

## Canary

### **This article is about the wild bird.**

The Canary (*Serinus canaria*), also called the Island Canary, Atlantic Canary or Common Canary, is a small passerine bird belonging to the genus *Serinus* in the finch family, Fringillidae. It is native to the Azores, the Canary Islands, and Madeira. Wild birds are mostly yellow-green, with brownish streaking on the back. The species is common in captivity and a number of different colour varieties have been bred.

### **Description**

It is 12.5 cm long, with a wingspan of 20-23 cm and a weight of 15-20 g. The male has a largely yellow-green head and underparts with a yellower forehead, face and supercilium. The lower belly and undertail-coverts are whitish and there are some dark streaks on the sides. The upperparts are grey-green with dark streaks and the rump is dull yellow. The female is similar to the male but duller with a greyer head and breast and less yellow underparts. Juvenile birds are largely brown with dark streaks. It is about 10% larger, longer and less contrasted than its relative the Serin, and has more grey and brown in its plumage and relatively shorter wings. The song is a silvery twittering similar to the songs of the Serin and Citril Finch.

### **Taxonomy**

The species was scientifically described by Carolus Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae*. He named it *Fringilla Canaria* but it was later moved to the genus *Serinus*. Its closest relative is the European Serin and the two can sometimes produce fertile hybrids.

### **Etymology**

The bird is named after the Canary Islands, not the other way around, derived from the Latin name *canariae insulae* ("islands of dogs") used by Arnobius, referring to the large dogs kept by the inhabitants of the islands. The colour canary yellow is in turn named after the yellow Domestic Canary.

### **Distribution and habitat**

It is endemic to the Canary Islands, Azores and Madeira in the region known as Macaronesia in the eastern Atlantic Ocean. In the Canary Islands it is common on Tenerife, La Gomera, La Palma and El Hierro but more local on Gran Canaria and rare on Lanzarote and Fuerteventura where it has only recently begun breeding. It is common in Madeira including Porto Santo and the Desertas Islands and has been recorded on the Salvage Islands. In the Azores it is common on all islands. The population has been estimated at 80,000-90,000 pairs in the Canary Islands, 30,000-60,000 pairs in the Azores and 4,000-5,000 pairs in Madeira. It occurs in a wide variety of habitats from pine and laurel forests to sand dunes. It is most common in semi-open areas with small trees such as orchards and copses. It frequently occurs in man-made habitats such as parks and gardens. It is found from sea-level up to at least 760 m in Madeira, 1100 m in the Azores and to above 1500 m in the Canary Islands. It has become established on Midway Atoll in the north-west Hawaiian Islands where it was first introduced in 1911. It was also introduced to neighbouring Kure Atoll but failed to become established. Birds were introduced to Bermuda in 1930 and quickly started breeding but they began to decline in the 1940s after scale insects devastated the population of Bermuda cedar and by the 1960s they had died out. The species also occurs in Puerto Rico but is not yet established there.

### **Behaviour/Reproduction**

It is a gregarious bird which often nests in groups with each pair defending a small territory. The cup-shaped nest is built 1-6 m above the ground in a tree or bush, most commonly at 3-4 m. It is well-hidden amongst leaves, often at the end of a branch or in a fork. It is made of twigs, grass, moss and other plant material and lined with soft material including hair and feathers. The eggs are laid between January and July in the Canary Islands, from March to June with a peak of April and May in Madeira and from March to July with a peak of May and June in the Azores. They are pale blue or blue-green with violet or reddish markings concentrated at the broad end. A clutch contains 3 to 4 or occasionally 5 eggs and 2-3 broods are raised each year. The eggs are incubated for 13-14 days and the young birds fledge after 14-21 days, most commonly after 15-17 days.

### **Feeding**

It typically feeds in flocks, foraging on the ground or amongst low vegetation. It mainly feeds on seeds such as those of weeds, grasses and figs. It also feeds on other plant material and small insects.

### **Relationship with humans**

This species is often kept as a pet. Selective breeding has produced many varieties, differing in colour and shape. Yellow birds are particularly common while red birds have been produced by interbreeding with the Red Siskin. Canaries were formerly used by miners to warn of dangerous gases. The bird is also widely used in scientific research. Canaries are often depicted in the media with Tweety Bird being a well-known example.