

BREEDING FINCHES IN A COURTYARD

Although the topic was about keeping birds in small spaces, the detail of the talk was the speaker's methods of keeping finches. Trevor was originally from Clare where he had about 3.5 hectares of land, had ready access to termite mounds and lived in a climate where seeding grass heads were readily available. When he was transferred to Murray Bridge in his employment, he was reduced to a backyard of about 200 square metres, has to travel 50 kilometres to collect termites and has difficulty in growing seeding grass heads because of the climate.

So how does he maintain a successful finch breeding operation?

Trevor showed pictures of his aviaries which are made of 25mm square tubing and measure 10m by 3.6m. Before building the aviaries, Trevor had planted fruit trees and the aviaries were built over these trees. The aviaries are constructed in panels which are then bolted together which means that they can easily be taken apart should the need arise. The back walls and ceiling are insulated. The aviaries face east which makes it a little more difficult to catch birds early in the morning, since the catcher is looking into the sun.

All aviaries are fitted with horse waterers which operate automatically. Trevor also had power connected into the aviary with the intention of setting up a fly breeding box in the aviary, and although the box is inside the aviary the propagation of flies has not succeeded at this stage maybe soon. Metal sheeting, 450mm high surrounds the bottom of the each aviary although it is recommended that a minimum of 600mm is best for mice control. Mice present a particular challenge for Trevor since his unit is has market garden glasshouses running along the back fence. During cropping, the mice are quite content to stay out in the gardens, but once the crops have been picked and the source of food disappears, the rodents look for somewhere else to feed. Trevor's mouse trap consists of a piece of guttering covered by a piece of sheet metal.

Inside the aviaries Trevor maintains a vegetable scrap heap inside a 20 litre drum with holes covered with bird wire to attract vinegar flies. One section of the aviary can be closed off with a door which opens in the top section of the dividing wall. The birds can be chased from the aviary into the small section for catching. Bottle brush and grevillea branches are provided in the aviary inside some wire frames in which the birds can nest. As stated before,

fruit trees are growing inside the aviary and grasses and silver beet are also grown inside the aviary. The beet is grown under a wire frame where the birds will pick at it as it grows up to the frame, yet if given as cut leaves the birds tend to ignore it.

Trevor's dry seed mix consists of a regular finch mix with added canary seed and red panicum. His birds are very keen on soaked seed which is fed every day. Trevor claims that the birds will eat less soaked seed than if fed on dry seed alone. A little niger and maw seed is also fed. Wild oats, barnyard millet, panicum grass, green and red veldt grass are fed when available. By planting out millet in early summer, Trevor is able to provide seeding grass heads through until the end of autumn. Seeding grasses also help to prevent egg binding. Mealworms, termites, ant eggs, fly maggots and vinegar flies are fed as live food as and when available. Citrus is a good fodder to attract vinegar flies.

Trevor finds that swamp grass is not absolutely essential for nesting material since most birds will use the grass left over from the seeding grasses. The small finches seem to prefer the U-shaped cane baskets which are packed into the mesh containers of brush. If a bird loses its partner, Trevor moves the single bird to a holding cage. He does not use a lot of prepared food, but has heard of others who have success by mixing 2 egg yolks with 25mm square of Madiera cake and some Passwell insect mix added in. The birds like to have a grit mix, shellgrit and baked egg shells.

When buying birds for breeding, Trevor looks for unrelated young birds but if he is desperate for a pairing will use older birds. He also feels that by keeping individual pairs in an aviary gives better results than colony breeding because the birds spend too much time chasing each other at breeding time. Birds are sold off after 2-3 years which means that a buyer will get another 2-3 years out of them. Birds are quarantined before being placed in the aviary which allows them to get over the stress of being moved. After being transported, Trevor uses an additive called 'Spark-Electrover' in the water for a few days which helps the birds get over the stress of moving. New birds are wormed before being placed in the aviary. While there are a variety of worm treatments available, he feels it is essential to use a mixture to treat tape-worm and to use different drenches so that there is less chance of the worms becoming immune to the chemicals in one treatment. A good treatment for birds with air-sac mite, particularly Gouldians, is 'Scatt'. Where chemical treatments are added to the water it is advisable to use much smaller containers than normal. Where quail are kept in the aviary with the finches, it is advisable to provide extra live food and

seedling grass heads, since the bigger birds may keep the finches away from the 'goodies'.

While neophemas are like a big finch in many ways, the smaller species will often do better without the bigger birds around.

Based on a talk given by Trevor Harrowfield at the UBSSA Seminar held at the Enfield Community Centre on Sunday 30th May 2004.