



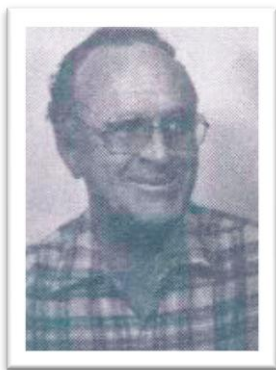
The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

What is compatible with what?

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By Brian Healy



Some of the common questions asked by buyers of birds; "Are such and such compatible with my finches?" and "What other species can I put with my birds?". These are not easy questions to answer unless one is very familiar with the aviary concerned and its management. The answers could be 'no' or 'yes' and 'any species' or 'no species at all'. There are numerous things to consider and, in many instances, it is a matter of trial and error. If the present occupants of the aviary are finches then it is very difficult to imagine that the likes of raptors, Currawongs, Kookaburras, Butcher Birds, etc., could be added without causing havoc. However, in the wild in Africa some weavers live in harmony with eagle species and actually nest in the eagle's nest. So there must be some possibilities.

In shrubs in my backyard (outside the aviaries) Bul Bulls, Grey Fantails, Eastern Spinebills, Red Wattle Birds and Butcher Birds have all nested successfully. To generalize, it is usually a matter of space, nutrition and the amount of cover and hiding places for the smaller birds, but the number of birds in the aviary and the idiosyncrasies of the individual birds are also important factors.

Even within finches there can be many examples of incompatibility. Two pairs of Cuban finches, Jacarinis or Crimson finches, are usually incompatible as the dominant pair will often kill the subordinate pair. However when three or more pairs are kept together (starting as immatures) they usually settle down and establish their own territories. A finch breeder at Mudgee has some 200 pairs of Cubans in a small (8-10 cubic metres) aviary. These breed like Zebras. Similarly some years ago I studied a medium sized aviary at West Pennant Hills where about 50 pairs of Jacarinis lived in harmony with each cock having his own small branch as its territory.

Incompatibility can take a variety of forms; Java Sparrows can intimidate smaller species. Zebra finches, Parsons and Cut-throats are renowned for interference with the nests of other species. I believe that this is nothing more than indication that insufficient nesting places and nesting material has been supplied to the birds.

Saffron finches and Cubans are usually aggressive to their own offspring. I have had problems with St Helena Waxbills raiding nests of other species and killing newly hatched chicks. Cuban finches are a good example of a species that exhibits a wide range of aggressive behaviour. Of recent years I have had the good fortune to have a very placid strain and have not seen any aggression to any other species. However, when I had my aviaries at Denistone, I had some birds that were very aggressive and attacked anything yellow. One particular cock even killed a yearling Golden Pheasant by attacking its head whenever it came near the feeder. I initially thought it a bit hilarious and I failed to recognise that the pheasant was being starved to death until it was too late.

I kept some progeny of that nasty Cuban when I moved to Pennant Hills in 1989 and the only species I could leave them with were the Budgerigars and Javas. I had a small hole in the Budgerigar aviary wall and the Cubans could come and go into the garden. They survived and because there were some 40 Budgies and about 20 Javas in the aviary there was generally harmony and all three species bred profusely. I weaned the young Cubans as soon as it became apparent that they had to stay out all day in the garden because of dad's aggression.

Another cause of incompatibility is the risk of hybridization, e.g. Blue-faced and Red-faced Parrot finches, the different munia species, the different weavers and many others. Where the hybrids are infertile, such as Canary/Goldfinch mules, no harm is done.

One species might be incompatible with other birds because of the aviary environment. Many parrot species and especially canaries are incompatible with a leafy, planted finch aviary. Parrots strip off the leaves while canaries attack the plant buds so systematically that the plant soon dies. There are many other groups of birds that can be considered to add variety to your finch aviaries. All you have to do is work out if they are compatible with your finches, with other birds in your aviary, with your aviary environment and most importantly, with people - you, your life style, your family, your neighbours and your bank account.

The true quail species, (King Stubble, Brown, etc.) usually get along fine with all the finches and save some from dying of exposure or cold. An incompatibility arises because some species of quail call continuously and tend to attract cats to the aviary at night. In my experience this is a good thing provided you have a solid wall at least a foot high around the aviary perimeter and an electric fence on the aviary to give a very clear message to every cat in the neighbourhood that the bird aviaries are a 'no-go area'. I recommend that every neighbour be given a cat and the bird keeper educate them all with an electric fence. This gives you a very effective deterrent force around your property against the movement of rats and mice to (or from) your aviaries. It makes for much better public relations with your neighbours than other traditional methods of cat control practiced by aviculturists. Another benefit is the reduce chance of interference from your local Council if you can live harmoniously with your neighbours.

The native Button Quail may be more attractive, the Red-backed, Painted and Little are very tame and quiet. The Black-breasted is an endangered species and this may appeal to some members. The Chestnut-fronted and Black-breasted tend to be more skittish and inclined to sudden explosive flight if not wing clipped or pinioned. Such flights can cause head damage and may disturb breeding finches. The Black-breasted Quail female also has a booming voice but this should not concern neighbours. The Californian quail and the Bob-White quail can also disturb finches since these species camp high in the bushes after being down on the ground below the finches all day.

I have always had Golden and/or Lady Amhurst pheasants in my larger planted aviaries. Other pheasant species are inclined to kill and eat finches on the floor but I have yet to encounter a Golden or Lady Amhurst guilty of this. Baby quail are a different story - incompatible with pheasants until they are a couple of weeks old. Parrots are mostly incompatible with finches regardless of the size of the aviary because of their destruction of the foliage. Most are also prone to grab finches and damage a wing or a leg. On the other side of the coin some parrot species are a lot at risk from finches like Zebras, Longtail and Bengalese, which can quickly build a nest in the entrance to the parrot's log. The parrot on eggs usually continues to sit tight and dies of starvation.

It is commonly stated that African Lovebirds should not be kept with finches. I agree with this statement but to illustrate that all is not black and white, I vividly recall a visit to an old fellow in Bathurst many years ago. He had a large backyard and had built a single aviary about 15 feet high covering it completely. This was built many years before I met him. When I visited I couldn't believe my eyes. He had only three species of birds and they were each in their hundreds. There were young of all species everywhere. Many of the trees and shrubs were dead or in poor shape due to one of the species, but every fork in a branch had a little stick nest and hundreds of nest boxes hung all around the aviary, had a constant stream of visitors. The species of birds were Zebra finches, Diamond Doves and Peach-faced lovebirds! I didn't notice a single mutilated finch or dove. Its management was also notable - the birds' diet was plain panicum, millet seed and greens from the local riverbank.

Provided there is sufficient space and plenty of brush and perches most finches are not worried by the smaller parrots like the neophemas, Bush Budgies and the small Lorikeets. I have had no problems with a pair of adult Kakariki but their youngsters played havoc with the foliage. An original pair of Hooded parrots got along with everyone but the new young pair have to go as they are very aggressive towards Purple-crowned Fruit doves, although they completely ignore the finches.

Doves and pigeons may squabble amongst themselves both within and between species but I have yet to encounter any problems with finches, either to the finches or to the doves. Of course, if you have a small

aviary full of finches and suddenly add a pair of Imperial pigeons, all hell will break loose. When nesting, my Imperial pigeons will attack me with beak, claws and wings, but they just ignore any finches which may have landed on their nest.

This brings me to softbills - a far bigger and more diverse group of birds than any of the other groups that have been mentioned. The most common species would be Silvereyes, Bulbuls and the Fairy wrens.

Bulbuls are almost entirely fruit eaters and can be easily kept and bred on fruit, especially over ripe bananas, apples, pears and paw paw. Some will take mealworms, nectar, cake, hard boiled eggs, greens and seed, but fruit is essential. They are nervous and flighty birds so space is important. No problems have been noted with a wide range of species except their own kind.

Silvereyes are another easy to keep species but like any Australian native species have to be obtained legally and be registered.

Another easy going species that adds to the harmony of the aviary, the fairy wrens can be difficult. They are essentially insect eaters but will eat cake, cheese, egg and are often seen in the seed hopper and around fruit but probably looking for insects. Generally, only one pair can be kept per aviary especially in the breeding season but this is flexible. Superb Blue wrens will permit male progeny to remain and these youngsters act as foster uncles to the next nests of young. Rarely do they develop any nuptial plumage while the adult male is about. The Splendid wren behaves similarly but in this case the breeding pair allow young female progeny to remain as foster aunts and they drive the young males away. I have not experienced any conflict between wrens and other species except in one aviary where I had a pair of Superbs and about six pairs of Jacarinis. One Jacarini persistently built his nest on top of the wren's nest and there was constant squabbling. This never appeared serious as neither bird was hurt. Both of these species can be deadly when earnest. I have watched a Jacarini dispatch a full grown female Funnel Web spider in seconds while a fired up wren can kill his opponent in a twinkling. I believe the trick lies in a combination of adequate space and food supplies. If food, especially live food is short, competition emerges and the wrens will be winners in any conflict with finches.

Again from personal experience the Himalayan Babblers (Pekin Robin and Silver-eared Mesias) are fully compatible with finches and with all the other aviary species I have kept. Bee-eaters and the Crimson, White and Orange Chats are also very tolerant of other species but I can only vouch for the Crimson Chat. Again it may be a different story if either space or food supply is in short supply.

With the provisos of space and food, problems should not be encountered with other small insectivorous native species but I would not expect successful finch breeding if some of the larger softbills such as Kingfishers and Kookaburras were tried.

Where I have seen Pied Stilts and Banded Plovers in aviaries the finches seemed unconcerned and were breeding. On the other hand many of the native nectivorous species are very territorial and aggressive. The king of these would be the Soldier Bird or Noisy Miner. No one would dream of putting one of these in a finch aviary. Most of the honey eaters are similarly aggressive but I hope to be able to relate good news when I give an update on this lecture. I am waiting the arrival of my first pair of Scarlet honey eaters (legal). I am told they will be okay with finches. Time will tell. After that I intend to trial a pair of Mandarin Ducks to see how they get along with finches and goldfish.

One other form of compatibility has to be considered if you are thinking of species other than seed eating birds. With good management the keeping of seed eaters is easy. Provided someone can keep a watchful eye over the place and provided you have an adequate watering system and plenty of feed hoppers you can get away for holidays, etc., without any worries. However, if you are planning to expand or to upgrade to insectivores, frugivores, or nectarivores; then you have to plan much more carefully. In the nonbreeding season you can get away with feeding every second day if conditions stay cool. Fruit tends to go off quickly in warmer weather and when birds are breeding it may be necessary to feed twice daily. Holidays become a bit hard to arrange. Your compatibility with the other members of the household then becomes an issue.

Incompatibility with your neighbours may quickly become an issue when you elect to keep noisy birds without getting the neighbours' blessings. Many parrot species especially the cockatoos and conures, peacocks, Wonga pigeons, and many others, can become your nightmare if your neighbours are not considered and consulted.

Lastly, it should be stated, that mammals and reptiles are not compatible with birds. Again, having said that, I have to admit that one of the most successful Java sparrow breeding aviaries that I have seen, was one on a farm at Eugowra in the Central West of NSW. The owner had about 30 breeding pairs of Javas and there were upwards of 200 young Javas in the aviary. The aviary was bare except for numerous perches and rows of wooden nest boxes. To my amazement nearly every nest box contained a nest of eggs or baby Javas AND one or two nests of mice. The mice were everywhere and Eugowra was in the thick of a plague of mice at the time. The owner said he always had mice in the aviary but the birds didn't mind. I saw clear evidence of that!

Editor's Note: It is not advisable to keep or allow rodents in a bird aviary, as the birds can pick up diseases very easily from the rodent's faeces.

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