

# **THE BENGALESE FINCH**

By Richard Chilton

The Bengalese is an ideal bird for the beginner, or a reliable foster for another species of finch. These birds are usually referred to as Mannikins, but their correct name is the Bengalese. The name Mannikin belongs to a group or family of birds of which the Bengalese is just one member. It is not a natural species, having been developed from several species by the Japanese several hundred years ago. The exact species used to produce the Bengalese are hard to determine, but it is usually agreed that the Striated Finch and the Sharp-tailed Mannikin played a major role.

Bengalese come in a variety of colours and patterns, the four most usual being ginger and white, fawn and white, chocolate and white, and pure white in both red and black-eyed forms. There is also a crested variety, which can be had in any of the colour forms although it is unusual in the case of whites. When breeding crested birds better crests are obtained if a crested bird is mated to a crest-bred rather than another crested. A crest-bred is one not having a crest but having one crested parent. Catering for this bird is no problem as they will thrive on a diet of panicum, canary, white and Jap millet with the addition of green food, seeding grasses, grit, cuttlefish and egg shell.

There is no outward difference in the sexes. Colouration plays no part in the determining of the sex of a given bird and the usual method of sexing is by comparing the size of the head and beak, the hen being finer than the cock. However, trouble can be experienced with this method if a large hen or small male is concerned. The only sure way to sex these birds is by the courtship display; only the cocks sing. The display consists of dancing up and down in front of another bird, not necessarily a hen, and uttering a quiet warbling song. This performance is unmistakable and denotes a definite cock. An easy method of inducing this performance is to place a suspected male in a small cage for a couple of days, out of sight of others, then introduce another Bengalese to the cage. If the original bird is a male it will invariably begin to court the newcomer.

Bengalese breed better in a cage or small aviary than in a large planted flight. Don't have more than a couple of pairs to an aviary, as more will spend most of their time sitting in a large communal nest rather than getting on with the job of breeding. I have obtained the best results by using breeding cages approximately 90 cm long, 30 cm deep and 38 cm high, with

a removable central division to enable easy cleaning. A nest box about 12 cm square with a half open front makes a good nesting site. Couch grass with the addition of a little coarser material makes good nesting material. No matter how big the box the birds will keep adding material until it is full. The normal clutch is four or five white eggs, which take approximately 14 days to hatch. The young remain in the nest for about three weeks and are independent within ten days of leaving the nest.

Bengalese have a reputation for being good foster parents. I have found that individual pairs vary in this respect. Some will willingly accept other eggs, or even young, in addition to their own, whereas others will only accept eggs if all of their own are removed. But in the main most pairs make good foster parents for other species of finch including some that feed a high insect content diet to their young. When rearing young, either their own or other species', a constant supply of seeding grass heads is most important. Although young can be reared on seed alone, better young will result if a varied diet is fed.

Bathing is a favourite pastime of the Bengalese with preference being given to clean water. Change the water and the birds will bathe almost immediately. I commend this interesting species to anyone wanting a steady reliable breeder or reliable foster parents for other species.