



## **The Care of Zebra Finches**

The Zebra Finch - *Taeniopygia guttata* - is a small colourful Grassfinch (4") from central Australia, where it can be found in large flocks. There is a subspecies found on the easterly islands of Indonesia and is known as the Timor Zebra finch. This subspecies is quite rare in the UK. The care of both subspecies is identical, but it is important not to interbreed between these sub-species.

They are attractive, inquisitive, and sociable birds that are easy to keep and look after. This means that they are an ideal species for the beginner to birdkeeping, indeed many of the UK's most experienced Foreign Bird keepers began with Zebra Finches. They are best kept in pairs or larger groups. A garden aviary with a group of Zebra Finches within is a joy. Their activities and constant chitter chatter will keep you entertained for hours. The noise from a garden aviary containing Zebra Finches is very unlikely to upset even the closest of neighbours. A sheltered aviary with a dry, draughtproof shelter attached will mean that Zebras can be kept happily outdoors all year round in the UK.

They will live happily with many other species of birds with little problems, save for a little robbing of nesting material. However, if you want to breed selectively for exhibition or to keep the colour variants "pure" you will be better to house them in breeding cages – one pair to each cage. As they have been bred for many generations in captivity there have been many colour variants developed. With such a wide choice of colouring to choose from there will be one that will appeal to you. Personally, the original grey is the most appealing.

Zebra Finches are seed-eating finches. A Foreign Finch mix makes a good basic diet, although this should be supplemented with greenfood once or twice a week and eggfood when breeding. Small pieces of fresh fruit (but not avocado) and vegetables may also be given as treats and clean, fresh drinking water should always be available. Zebra Finches breed well and lay large clutches of eggs, so the hens can become deficient in Calcium - a Cuttlefish bone or liquid Calcium solution can be given to provide extra protection against this. I also provide a little crushed Oystershell grit and proprietary vitamin and mineral supplements made specifically for birds. Your birds will appreciate seeding wild grass heads from a good, clean source when available and millet sprays will be picked clean.

Zebra Finches are easy to identify the sexes in most of the colours. The most tricky being with the Whites – the intensity of the red of the beak and the singing and behaviour of the male is the best way of telling them apart. The males have a coloured cheek patch, orange or black, and chest stripes. The bright red beak has a more intense colour in the males. In some exhibition Zebra Finches the hens have started to show this chest barring, this is a show fault and should be avoided.

Zebra Finches are mature at about 6 months old and if given the opportunity will produce a clutch of 4-6 eggs after about 12 days. A 6" cubed nestbox or wicker nest basket will be stuffed with Coconut fibre and hay or grass. Any feathers they find will be used to make a snug lining. The eggs will be incubated by both parents and should hatch about 14 days after being laid. Young Zebra Finches call enthusiastically and this encourages the parents to feed them constantly. As a consequence they grow quite quickly and should start fledging at 2-3 weeks old. The parents will continue to feed them for a further few weeks at which point they can be removed. Don't be surprised if the hen starts her next clutch before the earlier youngsters are completely independent. A hen should be given a rest after no more than 3 rounds of chicks. Zebra Finches are so reliable as breeders that some keepers will transfer eggs from other species for the Zebra finches to raise, or "foster", as their own.

Zebra Finches are generally shown in pairs, although some societies will allow single birds. A good pair of Finches are more than likely to beat a single bird in competition. If a pair is shown then they must be of the same colour variant and be one of each sex. The current requirement for show Zebras is that they should have been bred to be as large as possible.