Society Finch Species Profile: Housing, Diet, Behavior

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

The Society Finch, *Lonchura domestica*, also known as the Bengalese Finch and sometimes referred to as the Japanese Movchen, is one of the few species of domesticated finch. Although their history is not very clear, we do know that the Society Finch was developed through selective breeding of other finches, and its ancestry included the White-rump (or White-rumped) Mannikin *Lonchura* finches. Society Finches are not found in the wild, and, because of their domesticity, make excellent pets for the cage or aviary, however, like other finches, they do not like to be handled.

Physical characteristics

A small bird, the Society Finch has been bred to have many color variations. Common colors include pied (having white patches of color), brown and white, and cream and white. There are also lighter colors including fawn and white, and darker colors including chocolate, black, grey, and chestnut.

Cages and housing

Society Finches are quite active and a pair should have a cage 24"W x 14"D x 18"H. A larger cage is always better, but be sure the bird cannot fit her head between the cage bars. Since finches jump and fly mostly from side to side, wide cages are preferred over tall ones.

Aviaries are a combination of flight cages and regular cages. They are often large with vertical and horizontal space to allow for flight. Aviaries can be kept indoors or outdoors, as long as the temperature does not fall below 40°F.

Finches do not play with toys like psittacines (members of the parrot family), but they do enjoy swings and ladders. Use perches of approximately 1/2' diameter, with multiple shapes and materials to promote foot health. Be careful not to overcrowd the cage with perches, swings, and toys; this may hinder the bird from stretching and moving freely. Society Finches also enjoy a good bath, so a shallow plastic bath should be available to him. The bath should be regularly cleaned.

Cages should be kept away from high traffic areas, areas that experience major temperature fluctuations (such as near a door or heating/cooling vent), and areas where fumes or aerosol sprays may be present, which can poison the finch (such as garages, bathrooms, and kitchens). Cages should also be covered at night with a light blanket to prevent stress to the finch. Strange noises or movement in low light can cause extreme fear to the finch, causing him to fly into the walls of the cage resulting in potentially serious physical trauma.

Lighting is an essential part of a finches' health. If the cage or aviary is indoors and does not receive direct sunlight, full-spectrum lighting must be provided. Place the light on a timer to mimic the natural day:night cycle. Generally ten to twelve hours of full-spectrum lighting per day is sufficient to maintain a healthy bird. Timed, full-spectrum light helps the birds produce vitamin D and assist with proper molting and reproductive cycles.

Cages and aviaries should be thoroughly cleaned often, depending on the number of birds kept. The material kept in the bottom of the cage or the bottom cage tray should be cleaned daily.

Diet

As with any animal, Society Finches do best on diet that contains multiple ingredients. Pelleted foods are available, and contain the appropriate nutrients and vitamins. Finches also enjoy and benefit from greens in their diet. These may include dandelion greens (no pesticides or herbicides!!), kale, parsley, and spinach. The finch diet can be supplemented with other foods, but not all Society Finches will like every food. Very small amounts of apple, apricots, and bananas can be offered. The earlier in their life finches are introduced to new foods, the more likely they will eat them. Cuttlebones or crushed oyster shells can also be included in the diet, especially if pelleted food is not fed.

Fresh water should be given every day and the water dish, along with the food dish, should be cleaned regularly to prevent contamination.

Behavior

The Society Finch is one of the most peaceful of the finches. They are social with others of their own species as well as other finch species. They are rarely aggressive and will be the first to back down if confronted by another, more aggressive finch. Because the Society Finch is so tolerant of others, they do well housed with other species and are often used as foster parents for other finch species.

Reproduction

Sexing male and female Society Finches is extremely difficult. Mating behavior will give you a clue as to the sexes of your

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finches. Males sing, and when next to the female will often stretch their necks and fluff their feathers. Both sexes will make chirping sounds.

As juveniles of both sexes reach adulthood, they will become more vocal to attract a mate and to establish their territory. The photoperiod is just one factor that stimulates breeding. The most important factor in breeding finches is the nest. When breeding finches, a nest box must be placed inside the enclosure along with some nesting material that can include grass, paper, feathers, or other fiber. Nesting materials are also available commercially. Nest boxes can be purchased or made and come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and materials. Society Finches prefer a nest box that is enclosed and oval in shape with an opening in the front.

When a nest is available, a male finch will claim it and search for a female. If more than one male is housed together, nests for each male should be provided to prevent aggression or the breeding pair should be removed and housed in a separate cage. Females may also become aggressive among each other if there are not enough males around.

It is important to note that Society Finch females will lay eggs in either the presence or absence of a male. They will also lay eggs in the absence of a nest.

The male will sing and call out to females and, once he has attracted one, will continue to sing and dance to affirm the relationship. Approximately eight days after mating, the first egg will be laid. The finch may not start incubating the egg at this time; often she waits until the entire clutch has been laid. Incubation lasts fourteen days and the eggs will begin to hatch. Most often, the eggs do not hatch all at one time; rather they hatch over a period of two to three days. Eggs should not be handled unless very necessary.

Society Finch hatchlings are bald when they emerge from the eggs. The hatchlings should not be handled or fed. The parents will provide them with everything they need. Once the eyes have opened and feathers have started to grow, the young will grow rapidly and begin to look like Society Finches. After approximately two weeks, the young will leave the nest (and are termed "fledglings") and begin exploring their surroundings and learning how to navigate. They will be clumsy as they learn how to fly, perch, and feed themselves. Fledglings will also begin the weaning process. This process may go unnoticed or may be defined when the parents begin to show minor aggression toward the fledglings. The nest should be removed from the cage at this time to prevent the adults from mating again and becoming aggressive toward the fledglings.

When fully weaned, typically around 40 days old, the finch is considered a juvenile. They continue to learn from their parents at this stage, learning social behavior and how to live as a flock. If you are breeding the adults again, the juveniles and adults should be housed separately. A pair should not be allowed to produce more than 3 clutches in a year. The juveniles reach sexual maturity at 4 months of age, but it is best to allow them to reach 8 months of age before allowing them to breed.

Quick Stats: Society Finch	
Family: Estrildedae **Size:** 4-5 inches **Coloration:** Common colors include pied (having white patches of color), brown and white, and cream and white. There are also lighter colors including fawn and white, and darker colors including chocolate, black, grey, and chestnut. **Diet:** Simple diet of pelleted foods, fresh greens and occasional fruits, cuttlebone, and water. If you plan to use your societies for fostering, it is important to feed them a diet you want the fostered chicks to eat.	**Housing:** Wide cages to allow for flight (24"W x 14"D x 18"); can be housed in groups or even mixed with other finch species. Provide 10-12 hours of full-spectrum lighting per day. **Behavior:** These are very social birds, and make such excellent parents that they are often used to foster chicks of other birds in the family Estrildedae. **Owner challenges:** Their inquisitive, social nature may interfere with the breeding of shyer species, when housed together. **Life Span:** 5-10 years **Cost:** $5-$20

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