

Zebra Finch

FAMILY: *Estrildidae*

GENUS: *Poephila*

SPECIES: *guttata*

OTHER NAMES: Chestnut-eared Finch.

Description:

Medium sized finch with distinct plumage. Head and back grey grey-brown, chestnut ear patches. Throat, neck and upper breast pale grey with fine black bars. Lower breast has broad black bar. Flanks dark chestnut with white spots. Tail coverts barred in black and white. The legs are orange, eyes and bill red.

Females resemble males but lack the chestnut colouring and black barring on the breast. Throat, breast and underparts are pale buff and the bill is paler. Immature birds are dull versions of females with black bills and grey eyes, legs and feet.

One of the most common and widespread of the Australian finches, the Zebra Finch is sedentary and lives permanently in flocks. Non breeding flocks usually number around 100, but during dry periods thousands of individuals may congregate near water. Breeding colonies usually consist of somewhere around 25 pairs.

Zebra finches are mostly terrestrial in their feeding habits. Pair bonds are thought to last for life.

Length: 100-110mm.

Subspecies:

The nominate species *P. g. guttata* is found in Timor and surrounding Indonesian islands. It differs from the Australian subspecies *P. g. castanotis* in that it has the throat and upper breast pale grey with only faint barring.

Status:

In the wild - common

In aviculture - common

Distribution:

Throughout mainland Australia.

Habitat:

Most types of dry grassland and agricultural lands.

Diet:

Seeds and insects.

Breeding:

Opportunistic and almost continuous. The breeding season is strongly influenced by rainfall. In fact, Zebra Finches will begin courting and nesting just several hours after rain.

The nest is flask shaped, 120-200mm in diameter, with an entrance tunnel of around 80mm.

Both parents build the nest which is constructed from grass. Nests are most often located on twigs of bushes or low trees.

In captivity Zebra Finches will nest in virtually any receptacle on offer. Some aviculturalists report Zebra Finches breeding in a cut down Coke can.

Courtship Display:

Males approach females in a pivoting dance accompanied by much hopping on the perch. Feathers on the head and chest are ruffed and the tail twisted toward the female. Many males also crow during this process. Females indicate their receptiveness by tail quivering.

Sexual Maturity:

Of all the Australian finches these birds mature most rapidly, becoming sexually mature about 9 weeks after hatching.

Clutch:

4-5 pure white eggs (15mm x 11mm). Incubation period: 12-14 days. The young usually fledge at around 15-17 days. Fledged birds should not be removed from the parents until at least 4 weeks after fledging.

In captivity, Zebra Finches will produce many broods per season providing that plenty of nesting sites, seed and live food is available.

Mutations and Hybrids:

Zebra Finches have hybridised with a number of species including: Black-throated Finch, Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, Diamond Firetail, Double-barred Finch, Java Sparrow, Long-tailed Finch, Masked Finch, Plum-headed Finch, Saint Helena Waxbill, Star Finch African Silverbill, African Firefinch, Bengalese Finch, Black-headed and Tri-coloured Mannekin. Zebra Finches are perhaps the most common aviary finch and have been held in captivity for a long time. This and their propensity to breed has led to a large number of colour variations which are too numerous to mention. The main forms are as follows: Grey, Fawn, White, Grey Pied, White Pied, Silver and Cream.

Suitable Aviaries and Compatible Birds

For breeding purposes Zebra Finches will be quite happy in suspended cages or breeding cabinets. These should have at least the following dimensions: 700mm(long) x 400mm x 400mm. These birds are at their best in larger planted aviaries.

Zebra Finches will readily share an aviary with most other small seed eaters (eg. zebra, painted, parrot, etc etc) including doves and quail. One problem that aviculturalists experience with this species is that Zebras tend to be very competitive for nesting sites and have been known to exclude other species from nesting. On the other hand, one or two pairs of Zebras may induce other species to breed.

Species Specific Problems

These birds spend a lot of time on the ground and are therefore susceptible to worms and Coccidia