

A Bit on Fostering By Scott Golden

Many finch breeders feel that fostering is wrong or that birds that have been reared by foster parents will not rear their own young.

This has no scientific basis! None. Zilch.

Our failure to use the strongest tool in our finch-breeding arsenal in the 1990's (FOSTERING) led to the almost complete disappearance of African finches in the US until the recent imports of 2007-2008

Fostering fertile eggs enables us to get the first generations of domestically bred finches (F1 and F2) established. These birds only know life in captivity and are MUCH more likely to rear their own young on the foods you provide.

I use exclusively the old-fashioned, American brown and white society finches for fostering. I have found that the Euro societies, though very pretty, are vastly inferior when it comes to fostering.

Younger societies that have never raised their own young are ideal for new species. They eventually see the new species as 'what their own chicks look like' and do a fantastic job of raising them.

How to Set Up Societies as Fosters

Note: Societies are really worth their weight in gold. They are extremely dependable as foster parents for most species of estrildid finches. However, societies may harbor some bacteria or protozoa to which they are completely immune and the fostered species chicks are susceptible. It may be wise to put your societies on a thorough antibiotic-antifungal-probiotic regimen before setting them up as fosters. To be very careful against possible chick-killing pathogens, put your societies on a 10-day cycle of Amphotericin-B. Amphotericin-B is a powerful anti-protazoal/ameobal/fungal agent. Some Societies harbor something called 'megabacteria,' which, as I understand it, is a misnomer as megabacteria isn't even a bacteria. The organism is actually a powerful and difficult to eradicate yeast. Megabacteria causes few problems with Societies, but many other species of finch, and especially their chicks, have a difficult time with it and often die upon exposure through feeding by foster parents. As far as I know, the only effective way to eradicate it is through the use of Amphotericin-B.

Small, divided breeding cages work well for society finches

Whicker baskets or externally mounted nest boxes (my new favorite) work

well.

It doesn't matter what sexes your societies are: 2 males, 2 females, trios of males or females, or any combination of the 2 sexes are just fine! Really! Personally, I prefer 2-3 males as fosters, as it is easier to regulate their incubation.)

Synchronize your societies' incubation to match that of the eggs to be fostered by the use of the blue plastic canary eggs. Societies do not care about the color. Put one a day in the societies' nest until you have a clutch of 5 or so canary eggs. 99% of the time, the societies will begin brooding these fake eggs. If they bury them in nesting material, dig them out and do it again! It works. Trust me. By the way....interested in some swampland in Florida? When it is obvious the societies are brooding, remove the nest box and fake eggs. Make a small mark on the eggs to be fostered using a Sharpie marker (just in case the societies start to lay their own clutch, you can remove unmarked eggs).

Use a plastic spoon to put the fostered eggs in the nest ...carefully!

Put nest back in the society cage.

Societies should begin brooding new eggs promptly.

Often, I place a small utility towel on the bottom of the societies' cage as sometimes societies accidentally take an egg with them if they quickly exit the nest. If a towel is on the bottom of the cage, most eggs land, unbroken, and can be placed back in the nest.

On an index card, write the information about the parents of the eggs being fostered (i.e.: species, which cage if you have more than one pair of that species, and hatch date-generally 14 days from the start of incubation)

“The eggs have hatched! Now what?”

First, get excited! After you have done that, it is time for you to supplemental hand-feed the chicks (**MOST SOCIETIES WILL START FEEDING UNFAMILIAR CHICKS AFTER A COUPLE OF DAYS. YOUR JOB IS TO GET THEM TO LIVE THAT LONG!! THIS IS NOT HARD. IT JUST TAKES A BIT OF EXTRA TIME AND TLC**)

I use the small banding tool that comes with split plastic bands as my hand feeding implement. It is perfect for the job.

In preparing your hand feeding formula, float a smaller bowl in a larger bowl of relatively warm water. Mix a very small batch of formula (I use Exact Hand Feeding Formula) in the floating bowl. The warm water in the larger bowl will keep this hand feeding formula warm.

Remove the nest from the society cage. Remove chicks with a plastic spoon.

Dip the end of the hand-feeding tool in a very 'liquidy' part of the formula (i.e. not too thick). Gently insert tool into the mouth of the begging chick, with the groove (food-containing portion) facing the chick's tongue. The chick will lick the food out of the groove and will see the food in the crop along the chick's neck.

Do not over-feed, as you can aspirate the chick by forcing food into its lungs. I feed new chicks before work (6:30 AM) and 2-3 times after the work day (4:30; 7:30; 10:30PM)

Within a couple of days, your societies should be feeding the new chicks relatively well.

In subsequent clutches, try to give the societies the same type of fostered eggs. Often, they will start feeding these chicks from day 1, recognizing them as their own.

I will continue to supplemental hand feed chicks to assure their proper growth and fledging.

"I did it! My chicks Fledged!"

With a little hard work and some time, you will be saying these words. *A very important caveat is to make sure to remove your fledglings once they are independent and place them in flights with adult members of their own species.* This will assure that the chicks will adopt the songs and behavior of their own species. Song assumption and even sexual attraction or bonding can occur towards the foster parent species if young, independent fledglings are not placed with their own kind.

Now, my biggest bit of advice:

DO NOT SELL OR GET RID OF THESE CHICKS. IF YOU DO, YOUR BREEDING PROGRAM WILL BE DOOMED TO FAIL WITHIN 2 YEARS.

Yikes! I know it sounds kind of harsh, but that is the most honest, heart-felt advice I can give you. This F1, or first generation of chicks removed from wild-caught stock are going to be used to your schedule, your food, your avicultural techniques AND WILL BE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BREED WITHOUT THE NEED OF FOSTERS. That is the true goal: to establish these birds in captivity, where they will breed on their own under domestic conditions.