

Food and water dishes should be made from easy-to-clean, non-toxic materials. Be sure not to place them on the bottom of the cage, which is the bird's toilet, or directly under a perch. Each bird should have a separate food container, ensuring that those on the bottom of the pecking order have a chance to eat.

Songbirds love to play and explore. Ladders, ropes, swings and mirrors can all provide necessary entertainment. Check all toys for potential dangers. Mirrors must have a covered back to avoid exposing your bird to potentially toxic reflective backing. If your bird bores easily, rotate the toys regularly. You can also provide your bird with a cuttlebone or lava rock to help keep the beak and nails properly worn down.

To keep your songbirds' habitat clean, change the cage papers daily. Food and water dishes will also need daily disinfecting. Clean and disinfect the cage at least once a week. Toys and perches will need occasional disinfecting as well. Replace wooden perches periodically as they cannot be properly disinfected. Remember to rinse all items thoroughly after disinfecting.

DIET

Canaries and finches will rarely take to formulated bird feed, available as pellets, crumbles or mash. Instead, provide a finch seed mix, with oyster shell (for grit and calcium) and fresh greens available every day. Most fresh fruits and vegetables are suitable, but avoid avocado, which is potentially toxic. Your veterinarian can help determine whether or not vitamin supplements are required. Fresh water must be available at all times.

HEALTH

Your songbirds will require regular, routine veterinary check-ups, just like a cat or dog. During your annual visits, your veterinarian can perform any necessary grooming and a physical examination. Songbirds try to hide signs of illness, so by the time you notice something is wrong, the illness is usually well advanced. The following signs mean your pet needs urgent veterinary care: problems balancing, open-mouthed breathing, inability to perch, a change in vocalization, sneezing, discharge or swelling of the eyes, reduced appetite, decreased preening, swollen feet or joints, change in droppings or lumps anywhere on the body.

FERTILITY

Because it is difficult to find enough appropriate homes for these birds, breeding pet songbirds is strongly discouraged. Determine the sex of each bird. Do not keep males together in the same cage, as they will fight.

HELP PROTECT WILD BIRDS

Insist on purchasing a captive-bred bird. They are better socialized and healthier, making much better pets.



A QUICK GUIDE TO SONGBIRDS: FINCHES AND CANARIES



As pets, canaries and finches are fairly easy to maintain. While songbirds generally don't like to be handled, they are fascinating to observe. Depending on the bird, expect a life span of 5–10 years.

Before adopting a pet songbird, consider the following:

- Songbirds need nutritious food, fresh water and a clean habitat.
- Songbirds need daily attention and interaction.
- All household members should understand how to handle and care for a songbird, and they should all be as eager as you to welcome a songbird into the family.
- Like cats and dogs, songbirds require routine veterinary care, and they should be seen by a veterinarian who specializes in birds.

SETTING UP HOUSE

Essential items

- As large a cage as possible
- Perches (no sandpaper!)
- Food dish
- Water dish or bottle
- Formulated bird food
- Safe toys
- Shallow dish for bathing

Optional items

- Cuttlebone or lava rock
- Small travel cage

ONE OR TWO?

Whether to get more than one bird depends on the type of bird. Canaries tend to be solitary birds, content on their own. Finches are more social birds, happiest in the company of their own kind.

GENERAL CARE

Your songbird will need plenty of opportunity to fly, but it's best not to allow a canary or finch out of the cage. A typical house offers many dangers to a bird. Provide your bird with an appropriately sized cage, not free reign of your house.

Offer your songbird a bath at least twice a week. Fill a shallow dish with 6 cm of room-temperature water and place it in the cage. Once your songbird has finished bathing, remove the water. Nails should be trimmed about twice a year, by you or a qualified professional.

Unless you live in a cool climate, you likely won't need to cover your bird's cage at night. Some birds appreciate the extra privacy and others feel panicked. Take your cue from your bird's behaviour.

HANDLING

As a rule, songbirds do not like to be handled. If you must remove a songbird from the cage, remove all perches, turn out the lights, then gently reach into the enclosure. Place one hand over the bird's back, with the head resting between your first and second finger. Use your thumb and remaining fingers to gently restrain the wings.

HOUSING

Songbirds may not like to be handled, but they do enjoy company. Place your songbirds' cage in a draft-free area, out of direct sunlight, where they can watch and be watched. Don't place the cage under or near an air conditioning unit or vent, or in the kitchen. Select as large a cage as possible. The minimum suggested size is 60 cm long, 30 cm wide and 30 cm tall. Width is more important than height, as songbirds fly back and forth, rather than up and down.

A rectangular, metal cage with vertical bars is best. Wood or wicker cages may be attractive, but are impossible to disinfect. The bars should be no more than 12 mm apart, to prevent the bird from getting his or her head stuck. Line the bottom of the cage with newspaper or paper towels.

Provide your songbirds with plenty of perches of varying diameters. Pesticide-free branches from non-toxic trees such as apple, elm, or maple make natural and attractive perches. Finches, in particular, will appreciate the privacy that the leaves can afford. Wood, plastic and hemp perches can also be purchased. Monitor hemp or rope perches carefully, as the fibres can become tangled around the bird's toes. Avoid perches made of synthetic fibres or covered in sandpaper, which can cause irritation to the feet. Concrete perches can help keep the nails and beak properly worn down, but provide some non-concrete perches as well.

Their attractive plumage and cheerful song make small songbirds delightful companions.

Please support the animals in our community.



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