

Bird-Watching

Easy to Care for and Pleasant to Listen to, Lively Finches Make Ideal Companion Pets

If you are looking for an ideal pet, consider a finch. These birds, found all over the world from the desserts of Australia to snowy Siberia, are perching songbirds that come in a variety of colors and are easy to care for. Whether you choose the popular Society or Zebra finches, priced at just a few dollars, or the beautiful Lady Gouldians, which can cost a few hundred dollars, there is a finch to fit each person's lifestyle.

Finches have a life span of six to eight years and are not destructive. They rarely interact with human beings and are happiest entertaining themselves or a finch friend that shares their cage. Although energetic, these birds are fragile and do not handle stress well. It is best for them to live in a clean environment where they can remain calm. They should neither live with a heavy smoker nor in a home with a barking dog or meddlesome cat. They are also inappropriate pets for inquisitive children. Finches will thrive in a home where they are appreciated and well cared for on a daily basis.

Once you have decided that a finch is for you, select a healthy bird from a pet store, local breeder, bird fair or pet expo. Sara Neuman, a doctor of veterinary



Feathery Friend: Share your home with a finch

medicine at St. Marks Veterinary Hospital suggests choosing a bird that appears active and playful. "Do not pick a finch hovering on the floor or sleeping on a perch in midday," she says. "These are signs of potential illness." Healthy birds have clear eyes, clean nasal vents, a neatly aligned beak and clean anal areas. They should have tight and neat feathers. Neuman also points out that balding is a possible sign of mites.

Finches need a daily diet of seeds and water. It is recommended that you supplement their diet with seed



treats, greens, eggs, vegetables, fruits and even commercially packaged bugs. Vitamins help maintain their good health and a cuttlebone contributes to beak maintenance. Also, grit, which plays a role in digestion, is essential to these birds. (Make sure to ask specifically for finch grit at your local pet store because it must be small enough for the birds to swallow.)

Maintaining a finch's healthy diet is important, but finding the appropriate home for your avian also plays a role in its longevity. Choose a modest-sized cage that the bird can move and fly around in comfortably. When in doubt, always select a bigger cage in length so that birds can flutter from one end to another. Make sure the spacing between the bars is adequate so that birds cannot escape or get caught between the bars, injuring themselves.

Bird experts suggest using wood perches because they provide exercise for birds' feet and create a natural-looking environment. Line the bottom of the cage with paper towels or newsprint for easier cleaning, but do not overdecorate the cage with accessories. A tiny mirror, plastic rings, bells and a ladder can be rotated weekly and keep your bird's interest.

Cages should be placed in a quiet, warm and draft-free location with sunlight. Putting your bird's cage in the kitchen where cooking and cleaning fumes can harm it or in a noisy or heavily trafficked area is not recommended. Cages and accessories including feeding bowls should be thoroughly washed once a week in hot, soapy water, rinsed and dried.

So if you are looking for an easy-to-care-for pet that is fun to watch and pleasant to listen to, finches make great companions. They are lively birds, each with a distinct personality that makes them a wonderful addition to any home. ■

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