

# WELCOME TO BIRD KEEPING

A  
PROMOTIONAL  
LEAFLET  
PRODUCED BY  
THE NATIONAL  
COUNCIL FOR  
AVICULTURE  
(NCA)



# Welcome to

The purpose of this leaflet is to introduce anyone - young or not so young - to the keeping of birds. A decision to keep bird(s) needs to be based on informed knowledge. The NCA would never encourage anyone to enter into even keeping a single bird in a cage without giving it plenty of serious thought and consideration of the consequences, like what happens at a time of holiday and the overall level of commitment you would need to make to the well-being of that bird.

## Parent bodies

**The British Bird Council** [www.britishbirdcouncil.com](http://www.britishbirdcouncil.com)

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**The Budgerigar Society** [www.budgerigarsociety.com](http://www.budgerigarsociety.com)

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**The Canary Council** [www.canarycouncil.co.uk](http://www.canarycouncil.co.uk)

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**The Foreign Bird Federation** [www.foreignbirdfederation.co.uk](http://www.foreignbirdfederation.co.uk)

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# bird keeping

**T**he National Council for Aviculture (NCA) was established in 1945, and is a national organisation that represents the interests of those who wish to keep and breed birds in a right and proper way.

One of the major aims of the society is to promote the keeping of all types of birds based on knowledge and understanding. We know there are great benefits to the individual when keeping birds: it teaches the young to take responsibility for all creatures, and is a wonderful way to prepare for life ahead; and for adults, it's a way to enjoy those hours of relaxation and improve the quality of our life.

This leaflet cannot provide every scrap of information that anyone might need to

keep every bird. However, it will be able to explain those basic decisions that you will need to make before you get started. Some types of birds require greater commitment than others, and it's as well to make a start with birds that are less challenging before you jump in at the deep end with birds that require lots of time, money, and space to keep them properly. This leaflet is aimed at getting you started, and provides lots of contacts and pointers to help you get to the next stage of gathering additional information.

The NCA Website <http://www.nca.uk.net> will constantly be updated, and will provide an invaluable route to gaining more information and help.

## Pet Birds

### It's a wonderful hobby

**M**ost bird keepers are happy and contented people. They might work hard and get stressed by their daily business life but then can come home, take care of his or her birds and start to wind down. Keeping birds and just watching them is a great way to help you relax. If you get involved with birds, there is some aspect that will grab you. It might be the breeding, it might be the keeping and caring, or might equally be the combination of breeding and exhibiting, but it is sometimes easy to forget that there is a huge social aspect to keeping birds through all the clubs and societies that exist to bring bird keepers together - and that is what many people enjoy. There is no doubt, keeping and talking about birds brings everyone to the same level, and that too is a great reason to consider the positive social aspects of bird keeping.

**I**t's often that first pet bird that gets you into keeping birds in a bigger way. Young people often have a pet bird when a child, and the experience never leaves them. So frequently, a youngster who has kept birds when they were a child makes a return to more serious bird keeping when they are older, and have the time and facilities to keep them properly. Seed, water, grit and a millet spray occasionally, will be the main requirements to keep the bird happy. A cock canary is likely to sing its head off when it's really fit, and it is not difficult to teach a young budgerigar to talk.

A pet canary, budgie or a finch is an ideal starter bird; however, as parrots and the larger birds have become more and more popular, people are keen to keep a parrot in the house. The medium sized Parrots like Senegal or Meyer's are just about manageable in a home environment but if anyone is thinking of larger Parrots such as African Greys, Amazons, Cockatoos or Macaws they must understand these birds require lots of attention. They are not the type of bird that should be left alone all day when the owners are away at work. They are intelligent birds that need company for most of the time. They are wonderful birds and extremely entertaining pets - but not ideal as a first bird, and they can be noisy so it is important to consider noise if you have neighbours. Hand-reared baby Parrots make the best pet, but as it takes time and effort to breed these birds, they command a higher price. The larger birds are more demanding, so it is always as well to understand what the commitments are likely to be by visiting websites, reading books and articles and



talking to other bird keepers before you get in too deeply.

Many pet bird owners find their way into more serious bird keeping and that is where we will now focus our attention.



## What Birds Should You Keep?

**T**he first decision is to decide whether you want to keep and breed a collection of different species, or whether you want to concentrate on just one or two species.

**Getting information is vital to making good progress** - The first place to look will be the NCA Website for contacts. Recently, there has been a huge development of websites, and the NCA site will lead you to many links to other sites dealing with the different types of birds listed below. Books will be another source of information, but more and more people tend to gather their information from the internet, magazines and journals. The leading magazine

for UK birdkeepers is undoubtedly the weekly *Cage & Aviary Birds*, which contains articles about the keeping and breeding of birds by experts in their field, items of news about club activities, and a section devoted to birds for sale.

The bird fancy is full of interesting and helpful people. You can be sure that if you join a local society, you will be able to chat with fellow members and they will direct you towards people with the birds you wish to keep. Arrange to visit them in their birdrooms, and listen carefully to what they have to say. It seems to be built into bird fanciers to be able to help others share and enjoy their great hobby.

The different groups of birds that are generally kept by birdkeepers are listed below with a brief indication as to the level of difficulty and cost.

**Canaries** – Canaries come in a wide range of shapes and sizes and are generally free breeders, but the larger varieties are very feathery birds and tend to be more reluctant to breed. The smaller Glosters, Fifes and Irish are easy to breed, while the Yorkshires and Norwich varieties are more challenging breeds. The Glosters, Fifes, and Coloured Canaries are reasonably priced but the larger and more specialist Old Varieties are more expensive. Broadly speaking, if they are easy to breed they are cheaper in cost. The Canary fancy is largely based on breeding for specific shape and form (type) and for shows. The very best quality show birds in all sections demand a high price, but it is also possible to do well with exhibition Canaries and not spend a fortune on the birds themselves.

**Budgerigars** - Are popular as cage and aviary birds. In the past the budgerigar was one of the favourite house birds, colourful and active. These birds originated in Australia, but for very many years have been bred in captivity, and as a result a large number of colour forms have been developed. Small





budgerigars tend to be more free breeding than the large ones seen at shows, which are far more difficult to breed. The lesser quality bird is cheap but as the Budgerigar fancy has a highly competitive exhibition section, the best birds are expensive to purchase.

**Bengalese Finch**



**Zebra and Bengalese**

- Probably the easiest of the small seedeaters to house and breed, and the ideal species with

which to start your bird keeping. Both species can now be considered domesticated, and come in a multitude of colours. There are extremely competitive exhibition sections for both. Zebra Finches and Bengalese Finches; these have classes for different colours, and also the level of experience of the exhibitor. Birds in these groups can range in price from a couple of pounds each for aviary quality birds to several tens of pounds for good quality exhibition stock.



**Australian Grassfinches -**

These Finches might be considered as somewhat more expensive but the whole group of Grassfinches are reasonably

inexpensive and fairly easy to keep and breed. Heated accommodation is a must with these species as most breeding will take place early in the year January to April, This is so the birds are ready to show later in the year.



**Foreign Seed eaters**

- The majority of this large group are African and Asian in origin, and are often incorrectly referred

to as finches; as a group the majority are Estrildid's, (Waxbills and Munias). These and other true Foreign Finches and Sparrows are shown in the Foreign Bird section at shows. Prices can be substantial, depending on the availability and scarcity of the species. As a group they all need some form of heated accommodation in winter and in no way should they be considered hardy in our climate.



**Goldfinch**

#### **British and European Birds –**

The Goldfinch and Linnets were popular cage birds in the past. Obtaining breeding stock can be quite difficult. Hardbills are predominantly seed eaters and easier to breed and obtain than the Softbills, which are insect and fruit eaters, but it is more a question of being able to purchase surplus birds rather than the money they cost. Only ever buy from known breeders and only purchase birds that are correctly closed ringed which proves the bird is captive bred. It is illegal to sell or purchase British and European birds that do not have correct officially issued closed rings, with few exceptions.

**Parrots and Parakeets** - All Parrots must be considered as expensive, especially the larger

Parrots; these include Macaws, Cockatoos, Amazons and Greys. As a general rule, the larger the bird, the more difficult they are to breed. However once a pair of Amazons, or Greys is established, they will usually breed every year.

Parakeets are much easier to breed and are therefore much cheaper to buy. Cockatiels and Lovebirds are probably the least expensive and are fairly easy to breed. The larger parakeets are of medium difficulty to breed and are more expensive than the smaller varieties, but far less expensive than parrots. Many fanciers like to keep and breed Parrots and Parakeets, but they tend not to be as popular as exhibition birds.

## Accommodation

**B**efore purchasing your first bird, it is necessary to acquire suitable accommodation for it. There is a wide range of possibilities here, from the classic all-wire cage, which has been used for pet birds for centuries, through to large and complex aviary structures that will adorn any garden. The type of accommodation chosen needs to reflect the type, size, number, and requirements of the birds to be purchased.

In recent years there has been a massive increased interest in gardening, and this has brought about an increased interest in the small garden aviary. Usually a small outside flight with an attached shelter for the birds to roost will house a few Canaries, Budgerigars or even Cockatiels. There are lots of easily available Finches that will enjoy life in a small garden aviary. There are always doubts about mixing varieties because the larger birds tend to be a bit rough for the smaller, gentle birds so try and keep to at least one family of birds. It's not absolutely necessary to try to breed with the birds (although this will give an added dimension to your enjoyment of your birds). They will enjoy life in a comfortable flight with night protection, and a good supply of food and water. Probably, the small garden aviary is the least demanding on time of all

bird keeping except the single pet bird in the house. Small indoor aviaries have also become popular recently. These large freestanding cages are small flights that will comfortably house a few small birds (canaries or finch-type birds). They are attractive pieces of furniture and are ideal for a sitting room or conservatory. However, if your intention is to become an exhibitor it is likely that you will be attracted to keeping and breeding your birds in cages. Especially for breeding, it is usual to have one pair of birds to a cage. The dimensions of the cage are important, and proportionate to the size of the birds being housed.

Whichever type of cage or aviary you choose, remember that the bird must have room to stretch its wings, fly from perch to perch, and have easy access to food and water. It should be located in a cool, ventilated area which is not subject to draughts or too much direct sunlight.

## Buying Stock

**T**here are no fixed rules about buying birds - but a few guidelines that you should always consider:-

- Always buy a bird that looks fit - never a sick bird, or a bird in a heavy moult
- Buy from a breeder, or specialist pet shops or pet centres. Ask questions about how the birds have been cared for.
- Never impulse buy - make sure everything is ready for the bird or birds at home before you buy - cage, aviary, food and feeders, and water containers
- Buying from recognised breeders will always give you the chance to seek help and information about such matters as feeding and management



- Never be tempted to spend more money than you intend at the early stages, or to buy too many birds. Learn the management skills properly, before spending vast sums of money on birds.

## Breeding

Some bird keepers will initially be attracted by the wide variety of colours and colour combinations found in birds, but for most people, it's the breeding that gets them bitten by the bug. There is nothing better than putting a pair together, getting all the preparations correct, seeing the eggs and looking into the nest one morning and seeing chicks that have just hatched.

A couple of pairs of small birds breeding are not a massive commitment. Once it gets to several pairs - and they breed well - it is not only a lot of work keeping them well managed but you need the space and time to keep the youngsters. Small birds can generally be bred in cage, a small aviary, or flight. Canaries nest in an open nest pan while most of the small finches like Zebra Finches and



Bengalese will nest in an open-fronted small box. Budgerigars will nest in a box with a hole at the side. In fact all of the parrot-like birds nest inside a box. Obviously, the size of the box is proportional to the size of the bird.

Most hens will rear their youngsters with the assistance of the cock if you, the breeder, offer the right foods. For all seed eating birds, it will be seed or a mixture of different seeds that will be the basic diet. All such birds will welcome a rearing food which is easy for the hen to feed and is usually described as eggfood or softfood.



Parrots are also essentially seed-eating birds, but the breeders of these birds tend to offer a far more specialised diet which consists of soaked pulses and lots of chopped fruit and vegetables. For all birds, it's vital to read up what their standard diet consists of and always find out where you can readily purchase the foods before you buy the birds, and get in a suitable amount before bringing the birds home!

Never forget birds require some "extras" like grit and cuttlefish bone as a way of providing extra calcium for producing their egg shells, but read up on the variety you intend to keep. All birds require fresh water changed at least once every day.

Once the chicks hatch, you can see growth within days, and for small birds like canaries, budgerigars and finches - in less than two weeks you can see the coloured feathers growing. Canaries and finches will leave the nest within three weeks and for budgerigars it's around 30 days.

**Hand Rearing** - Many of the Parrots are taken early from their parents, and are hand fed by their owners. This process is known as "hand rearing". Birds that are raised in this way are extremely tame and in their own way, believe the person who might have raised them is their mother. The difference between a hand-reared bird and a parent-reared bird is amazing - the hand-reared bird will be loving, gentle and rarely bites. For this reason these birds are totally fearless of people - just what is required of a pet bird. Hand-reared birds tend to be far more expensive than parent-reared birds because of the time that has been spent feeding these birds for several weeks. A hand-reared Cockatiel makes a fantastic pet - especially for children.

## Ringling Your Birds

There are 2 types of rings - closed ring which are placed on the leg of the bird while the chicks are still in the nest, and split rings that can be placed on the leg at any time. Closed rings are metal rings, usually coloured aluminium, and split rings can either be metal or more usually plastic. A ring is mainly used for identification purposes, and helps identify the age of the bird. Ring manufacturers offer rings in a range of sizes, each suitable to specific type and size of bird.

Closed rings generally include the code number of the breeder, together with the year, and a consecutive number for personal record keeping. Thus the ring is unique to the bird. Some varieties require these closed, coded rings for birds to be shown in young bird classes, and bred by the exhibitor. These rings are purchased through the national societies every year. Split rings may be fitted to birds at any age, and are often used for identification of a particular family of birds within a birdroom.

## Shows and Showing

While many people keep and breed birds purely for their own enjoyment and for the pleasure of seeing them live out their lives, breeding for exhibition needs to be considered as an add-on to bird keeping. Those exhibition breeders still enjoy the breeding and keeping of their variety - it may remain their main interest - but the driving force behind them is the breeding of better quality, to a set standard, and to compete seriously at the shows.

Organising annual shows are the focus for many clubs and societies. Shows are generally less well supported these days but it's still an important part of the hobby. There are clubs and societies all over the country, and it's often the highlight of the club's year to stage an annual members' show, or even an Open Show where members of other clubs and societies can compete. It brings members together and shows can become great social events. There is no doubt that a show is a test of the quality of a year's breeding results, and it is important to compare your results with

Gloster Consort Canary



that of others. Judges tend to be experienced fanciers who are placed on a panel of judges by the appropriate national society. Most judges either are currently, or have been, highly successful fanciers and exhibitors in their own right.

Some people enjoy the competitive aspect of showing. Others like to be involved, and taking part in the show is enough for them. For others it's winning that is important - and then it can get quite serious - but never allow the showing to overcome the pleasures of keeping the birds! Bird fanciers fall into various groups, but most of the serious Canary, Budgerigar, Zebra and Bengalese Finch fanciers are keen to show their birds. These birds are usually bred in the first half of the year and most of the shows take place towards the end of the year. Most of the sections have classes for two groups - current year bred birds and adult birds.

Many bird keepers keep and breed our Native birds, known as British and European

birds. They are not wild caught as some people try and make out, but have been bred over a number of years in captivity. If these birds are shown they normally need to be closed rung, which means that rings were put onto their legs when they were just a few days old and still in the nest. This proves they are captive bred, and the rings usually show the code number of the breeder.

There are also two interesting sections attached to the British and European bird sections at shows. These are for Mules and Hybrids. A mule is a Native bird crossed with a canary, and a Hybrid is a cross of two Native birds. This tends to be a highly specialised area of bird keeping and needs lots of experience before breeding is likely to be successful. However, it's an area of the fancy that can be highly rewarding in the satisfaction that comes with success.

The majority of British and European birds bred in captivity are known as Hardbills, which means that they are primarily seedeaters.



Thrush

There is another group of birds from the British Bird and Foreign Bird sections called Softbills. These are birds that tend to have a longer beak, or bill that is not designed for cracking seeds and nuts. These birds generally only eat insectivorous foods, fruits, vegetable, live insects, mealworms etc and nectar. From the British and European section these would include Blackbirds and Thrushes, and those less common birds like Wagtails. The Foreign Bird section of Softbills would include Hummingbirds, Sunbirds etc. Fanciers tend to keep just a few Softbills, and they must be considered as a very specialist section. At the shows, because of their beauty they are always popular with the visitors, especially

when staged in a well-decorated cage.

The Foreign Bird section is another quite specialised area. Many of the African and Australian Grassfinches are free breeding so the numbers at shows can be quite large. Some Foreign Birds are not so easy to breed, and as a result are far less frequently seen at the shows. In recent years the importation of wild-caught birds from most areas of the world has been prohibited, and so emphasis has been on breeding with these birds to build up stocks, rather than just keeping them. It is important that this trend continues, and that populations of aviary bred birds are established for as many of these species as possible.

## Organising shows

Shows might come a lot later for you, when you have acquired quite a bit of experience with your birds, and have learned what a show bird of your species should look like, but many experienced bird fanciers have the major aim of breeding birds and showing them. Some will show to tell others what they have bred, while others are keen to compete with their peers. Everyone who keeps birds enjoys breeding and caring for their birds, but for some there's the added attraction of breeding to a standard set by the national organisations and showing their birds against other fanciers. Shows are important to the fancy. They are a way of promoting bird keeping by attracting non-bird keepers, but shows are also a great way to bring bird fanciers together. For most cage bird societies, it's the highlight of the year when everyone comes together for the members' show.

Regional and specialist societies tend to organise larger and specialist shows for single varieties like Budgerigars, Zebra Finches, Bengalese finches, and the different varieties of Canaries. These shows tend to be Open shows where non-members and fanciers from outside the area are welcome to compete. These are the events that attract birds of the highest quality and exhibitors tend to take the showing far more seriously than the local cage bird society where it's all about taking part. Whichever way, going to a show can be a great day out!

need to know where you're nearest, specialist avian vet holds clinics, and keep the phone number safe.

Sometimes things go unexpectedly wrong and you need urgent help. Serious bird keepers will need to get to know their local avian vet who will always be prepared to offer help when it is required. Knowing the local vet is a bit of a safety net for those who have problems!

### *How the Hobby is Organised - Clubs, Societies and National Bodies.*

**Cage Bird Societies** - The best place to start for any bird keeper - or potential bird keeper - is the local Cage Bird Society (CBS). These tend to be smaller clubs for bird fanciers in a local area. The number of these clubs has greatly reduced in recent years, and many clubs have amalgamated. They are the backbone of the fancy and where nearly every new bird fancier starts to learn the skills of breeding and showing. There is usually a members' show every year, perhaps also a young stock show, and monthly meetings where guest speakers are arranged to talk to members. Cage Bird Societies cater for the needs of all varieties but sometimes due to the members they have tend to specialise in one area.

One of the major reasons for the existence of the NCA is to promote aviculture and to help people get started in the hobby. There is another route into the hobby - you might know someone who keeps a particular variety of birds and you want to keep the same birds - and they might well introduce you to one of the specialist societies. That's fine, but we always describe the Cage Bird Societies as the "back-bone" of the fancy. However, many people come into the hobby and after a couple of years make their way into one of

## Veterinary assistance

It is improving - but few vets have any great knowledge or interest in birds. This means that if you are serious about birds, you



the many specialist groups and leave the cage bird society behind, although belonging to one of the specialist groups and your local CBS is probably the ideal.

**Local "Single Variety" Clubs** – As the name implies, these organisations have been set up to bring together fanciers specialising in one particular species of bird. They are often break-away groups from cage bird societies, where the focus can be on one group of birds. The formation of these groups has tended to weaken the cage bird society system.

**Regional Societies for all Birds or a Group of Birds** - Often these clubs will hold an Open Show and fall between the cage bird society and a regional specialist society. Some will hold monthly meetings, for others the chief motivation will be primarily an Open Show

**Regional Societies for Specialist Varieties** - These very often are locked into the National Societies by affiliation, and carry out the work of promoting their chosen variety on a regional basis.

**National Societies for Specialist Varieties** - These tend to be the ruling body for the particular variety in question, and set the standards and rules for the variety, as well as promoting the particular variety. They generally offer patronage to other Societies shows, and organise one large Open show each year themselves – often known as the "Club Show"

## Contacts

CBS's, National, and Specialist Societies. It's a great shame but there is no formal way to access information about contacts for the various levels of Clubs. It's always worth doing a Google check to see what comes up. Many specialist Societies have websites, and increasingly so do Cage Bird Societies. These websites usually have a contact point that you can go to find out more about the Club. Magazines like Cage & Aviary Birds each week carries news about Clubs and Club meetings, and sometimes will carry adverts for the major societies, but again there is no formal system for finding a National or Specialist society.

## Help and advice

Never be frightened to ask. The secretary of a club is usually very approachable and many of the specialist societies will have a "help-line". You might believe that your problem will be a small problem to others but to you, it's a massive problem. Experienced fanciers understand that and will always be prepared to help you with a problem.

The NCA can be contacted through the Secretary at:

**Email:** [info@nca.uk.net](mailto:info@nca.uk.net)

**Website:** [www.nca.uk.net](http://www.nca.uk.net)



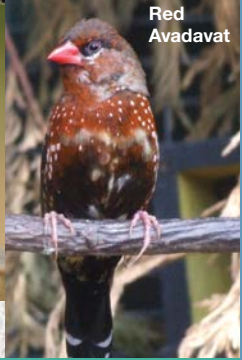
Rainbow Bee-eater



Splendid Fairy Wren



Bullfinch



Red Avadavat



Goldfinch



Hoopoe



Norwich Canary



Rainbow Lorikeets



American Goldfinch



Redheaded Finch



Squacco Heron



Red-browed Finch

