

The Best Finches For The Bird Aviary

Find out which finch pairs are great to mix together in your bird aviary.

By Karl Lieberman

Q: I have just finished building my first aviary and am trying to decide what to put in it. I am looking for some bright colored finches that will be fun to watch. Which finches would live well together? I am interested in parrot finches, Gouldian finches and owl finches. The aviary I built is 9-feet wide by 10-feet long.

A:When choosing pet finches for an aviary, research the birds you find appealing before making your purchases. Owl finches, Gouldian finches and parrot finches are all compatible species that can live and breed in the same enclosure. This particular combination of finches offers a nice variety of colors and patterns, while allowing you to observe three different sets of social dynamics.

Planning ahead will help you to maximize your enjoyment as well as your breeding successes. While a space of 9-feet by 10-feet is fairly large, do not to overcrowd it. I suggest no more than seven pairs in a flight this size. This number might rise dramatically if breeding occurs, so you may need to address space issues if the number of birds increases. The natural behaviors of the birds also emerge more fully when they do not feel pressured by overpopulation.

By The Finch Species

Gouldian finches are an excellent aviary subject. Their vibrant colors are beyond compare, and their peaceful natures make them ideal community birds. Their interactions with each other are often fascinating. I once had a female Gouldian abruptly part with her mate of two years in the middle of a nesting cycle. She chose another male to take his place. Interestingly, he immediately began to help incubate the eggs and subsequently raise the babies even though they weren't his. Sometimes an unpaired bird acts as a third parent to help to incubate eggs and raise babies. Gouldians can be a little nosy and disruptive to the nesting activities of other birds, but this can be minimized.

Owl finches are best kept in small colonies where their quick and acrobatic flight can be observed while allowing them to enjoy each others' company. Young, fledged owl finches help feed and raise their younger siblings. They are active and curious birds, and they enjoy exploring every corner of their flight.

Parrot finches are not as social as owl finches and Gouldians, but they usually seem happiest when kept one pair per enclosure. Parrot finches are very unusual because they are somewhat nocturnal. My parrot finches are often up and about on moonlit nights singing and feeding. I had parrot finches that, on occasion, would take over the nests of Gouldians and raise their babies as their own. This might occur because Gouldians and parrot finches are each others' closest relatives. The high activity level of parrot finches adds a lot of visual interest to a mixed collection.

All three of these species will prefer to nest as high as possible. To cut down on conflicts, offer slightly different nesting facilities for each.

Nest Choices For Finches

Most Gouldians choose a standard wooden finch box for breeding. These generally measure 6 by 6 inches with a 1½ -inch entrance hole. A sense of choice is important for all nesting birds, so offer more nests than you have pairs. Because Gouldians are not known to be particularly good builders, so loosely stuff their boxes with clean, dry Bermuda grass. Place nest boxes for Gouldians at least 18 inches apart to help avoid bickering over one nest.

Owl finches usually show a distinct preference for hooded wicker basket nests. Due to their intensely social nature, they enjoy having their nests more tightly grouped together. Approximately 6 inches of space in between suits them well. They like to use shredded, sterilized burlap, Bermuda grass and sisal for building material. Provide plenty of nesting material to cut down on stealing from the neighbors.

Parrot finches breed best when they have a distinct sense of privacy. They typically like to use a standard wooden finch box. Place parrot finch nests as far from the aviary door as possible, with the entrance hole facing to the rear or side of the flight because it helps the birds feel more secure and remain steadier on the nest. Parrot finches can be a bit hyperactive, so the more secluded they feel, the calmer they tend to remain. They use large amounts of nesting material, such as burlap, sisal and grasses and are enthusiastic nest builders. Attach nontoxic, non-fraying artificial greenery on and around the box to increase their comfort and for better breeding success.

When planning an outdoor aviary, the birds must be properly acclimated. Acclimatization means that birds are placed outside in the late spring or early summer when night time temperatures are consistently above 60 degrees Fahrenheit. This helps the birds to gradually adjust to cooling temperatures and shorter days as winter approaches. Access to a fully shaded area is equally necessary in warmer months. Check with a knowledgeable source to be certain your area is suitable for outdoor finch keeping.

For birds wintering outdoors, a nightlight is essential. Because finches have a very high metabolic rate, constant access to food is vital. During the short days of winter, allow the birds the opportunity to feed all around the clock. Use an outdoor-safe, 25- to 40-watt light bulb to keep them warm. Try a red or blue bulb so the birds can see without disturbing their sleep. In most cases, heaters are unnecessary and can be dangerous to birds as well as a potential fire hazard. In the colder months, offer a separate dish consisting high-fat seeds. A combination of chipped sunflower, hemp, Niger and flax makes an excellent supplement mix.

Plenty of fresh bathing water is especially important for outdoor birds. You may notice that your birds tend to bathe more frequently in cooler weather. This is because clean feathers provide better insulation from the cold than dusty feathers.