

Notes On Fostering Finches

by
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Wilmington, Delaware

All finch breeders face the potential problem of finding a healthy nestling which has been purposefully or accidentally removed from the nest by its parents. The breeder has only a few options to save the baby — return the baby to the nest (if the nestling fell accidentally and its return will not cause abandonment of the nest by the parents), hand-feeding (not easy and not always successful), or fostering (if an appropriate pair is available). Fostering is the most common choice. However, the results of fostering are often not as good as expected, partly because breeders immediately think of society finches when there are other options. This article will suggest some alternatives to fostering finches under typical society (Bengalese) pairs.

Types of Fostering

Finch nestlings may be fostered to male/female pairs of societies, to "pairs" of societies of the same sex, to zebra finches, to closely related or similar species (e.g., red-cheeked cordon bleu to blue-capped cordon bleu), and to mixed pairs (male/female of different species) if the mixed pair has formed a pair bond. The following discussion will give two examples of fostering and then consider some aspects of what constitutes a "good" pair of foster parents.

An Unexpected Foster Pair

Recently two of my four fire finch nestlings (*Lagonosticta senegala*) were ejected from the nest, the first on day one and the second on day three. In an attempt to save them they were placed with the only pair of foster parents available — a female society and a male owl finch (*Poephila bichenovii*) which had been together for several months, had built a nest, and were incubating fostered eggs. The foster parents accepted the babies immediately. The fires were reared successfully with no live food and fledged at day 18, one day behind their siblings which were successfully raised by the natural parents. All four babies were equally strong and healthy. The diet for the fostered babies included the parents' usual fare¹ and two daily feedings of Robert Black's for-

mula for fostering finches.² An evening feeding of Abba Green was also given.³ Feedings were provided at 6 a.m., 2 p.m., and 6 p.m. Interestingly, once fledged, the young only accepted food from the owl finch. The female society initially attempted to feed them, but the young only accepted food from their father. Preening and clumping continued with the society, however, and all four birds continued to behave as a typical family.

This fostering episode took place in a 12 x 12 x 32 inch cage located in the dining room less than three feet from the main conversation area. Clearly these circumstances are less than ideal for a successful fostering and raise the question of why this worked.

Cordon Bleus as Foster Parents

One golden-breasted waxbill (*Amandava subflava*) was found beneath its nest which contained eggs and another newly-hatched nestling. Hesitant to disturb the nest, I fostered the baby to the most reasonable pair, a pair of red-cheeked cordon bleus (*Uraeginthus bengalus*). The nestling could have been placed with societies then sitting on eggs, but the cordons were selected because the societies had already rejected a golden-breasted earlier in the season. Also societies are not likely to accept or succeed in rearing a golden-breasted because this waxbill nestling differs in size and appearance compared to the societies' own young.

The cordons were sitting on their third infertile clutch and appeared pleased with the appearance of the baby. They fed the nestling from their usual diet, but relied heavily on Robert Black's fostering formula, a few very small meal worms (10-15 per day), some aphids and seedling grasses. The cordons were one year old and had never raised their own young. Again, the significant question associated with this fostering is why it worked at all.

Observations on "Good" Foster Parents

Based on past success and failure with fostering, the author offers the following observations concerning the



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Basket of young blue-caps with their parents — blue-caps may be easily fostered under red-cheeked cordons because of their close relationship. Breeding both species simultaneously could provide a "safety" for abandoned young, especially when the clutch is large and the demand for live food is very high.

reasons these two unusual fosterings worked.

1. *Perfect Timing and Circumstances* — Both pairs had been sitting on eggs which were infertile but "due" to hatch. Young were raised alone without comparison to young of the parents' own species.

2. *Readiness to Breed* — Both pairs



Owl finch — owl finches are commonly fostered under society finches. However, when properly managed, owl finches make excellent foster parents themselves — even for waxbills.

had been surrounded by other breeding birds of the same or similar species, and both pairs had displayed an interest in breeding although they were unable to produce young themselves. Both pairs had strong pair bonds and had shown indications of being capable parents. Housed separately, each foster pair was undisturbed by other birds.

3. *Personality* — Both pairs of birds were calm, agreeable, and tolerant for their species. They were used to their environment, their diet, and the person who cared for them.

4. *Age* — Both pairs were at least one year old. The female society was 2-1/2 and had already fostered bronze-winged mannikins (*Lonchura cucullata*) and silverbills (*Lonchura cantans*).

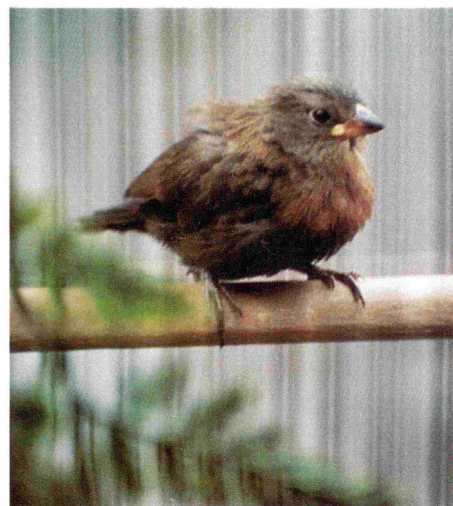
In sum, the successful adoption of these fostered babies was probably due to the fact that both pairs had been sitting on eggs already and were very eager to have young. They were surrounded by many successful breeding pairs with young which produced begging sounds that further enhanced the foster parents' desire to have young of their own.

If you attempt similar fosterings, make sure the pair employed is in breeding condition (preferably sitting on eggs), that the parents will feed the diet necessary for rearing the fostered young, and leave the foster parents alone as much as possible. Avoid nest-pecking. Instead, listen for begging

sounds or watch parental behavior⁴ to determine the success of your attempt. Essentially you are asking your birds to do something difficult, so do not stress them while they do it.

Implications

Certainly it is possible to foster finches using birds other than societies. It may even be preferable. By considering more species as potential foster parents you will increase your options for finding a pair at the right stage of the breeding process.⁵ By increasing your



Fledgling Peters' twispot — using the methods discussed in this article, the author was able to foster a Peters' twispot under cordons. This was done when an egg was laid on the floor by the natural parents (which are excellent breeders) after their nest had been removed. The cordons reared the Peters' to maturity, and she has since been removed and accepted a mate of her own species. She will be allowed to breed in the coming spring.



Recently fledged fire finch — fire finches can definitely be fostered, although placing nestlings under a pair of breeding societies is not the best way.

options for foster parents you may also be better able to match the fostered young with foster parents whose natural young would be similar to the fostered species (greatly improving your chances for success). Many breeders have limited space and resources, but specifically purchase society pairs "just in case." Perhaps the space reserved for societies could be better filled with birds which really need to be established in aviculture. However, birds already under your care which are infertile (as my cordons), "retired," or imperfect may be humanely kept as foster parents.⁶

Clearly, as shown by my fostered fire finches, Black is correct in his assessment that waxbills can be reared with no live food. This knowledge, plus expedient fostering, may help establish some relatively difficult birds (such as waxbills), and minimize capture in the wild, hopefully contributing to their future survival.⁷

NOTES

1. The standard diet fed to these and other finches under the author's care includes the following other than the usual seed, grit, etc.: wheat germ, Proteen 25, Hills Nestling Food, Sluis Bekfin, Ornithological Products Insectivorous Mix, Oyster Shell and Mineral Mix, Extra Fine Finch Seed, Wild Weed Seeds, Petamine and an assortment of greens including kale, chickweed, comfrey, dandelion and various dark-leaved grocery store varieties.
2. Robert Black, *Society Finches as Foster Parents*, Florida, 1977. This is a very short, but extremely useful work on fostering and should be supplemented with Black's work on nutrition, *Nutrition of Finches and Other Cage Birds*, Georgia, 1981.
3. Abba Green is available from Abba Products, P.O. Box 122, Elizabeth, New Jersey 07207.
4. Good parental behavior includes the following: calmness and a steady rhythm in all actions (if the birds become flighty or unsteady after a nestling has been introduced, then the chances of successful fostering are slim, demanding very close observation from the breeder and plans for an alternate method of rearing the young if the parents do not settle down); routine trips to several feeding dishes followed by entrance to the nest and begging sounds (which is easiest to observe directly after the sunrise feeding or after new foods have been introduced); brooding of the young by at least one parent usually through the first week (this will vary with the individual and/or species); lack of interest in displaying or nest building.
5. Black, 1-13 and Mervin Roberts, *Breeding Society Finches*, T.F.H. Publications, 1979, 84-85.
6. Black, 2.
7. I would like to thank Hal Bruce, President of the Delaware Avicultural Association, for encouraging me to write this article. It forced me to think more seriously about fostering birds and to appreciate the necessity of passing on information which might help other breeders in attempts to establish the more difficult-to-breed species in this country. ●

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