

## Quarantine 2.0

When breeding wild-caught finches, there are actually two phases of the quarantine procedure, the second of which you may not be familiar with. It is as important, and sometimes even more so than the first.

The first phase is one we should all know by rote--that of sequestering all newly purchased birds entering our facility from an aviary or wholesaler. We are, of course, looking for any illness in the newly acquired birds, and we even hold them back for a protracted period of time, in case the stress of traveling and entering a new environment brings out a dormant pathogen to an active status. We have visited the large wholesalers and seen first hand or heard of sick birds mixed in with healthy-appearing ones and know we will experience this.

How long we hold these birds depends on many factors. Did the birds recently go through a quarantine process when arriving in the United States? Were they from a large wholesale facility that may hold upwards to 100,000 birds? Did we buy from a knowledgeable and reputable broker who hand selected birds at a large facility? Did they come from a local breeder? Are we familiar with that breeder's environment and safety? Times we hold the birds may be anywhere from two weeks to two months.

When we release these new birds into our general breeding areas, phase two begins. This is when the new birds encounter pathogens we may have in our facility. Most of our existing birds have built up immunities to the common diseases and while it may appear all is well as they are all well, pathogens are usually present.

If we were to believe our breeding areas were pathogen-free, we would have a rude awakening in the fact that when birds left our premises, they would fall sick or die, because they would be overwhelmed by "everything out there." Exposure to most things a bird is susceptible to is critical in raising strong breeders. Over a period of time, most do get a touch of this or a touch of that. Sometimes it is evident and we medicate. Other times, their bodies ward off invaders and develop immunities on their own.

So it is when imports enter our world. Some will already have immunity to some diseases we have here, but others won't. Common diseases vary from area to area in Africa. Let's say you buy three pair of a species and they do fine for you. Then you buy three more pair later, and they are sick. You medicate, you lose a few, and wonder

what went wrong. Either they were exposed to sick birds at a wholesaler, or the new batch was trapped in a different area than the first ones and hadn't built up the same immunities.

When you have taken new birds from your quarantine and put them into your general breeding area, they may do fine for awhile; then they fall ill. You think that all along they were harboring an illness from Africa that finally became active, when in fact they encountered a pathogen in your facility they had never been exposed to before.

I am sure every bird broker has been blamed at one time or another for a bird's illness from a disease that was not at all present in his shipment.

The best way to handle phase 2 of a quarantine is to move the birds to a flight or an aviary and leave them in the cage. That way, you can watch them for signs of contagion and treat them. Once they are among the flock, it is hard to single them out for medication without having to medicate all of your birds. If they are being moved to a cage room, do not mix them with other birds you presently have, but leave them in their own cage and monitor as above.

If some of the quarantined birds do show illness, I treat them and then wait some more, to see if they are going to pick up something else. I have waited a year before releasing some into the general free ranger section.

Part of the domestication program is not simply getting them to breed on their own, but introducing the African wild-caughts to our pathogens and building their immune systems for existence here in the U.S. Sooner or later, they have to go through this process. They, with you as a partner, will succeed and become candidates for a breeder program, or they may stay weak or die. The sorting out is critical. Not every bird is a suitable breeder.

I'm sure some people have odd numbers of certain species, having had some of their finches die on them. The good thing is, you still have some odd numbers that did make it. This is not a time to give up on breeding a species, but a starting point.

There are a few species that are known to be more delicate to survival here than others. They include the Rosy and Green Backed Twinspots. Also, the Pytilias have shown me to be challenging species. It may take up to 20 birds before you finally have 3 or 4 pairs of breeders.

I already have two species I have taken on as “challenge” finches. They have been extremely difficult, through sickness, mate aggression or unwillingness to breed. I will keep buying more of those species until the sheer numbers give me the pairs I need. I learn a little bit more each time there is a setback and remain optimistic.

If there is a species or two you have always loved, only to be disappointed when you finally got them and you had some of the problems I mentioned—don’t give up. Keep working on them until you find success, whether through nursing them through the second phase of quarantine, or finding the right conditions to make them want to breed. Be patient. Let them age up. Don’t be too quick to try to get them to mate, lest you be disappointed with tossed eggs and chicks. But by all means, don’t feel defeated. Decide what your “challenge” bird will be and keep trying.

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