

Chapter 1

Finches: More Than Just Pretty, Chatty Birds

In This Chapter

- ▶ Knowing what a finch is
 - ▶ Understanding how a finch is put together
 - ▶ Looking at the different varieties of finches
 - ▶ Getting in touch with finch clubs and societies
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Finches are charming companions, adding a little bit of life to an empty corner of any home. Whether you plan on having just a pair, or would like a whole aviary full, finches offer a glimpse into the natural world, and give keepers hours of watching pleasure. They are easy to care for, are relatively quiet, and some are prettier than a rainbow. What more could you ask for?

First Things First: Using This Book

Finches For Dummies is a book I wrote for people interested in finches — whether you're a parent buying this book for yourself or your child or you're a kid buying it for yourself using your hard-earned cash. Maybe you just bought a finch and need the essential scoop on getting set up as well as general care information. Or, you may already have a finch and you need a refresher on the best way to take care of your pet or want to understand it better. Perhaps you're ready for a new pet but aren't sure if a finch is right for you and yours. If any of the above describes you, keep on readin'.

This book is a reference, so you don't have to read it in order from start to finish. Begin with Chapter 4 if you need basic setup information, flip to Chapter 6 if you're thinking about breeding finches, or head to Chapter 2 if you're still on the fence about adding a

finch to your family. (Although those of you who prefer to start at the beginning and read until you reach the back cover are welcome to do so. I'll never tell.)

As you read, keep an eye out for text in *italics*, which indicates a new term and a nearby definition — no need to spend time hunting through a glossary. And `monofont` points out Web addresses for additional information worth checking out. You'll also run into a few sidebars (the occasional gray box); although the information in the sidebars is good, it's not essential to the discussion at hand, so skip 'em if you want to.

While reading *Finches For Dummies*, be on the lookout for these icons, sprinkled here and there:



This icon flags tips and tricks that will help you be the best finch friend you can be.



This icon points out information that's so important you'll want to be sure to remember it.



This icon highlights information on things that could harm you or your finch.



This icon flags information that you can use to impress your friends with your amazing bird knowledge, but it isn't absolutely necessary, so don't feel the need to memorize it.

What Is a Finch?

The term *finch* is actually a very broad term, encompassing hundreds of species and subspecies, from canaries to sparrows. In general, finches are small song birds that come in an amazing variety of colors, shapes, and sizes. They all have short, cone-shaped bills adapted to the type of food they typically eat. All finches are seed eaters, but most will eat other vegetation and insects as well.

Finches have been kept as companions for hundreds of years. The Chinese and Japanese have been breeding finches since the 1600s — for example, the society finch (also known as the Bengalese finch) is not found in the wild because it was developed by humans, much as breeds of dogs were. It is also one of the most widely kept finches today. The canary is the oldest domesticated bird, having been bred

in captivity for many centuries, and, like dogs, bred for certain traits (its ancestor, the serin finch, is still found in the wild in the Canary Islands). Finches that have a long history with humans do very well as companion birds. They tend to be hardier and less skittish than other types of birds, who haven't been around the bird scene for as long.

In the following sections, I show you what makes a finch a finch.

Where finches come from

Because they comprise such a large group, finches are found in every corner of the world. Even the Galapagos Islands are home to 13 species of finches, all of which were studied by famed British naturalist, Charles Darwin. The finch was one of the animals used in Darwin's Theory of Evolution.



You can only keep finches that aren't native to North America — this goes for all birds, actually. If a bird is native to North America, housing it is illegal. Birds that fall into this category include the American goldfinch, the cardinal, and the pine siskin, among others.

Most of the companion finches available for purchase are native to other countries but were bred in captivity where you live.

The many species of finches

One of the more fascinating things about finches is their seeming endless variety. They range from very delicate to very hardy birds, in all colors of the rainbow. Some are drab and others are exceptionally vivid. Many species are *dimorphic*, which means that you can distinguish the gender of the bird just by looking at it. Others are *monomorphic*, which means that you can't visually distinguish the genders of the birds.



All finches are scientifically grouped under the order *Passeriformes*. Passerines (which is what *Passeriformes* are called) comprise more than half of the bird species in the world, with nearly 5,400 members. Not all Passerines are finches, but all finches are Passerines.

Though no one expects you to become an *ornithologist* (someone who studies birds), in order to provide a good home for your companion finch it can be helpful to understand where your bird is classified in the scheme of things. Here are the four different groups of finches:

- ✓ **Fringillidae:** The 138 members of this group are often called the “true” finches. This family includes the canaries, chaffinches, some siskins, rosefinches, goldfinches, and bullfinches. These finches are adapted to crush seeds and, as a result, they have strong skulls and jaws. These finches are found on all continents.
- ✓ **Passeridae:** This group of 38 finches includes sparrows and snowfinches. Formerly found only in Europe and the surrounding areas, these finches have now been introduced to habitats all over the world. Two types of Passeridae are commonly found in the United States, including the house sparrow. As a group, they are hardy and gregarious songbirds.
- ✓ **Estrildidae:** Included in this group of 139 birds are some the most popular companion finches, including grass finches, parrot finches, waxbills, society finches, greenfinches, serins, firefinches, firetails, quailfinches, gouldian finches, mannikins, nuns, munias, java sparrows, cordon bleus, cut throats, and zebra finches. The majority of finches in this group are from a temperate climate, preferring warm weather. They tend to be flocking birds and are all seed-eaters.
- ✓ **Ploceidae:** This group has 117 members, including the whydahs (also called widowbirds) and weavers (also called bishops). They are found primarily in Africa and India and can be more aggressive in their response to other birds than some of the more commonly kept species.

One of the longest domesticated and most popular varieties of finch is the well-known canary (see Figure 1-1). Canaries come in a variety of colors, from bright yellow, like the famous Tweety Bird, to brown, gray, white, and *variegated* (having either regular or uneven dark markings). Canaries are delicate birds, originally from the Canary Islands, and have been a popular pet in Europe since the 16th century, perhaps even earlier.

Most people buy a canary for his beautiful song. The males are the singers of the species, and they’re generally the gender that you’ll want to keep if you want to hear singing in your home. The females can make great companions too, but they won’t launch into song the way a male will.



The canary’s song depends largely on the type of canary that you choose. Some canaries sing a variety of songs, while others are trained only to sing in a certain manner — yes, canaries have to be trained to sing. Many breeders keep an “expert” singer, a canary

with a particularly masterful song, in a cage along side of his young males. The youngsters will learn from this maestro and, hopefully, pick up the essentials of beautiful singing. Don't worry if you don't have a master singer to teach the young males their trade — CDs and tapes of canary song work just as well (you can buy these at some pet stores).

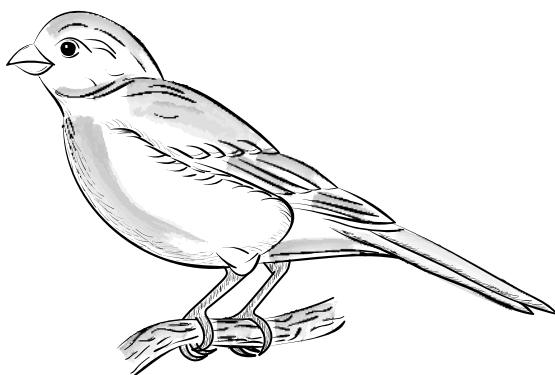


Figure 1-1: Canaries are among the most popular types of finch.

Size differences

Finches can vary in size from about 3 inches in length to about 8 inches in length. Some finches are very tiny, such as the gold-breasted waxbill, measuring in at under 3 inches. The whydah, who is only 5 inches in length, has a tail that can reach 15 inches during breeding season.

Temperament differences

In terms of companion quality, most finches are the same. Some are more skittish than others, but for the most part, they all make wonderful companions. Some can be more demanding in terms of nutritional needs or housing, and others are far easier, such as the zebra, society, or owl finch.

Finches aren't aggressive toward children or other pets. The reverse is far more likely to be true. However, some species of finches are aggressive toward other species of finches, and all varieties of finches will have more of a tendency toward aggression during the breeding season.



I see your true colors shining through . . .

Some canaries, like the red factor canary, will turn various shades of red and orange if they're fed certain foods, such as paprika. Although this practice is forbidden in most show circles, it is actively practiced by many companion owners.

Don't try to feed your other types of canaries the color food — only the red factor has the genetic predisposition to show what it eats through its feathers.



If you're going to keep a large *aviary* (a home for birds that's large enough for an adult human to walk into), and you wish to have more than one species represented, do some research ahead of time to find out which species will be most likely to get along. For example, weavers are quite aggressive and the males will hurt, or even kill, other species and other males of their own species. Society finches, on the other hand, get along so well that more than a dozen of them will try to crunch themselves into one nest to sleep for the night.

Most of the time, finches will shy away from human contact. Taming a finch to appreciate human contact is sometimes possible, but that depends a great deal upon the individual finch and will usually require more patience and effort than most bird guardians are willing to devote. Remember that your companion finch is a very delicate creature and easily frightened. Too sudden a shock or fright can be fatal to your little friend.

The finch lifespan

Most finches live to be between five and ten years old, with some variations among species. Some have been reported living 15 years or more. Although it's very rare, finch guardians have also reported that their finches have lived up to 27 years! Now that's a well-cared-for finch!

Anatomy of a Finch

Knowing the parts of your finch is a good idea, so that you can describe a problem to the veterinarian if you have to do so. Knowing the different parts of your finch is also a good idea if you're going to breed or show your birds. This way you can speak like an expert with other hobbyists. Here are the parts of your finch you'll want to be familiar with (see Figure 1-2 for an illustration).

Crown: The *crown* is simply the top of the head. It's an important word to know in finch-speak because many finches are identified by the color of the crown.

Nares: The *nares* (nostrils) are at the top of the beak and may not be visible because they're often covered by fine feathers.

Beak: The upper and lower mandibles make up the finch's beak. In the case of a finch, it's short, wide, and rather triangular in shape. This is for crushing the tiny hard seeds that make up most of your finch's diet. The beak is made from the same tough material that makes your fingernails.

Ear and ear coverts: Your finch has tiny flat holes for ears, and they're covered by *coverts*, or tiny flaps of skin bearing feathers, which protect them from the wind when flying. This is why your finch's ears are difficult to see.

Eyes: The finch's eyes are on either side of his head so that it can see a wider area than you can see with your forward-facing eyes. A finch needs a wider range of vision because it's a prey animal and needs to be on the alert for predators. Finches, like many birds, have a third eyelid called a *nictitating membrane*, a thin semitransparent lid that washes the eye like a squeegee and closes for protection.

Throat: The throat is just beneath the beak and extends to the breast. Many finch species are identified partially by the color of the plumage at the throat.

Nape: The nape is the back of the neck.

Shoulder: The shoulder is at the top of the wing, nearest the finch's back.

Breast: The breast is just below the throat.

Foot: Everything that most people think of as a bird's leg is actually a bird's foot. That's why the "knee" appears to bend the wrong way — what you may be thinking of as the knee is actually the bird's heel. As for toes, finches have three front toes and one that grips to the rear.

Vent: The vent is where your finch eliminates. In a human, this would be a combined anus and urethra. Birds do not urinate.

Primary feathers: Finches have ten long primary wing feathers that aid in flight.

Secondary feathers: The secondary feathers on the wing occur after the primary feathers; they're smaller and closer to the body than the primaries are.

Rump: The rump is beneath the primary flight feathers on the finch's lower back.

Mantle: The *mantle* is the bird's back.

Crop: The *crop* is a sac-like organ that's kind of like a "first stomach." It's where the food goes immediately after being swallowed and is located at the breast.

Gizzard: The *gizzard* is like a "second stomach" that grinds food to digest it.

Syrinx: The syrinx is equivalent to vocal chords in humans. It allows finches to sing when air is pushed through it.

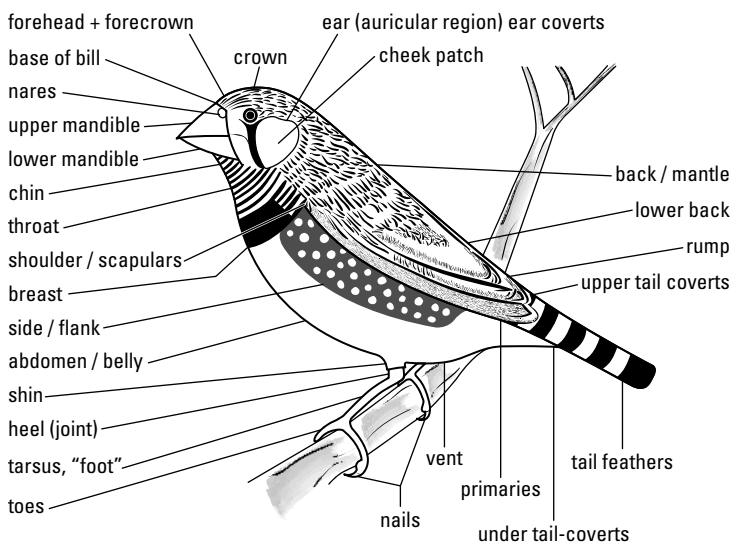


Figure 1-2: The anatomy of a finch.