

WINTER TIME

TIME TO GIVE YOUR FINCHES THAT EXTRA SPECIAL CARE

By K. & I. Foster.

Picture this, a southerly squall has just come through, 20 knot winds and the ground temperature down to 10° with heavy showers. You are made to stand outside in these conditions with a tee-shirt and a pair of longs.

How long before you are calling for help and lapsing into severe hypothermia, serious fatigue, and eventually death. This is not fiction, this scenario is based on fact. Now picture your beloved small foreign finches in this same situation. Surely you wouldn't do this to them.

We will generalize with mainly the more commonly kept species, as those breeders with rarer species would, or should, have taken the appropriate steps to insure their finches are correctly kept.

Most of our more commonly kept species i.e. Stars, Fires, Cordons, Cutthroats, Orangebreasts, Cubans, Nuns, Red and Blue Parrot Finches, Jacarinis, plus a few more, all fall in the category of sub-tropical species. This means they are used to warmer climates than our winters will give them. Prolonged periods of temperatures under 10°- 12° degrees, will surely lead to egg-binding, sickness and eventually deaths in your birds. Because their natural habitats afford them warmer, more favourable temperatures and weather, these birds do not have the appropriate down feathers to maintain extra body warmth.

Now for some simple solutions to our colder winter conditions. We have forgotten how many times we have been told by some bird keepers, that they will put their finches out in the cold, and they will adapt and toughen up to the cold conditions. Two words sum this type of thinking up (ABSOLUTE RUBBISH). Just like you standing in light clothing out in that cold southerly wind, you are never going to get used to it, you are only going to get sick, and even worse to follow. Just the same is going to happen to your little finch friends out in the cold. The obvious difference here, is that you can go inside and put on more layers of clothing, close doors and windows, and turn your heaters on, our little finches cannot.

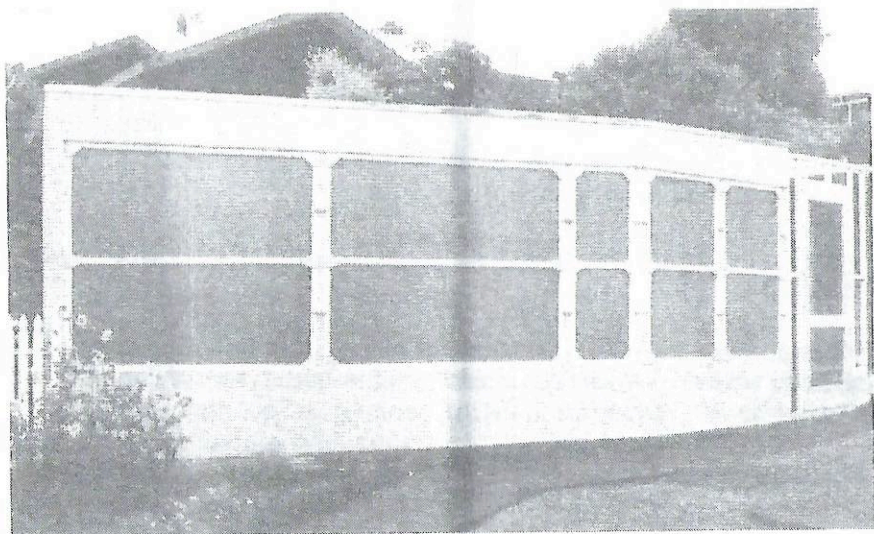
A good start is to roof your aviary, and cover in the sides and fronts, particularly to the sides exposed to the prevailing winds. Very important is night lights, or if you prefer, lights on a timer, reasonably cheap to install and run.

This lighting is particularly important from 5am-8am and 5pm-8pm, on those dark winter days and nights. Remember, it is generally agreed by most experts, that our finches require 12-14 hrs of daylight for correct and adequate feeding time. Your lights will ensure that your birds can get that extra feed time on the shorter winter daylight hours. You will also find that if you have a finch a little down, on health, it will come down later at night, or in the early hours of the morning, and get that extra feeding time, which is often the difference in the case of foreign finches, of life and death. This extra feed time will allow them to build up extra body heat and warmth. We have experimented with this over the years, and found it to be remarkably high in success rates. It is a very rare occurrence now, to find a bird dead on the floor. Another common misconception among N.Z. aviculturists, is the idea that our tropical Australian and African finch species are winter breeders. That is totally incorrect. If you are aware of the climates and the breeding seasons for these finches in their natural habitat, you would have to agree that our finches are by no means, winter breeders. To do so is senseless in terms of the longevity of your breeding stock, and at best, a most unkind extra stress to place on your finches. Eggbinding and weakened parent birds and chicks, is most often the result. Remember that most of the Aust. finches, for example the Gouldian, breeds naturally in the wet season, which ranges from Nov-Mar, This creates new growth of green seeds and grasses, in turn triggering the natural breeding responses, and the breeding cycle starts. But remember, the temperature during the breeding cycle ranges from 15-30 degrees with an average of around 23 degrees. So do not subject your finches to a breeding cycle, to temperatures and conditions, that are clearly not what these birds are naturally adapted for.

The other thing you can do to help in colder conditions, is a diet slightly higher in carbohydrates and oily seeds. This will help to build the birds fat reserves for the winter months. Another help in the prevention of egg-binding, for those who follow this dangerous path in winter time, if you must attempt to try to breed in cold conditions, is to add small amounts of Cod Liver oil, Wheat germ oil and Calcium Sandoz to their seed or soft food mix. By far the best solution, is DO NOT attempt to encourage your finches to breed in winter.

Another important factor, is to try and provide dry floor areas. The Aust. and African finches, do not do well in cold, damp and drafty conditions. We have overcome this problem in our aviaries by having a false floor, which means we have two floors, with a small gap between them to keep the top surface dry. The least you can do, is to provide well drained floors, particularly if you have dirt floors.

Do the right thing for your finches, and show them some kindness, treat them with respect, and use some avicultural common sense, and you will find as we have, that they will reward you with a long life, and good breeding results.



Here are 2 aviaries recently seen on visit's that provided winter protection. The top one is in Auckland and has removable shutters with tinted plastic attached. The second one is in the Waikato and has plastic curtains made from heavy-duty clear plastic which are attached to the aviary with a track system so they can be removed in summer.

You don't have to spend alot of money to provided winter protection, even a cheap tarp from The Warehouse tacked onto your aviary is better than nothing. Ed.

