



BREEDING IN A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT

Breeding time is by far the most exciting period of all, a time of eager expectancy for the breeder, anxious to behold a happy event that verges on the impossible, that of managing to successfully breed our colourful little friend, so proud and wild in its natural habitat, in our limited albeit spacious breeding cages. What a joy to observe the hen proudly hopping around the cage carrying nesting material in her beak, and then weaving it into a nest, calling incessantly to draw the attention of her mate, who in the meantime bounces and sings his head off in his enthusiastic drive for procreation. For the bird keeper this is one of the most satisfying and emotional periods, yet fraught with mishaps and disappointments. In fact, potential problems to complete the full breeding cycle await the enthusiast all the way from nest construction through incubation, hatching and finally weaning.

As repeatedly emphasised earlier, success may only be expected if we have the appropriate raw material, notably tame birds which have been bred in captivity for a number of generations; birds with the right characteristics that can overcome the peculiarities of management and breeding in cages and able to produce youngsters which are healthy and strong enough to make it through the delicate moulting period.

For newcomers to breeding goldfinches we have prepared a plan to help them through all the breeding stages, intended as a guide to enable them to standardise and optimise their breeding techniques.

PREPARING THE BREEDING PAIRS

Preparation of breeding pairs starts off with selecting the individual birds that will potentially form the breeding pairs. Meanwhile, the breeder would have prepared a number of breeding cages according to the number of pairs he intends to put up for breeding and youngster population expected.

As explained earlier in the previous section, in our indoor cage configuration we shall be utilising the top two rows of cages for breeding purposes, and therefore, by January they should be clean, disinfected and fully equipped, ready to house the birds.

The breeding cages should be equipped with all that is structurally and logistically necessary before introducing

the breeding pairs, obviously to avoid unduly upsetting them later. Equipping includes hanging the nest receptacles and properly concealing them, and putting up adequate separators between the cages in such a way that breeding pairs do not disturb each other.

The nest pans to be used are of the internally hung type, consisting of a metal ring with hooks and a wicker basket that fits into the ring. The nest ring should be firmly hung to the side panel of the cage at one of the top front corners, right or left. The nest should be concealed for privacy by means of an artificial trailing plant tied up on the outside of the cage and shaped around the nest corner. Due attention is to be paid to the stability of the nest, the lack of which may discourage the hen from breeding. It is noted that wild goldfinch hens rarely, if ever, choose wobbly branches for their nest. In this well concealed refuge the hen will find the necessary shelter, privacy and confidence to kindle her nest building instinct.

It is also fundamental to provide the breeding pair with privacy, especially in all wire cages, thus shielding them from sight of neighbouring pairs. For adjacent cages, it is a good idea to insert a vertical partition made of nylon or other translucent material, which while prohibiting pairs from seeing each other, offers the added advantage of not impairing luminosity in the breeding environment.

Our breeding cages are now almost ready, each complete with drinkers and feeders, grit and cuttlefish bone, three perches, and a well concealed corner that simulates a breeding site. There remains one last item, the wicker nesting basket, which we will only insert a few days after introducing the hen.

At this stage, in fact, we introduce only the cock, applying what we learn from the wild, where the male is observed establishing his territory, singing ardently and incessantly to attract a hen with which to bond till the end of the breeding season. So by mid-January we introduce our males to the breeding cages, paying special attention to their feeding regime. The breeding instinct of a goldfinch hen will only respond to the flaunting of an adequate sexual drive by the cock, meaning that we have to prepare the latter fittingly, well in advance of pairing up.

At this point, the food offered to the cock is enriched with germinated seeds from the usual mixture of seeds soaked