

The Morning Ritual

By Doug Taylor

You would think Finch Mansion was being run by military generals the way breakfast is executed every morning. But no, the precision involved is based on how the many species of finch are adapting to their conditions and me and how I am adapting to them and their needs. They like routines and understand them well. Routines keep them calm and secure. They become earnest and dependable breeders.

New parent raised, no live food (PR/NLF) species, including Red Wing Pytilias and Yellow Wing Pytilias that have fledged this week, along with successive fledglings from the Orange Cheeks, are contributing to overall numbers, along with a few Australian species that are known and reliable producers. Gray Singers have chicks, but I am not counting them until they fledge.

I owe some of the success on creating a hybrid flight/cage room where there is freedom to build nests wherever the birds want. As it turns out, both species of Pytilias chose existing bamboo nests in cages—just not the ones they were originally assigned to. On the other hand, the Orange Cheeks prefer to build their mini tumbleweed coco fiber balls and stack them in piles in every corner of the room and other parts, yet to be discovered.

There are about a dozen cages that have their doors wired open, have nests set up, and are left for the needs of any pairs choosing to use them, as was the case with the Pytilias. In the instance with the Yellow Pytilias, a pair of Zebras, with their chicks fledgling last week, used the nest next to theirs. The 30" cage has six nests and it's possible other nests are being used.

But let's get on with the routine that begins at 4:30 am for me, prepping food for the day, and the first delivery of food, which occurs at 6:17 am, the time the 2nd bank of lights, goes on in the first bird room.

Lights on are spaced one hour apart for each room. It gives me time to deliver breakfast in one room and prepare for the next. Up to 60 plates of food are prepared for each room.

It is critical to serve The Green Day Diet of fresh vegetables and fresh egg food at lights on. There are always hatchlings and fledglings to be fed, and for proper growth they must start each day with nutritious food and not be stuffed with seeds.

The order in which plates of food are served is always the same. This way, all of the birds are patient, knowing when they will get theirs. The only deviation from the routine is when there are hatchlings or fledglings and those specific cages are served first. Not only do the parents depend on this to feed their noisy babies--and are reinforced that they can continue doing so on a daily basis--but the other birds know what the priority is. It also lets them know that having babies results in an earlier feeding. There is no mistaking what the sound of begging chicks is. You know and the other birds know.

You may think I've become a little obsessive over this, but I will tell you, Success is in the details. Once the rooms have been fed there is time to clean up and prepare for water, which is usually an hour and a half after feeding. When eating soft food, some of the food does get stuck on beaks and most of the birds use the water to wash it off, getting the water muddied. The birds do wait until they get their fresh water to bathe. The water is delivered at about 85 degrees, which most seem to like. If they want it cooler, they wait. But usually by the time water delivery in a room is completed, half of the birds have already bathed.

Bathing is an extremely important part of the daily grooming. And in cooler weather, clean feathers insulate better. Just to show how much they anticipate it, the birds get noisy at feeding time, but doubly so when their water is being changed.

The final round of the bird rooms is to refresh seed. The birds usually go directly to the refreshed seed cups as soon as you are finished with their cage. It is for this reason I wait until last, as I want them to have a good, nutritious breakfast, from the fresh soft food plate first. I have one exception to this, which also reinforces how well they understand the concept of a routine. The Strawberry finches prefer a smaller seed than the white millet all of the birds get. I have made it a point to give them their special seed when I give them their fresh water. Every day when I come into the room with their water, there are one or two of the Strawberries perched on the seed cup, waiting for their day's refill.

The only other visit I might make in the morning is to bring in fresh piles of coco fiber and a handful of feathers. Nest building is always on the agenda for some of the free rangers in the hybrid flight/cage rooms.

I don't linger in the rooms in the morning. Some birds prefer not to eat until you leave. The same goes for bathing. They have their preening and

socializing as well, only in the company of birds. Leaving the birds alone to do their thing is one of the better restraints for successful breeding.

My next visit to the rooms is in the afternoon to check on food levels for the cages, with hatchlings and fledglings, as well as the colony cages. More plates of food are brought in as needed.

I prefer to do cleaning and maintenance chores in the evening, usually within the last couple of hours before lights off. The birds are most settled at this time, their day's activities complete, and less likely to be upset by the intrusion and what it entails. This, too, is predictable and acceptable.

I think most people find their lives run more smoothly when they have a daily routine. I know it works for me. And as you can see, my routine is strictly for the birds.

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