

## THE CANARY...A BACKGROUND

The common Canary known to aviculture is a domesticated yellow mutation of the Wild Canary, *Serinus canaria*, a small songbird in the finch family originating from the Canary Islands, the Azores, and Madeira.

The bird is named after the Canary Islands, not the other way around. The Latin name for the islands is *canariae insulae* ("islands of dogs") this refers to the large dogs kept by the inhabitants of the islands.

The Wild Canary is 12.5 cm long, with a wingspan of 20-23 cm and a weight of 15-20gm. It is yellow-green, with brownish streaking on its back. It is about 10% larger, longer and less contrasted than its relative the European Serin, *Serinus serinus*, and has more grey and brown in its plumage and relatively shorter wings. The song is a silvery twittering similar to the songs of both the Serin and Citril Finch, *Carduelis citronella*.

Its habitat is semi-open areas such as orchards and copses, where it nests in bushes or trees, from sea level up to an altitude of 1700m. The estimated wild populations are currently:

- Canary Islands: 80,000-90,000 pairs.
- Azores: 30,000-60,000 pairs.
- Madeira: 4,000-5,000 pairs.

Canaries were first bred in captivity in the 1600s. They were brought to Europe by sailors, where they were bred by monks, who only sold the males (which sing). This kept the birds in short supply and drove the price up. Eventually the Italians obtained hens and were able to breed them. Canaries then became popular and resulted in many breed-types arising and the birds being bred all over Europe. The same occurred in the United Kingdom, at first the birds were only owned by the wealthy but eventually the general public started to breed them, and more breed-types arose through selective breeding.

Canaries are generally divided into three main groups: Mutation Canaries such as Ino, Eumo, Satinette, Bronze, Ivory, Onyx, Mosaic, Brown, Red-factor *etc.*, Type-Canaries, bred for their shape and conformation, such as Border Fancy, Fife Fancy, Gloster Fancy, Gibber Italicus, Raza Española, Berner, Lancashire, Yorkshire and Norwich. Song-Canaries, bred for specific song patterns, such as Roller, Spanish Timbrado, Waterslager (also known as "Malinois"), American Singer, Russian Singer and Persian Singer. However, many of these varieties are not currently available in Australia. Canary breeding has become very specialised, with clubs devoted to

specific breeds established all over the world.

There are many Canary Shows held each year with the largest one being in Europe, this event attracts thousands of breeders, and as many as 20,000 birds are exhibited at the event.

Canaries were once regularly used in coal mining as an early warning system for toxic gasses, such as methane and carbon monoxide. The presence of these gasses in the mine would kill the birds before affecting the miners, and thus warn of the danger. The use of Canaries in British mines was discontinued as recently as the late 1980s.

Canaries have been extensively used in research to study the birth of new neurons in the adult brain, and also for basic research in order to understand how songbirds encode and produce song. Using Canaries, Professor Fernando Nottebohm, at The Rockefeller University, detailed the brain structures and pathways involved in the production of bird song.

Reference: Wikipedia—the free internet encyclopaedia



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