

Mousebirds for the New Millennium

by Kateri J. Davis, Sacramento, CA

The word is slowly spreading; mousebirds make great aviary birds and, surprisingly, great household pets. Although still generally unknown, they are the up-and-coming pet bird of the new millennium. They share many of the qualities of small pet parrots, but lack many of their vices, which helps explain their recent increase in popularity. Few softbill species make good household pets so mousebirds are definitely unusual in that respect, and many a bird lover's heart is instantly melted when these little creatures turn into puff balls of pleasure at the touch of a human's hand.

What is a Mousebird?

Mousebirds get their common name from their mainly brown and gray coloration and their habit of dashing quickly and secretly through the underbrush. Their small size, soft, fur-like plumage, and long, skinny tails also add to the rodent image. Another common name for mousebirds is colies, but this name, coly, is most frequently seen in older references.

There are six species of mousebirds that combine to form a unique family, Coliidae, and a unique order, Coliiformes, in which they are the only members. All of the mousebird species are found in the central and southern parts of Africa which makes Coliiformes the only bird order strictly endemic to that continent. Dry scrub lands and savannas are their main home where they eat fruit, leaves, and flowers. While not invasive, they have proved to be adaptable, much to the dismay of some African farmers as they will feed on

crops and frequent village gardens. They are considered a pest bird by many Africans and destroyed as such. Luckily, so far none of the mousebird species are endangered or listed on CITES even though some of them have naturally small ranges.

Mousebirds are not closely related to any other bird species, although they share traits with parrots. Like parrots, they can hold a small object in their foot and raise it to their beaks to eat or nibble on. They are just not quite as strong or adept at it. Recent fossil evidence points to a possible distant relationship to the order, Piciformes, of woodpeckers, barbets, and toucans.

All of the mousebird species are closely related to each other and easily recognizable, as all of them share a common body shape and behavior patterns. They are about the size of a lovebird with brownish or grayish plumage, and a very long, stiff, pointed tail. They have a crest which can be raised or lowered at will and is usually erect. They have large feet which are pampodactylous, meaning they can point all four toes forward, enabling them to be quite acrobatic even hanging upside down and twirling from one toe.

Mousebird Species

Three of the six species of mousebirds are available in the USA currently. Speckled Mousebirds are by far the most commonly found of the three, with the Blue-naped Mousebirds second in availability, and the Red-faced Mousebirds third, but very hard to find. The other three species, White-headed *Colius leucocephalus*, White-backed *C. colius*, and Red-backed *C. castanotus*, are very rare, if they exist

at all, in private aviculture, and only a few zoos have them in their collections. According to the ISIS report of September 1998, Red-backs are not to be found in any USA collections. This is unfortunate as all six species have been imported in the past although little focus has been placed upon them. Hopefully this will change in the upcoming years.

Speckled Mousebirds

Speckled Mousebirds *Colius striatus*, also known as Bar-breasted or Striated, are the most common mousebirds in USA private and zoological aviculture today. There are 17 subspecies, differing mainly in color of the legs, eyes, throat, and cheek patches or ear coverts. They have reddish brown body plumage with dark barrings and a very wide, long, stiff tail. Their feathering is soft and easily damaged. They have a soft chattering call and are the most vocal of the three species. Their fluffy appearance and shaggy crest gives them a "I just woke up" look.

Blue-naped Mousebirds

Blue-naped Mousebirds *Urocolius macrourus* are the most colorful species with a brilliant turquoise-colored nape, deep red, bare skin around the eyes and bill, and bluish-gray plumage. Their feathering is smoother, and their crests skinnier and higher than the Speckled species. Blue-naped's tails are much skinnier than that of the Speckled but just as stiff and long. Their calls are melodic, usually consisting of a delightful one-note whistle.

Red-faced Mousebirds

Red-faced Mousebirds *Urocolius indicus* are closely related to the Blue-naped and look similar. Their smooth plumage has a greenish cast to it, and their crests are shaggier and not as tall as crests of the Blue-Naped. They have more pronounced red around the face and bill but lack the blue nape. They also have a melodic call, usually with three notes to it.

Mousebirds in Aviculture

There are many reasons why mousebirds make interesting avicultural subjects. Their personalities, movements, and behaviors cause them to

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stand out in the avian world despite their lack of gaudy colors or their inability to mimic. Mousebirds, especially the Speckleds, have an inquisitive, bold nature and always need to be aware of what is going on around them. They are hardy, with few disease problems, and live an average of eight to 10 years in captivity.

Perching

Their perching style is unique. Instead of standing erect on a perch, they squat on it usually with their bellies touching, and when hopping on the ground, their legs splay out, and they use their hocks for balance. Preferable to perching, they like to hang from branches, perches, or the wire of cages. This is not the same type of hanging that parrots do, as mousebirds hang tail down with their feet at shoulder level or higher, as if they can not

finish a pull-up. At night, they roost in this manner. If kept together, the hanging mousebirds will cluster, often belly to belly, for warmth.

Clustering

Mousebirds have a difficult time regulating their body temperatures so in the wild this clustering activity helps them regulate—and they will naturally go into a torpor state in lower environmental temperatures in which their metabolic rate and body temperature is severely lowered to save energy. Their metabolic rate can be reduced by an amazing 90%! If the mousebirds are healthy and in good condition, they will revive by morning and continue normal activities.

Up to 25 birds have been observed clustering together in the wild. Only a few other bird species, such as hummingbirds, can enter this type of torpor state. Because of this problem with maintaining body temperatures, in captivity it is wise to give supplemental heat if kept outdoors in harsher weather conditions.

Clustering is done by mousebirds in the daytime also, simply because they enjoy other mousebirds' company. Mousebirds are highly gregarious, staying in flocks year-round, and forming tight bonds to other members of their flock. They will spend a lot of time allopreening (grooming each other), allofeeding, playing, and following one another around. If mousebirds are kept in groups, their activities are very interesting and entertaining.

Aggression

Mousebirds are very aggressive to strange mousebirds though, so the aviculturist must take care when introducing new birds to established flocks. Anytime birds have been separated from the others for a time, they need to be carefully introduced again. If there is not enough room in the enclosure for all of the mousebirds to feel secure, especially when a pair wants to breed, they may even become aggressive to other flock members. Mousebird aggression is usually violent, bloody, and often fatal within a short time if not stopped. They will attack the toes and tails first and will often gang-up on the victim.

Rarely are mousebirds aggressive to other bird species in aviary situations and can easily be housed with other non-aggressive species from finches to touracos. Their curiosity may cause problems with other species that want to breed, as the mousebirds will want to investigate all activities. They have a tendency to steal nesting material from other birds to make their own nests and have been known to eat small nestlings. Mousebirds that are raised as pet birds will usually stay tame if put into aviary settings, coming to land on shoulders and backs to cuddle with their human friends.

Breeding

Mousebirds are undemanding breeders in captivity, and breeding takes place year-round in most areas. Nesting sites and materials used are varied, ranging from covered baskets to open boxes, grass to feathers. Two to three eggs are usually laid, and both parents incubate and raise the young, with other flock members helping as well. Two females will sometimes lay eggs in the same nest.

The chicks are semi-precocial, growing rapidly and are totally feathered and weaned within a month. To hand-raise a pet mousebird, the chick should be pulled from the nest when he is around eight days old, which is about the time the chick would be leaving the nest naturally. Only a week or so of handfeeding is required to have a extremely lovable pet bird.

Feeding Mousebirds

Feeding mousebirds is a simple matter. They eat the standard softbill fare: chopped fruit and vegetables. Mousebirds are not picky and eat a large amount for such small birds, generally one-half a cup of food per bird daily. A variety of fresh fruits and vegetables such as pears, papaya, bananas, apples, zucchini squash, and chard should be fed with small soaked and/or dry softbill pelleted food. Livefood such as mealworms and waxworms should be offered two to three times a week. Being the herbivores that they are, mousebirds can be destructive to live plants in their enclosures, but giving more greens in their food mix will help keep this to a minimum.

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Speckled Mousebird.



Red-faced Mousebird hanging as he dries after a water bath.

Household Pet Mousebirds

Like many parrots, mousebirds make great pets for the home, although keeping pet mousebirds is a relatively new trend. They are able to live in cages in homes or apartments easily and are quiet which makes the neighbors happy too. They do not chew on wood so are non-destructive to the home and plus do not have feather dust to irritate allergies. The price for a mousebird ranges from \$100.00 to \$400.00 depending on the species and whether hand-raised or not .

If the bird is to be a pet, it is best to purchase a young, hand-raised, well-socialized bird. Only one pet mousebird per household is wise so the bird will transfer its need for social interaction to the human owner. Pet mousebirds may become jealous of other birds or animals that get too much of their owner's attention. Unlike many parrots, mousebirds generally bond to the whole family instead of just one individual, since,

in the wild, they have such close relationships to their whole flock, and the human family becomes their flock. Pet mousebirds crave petting, and the favorite place for a pet mousebird to be is hanging somewhere on its owner. They make good pets for a novice bird person or an older child (under parent's supervision, of course).

Housing Mousebirds in the Home

Housing a mousebird takes planning because of two things: their tails and their feces. A cage should be as large as possible, at least 2.5 feet cubed, because their tails are so long, stiff, and fragile that if they hit the sides of the cage frequently, they will become ragged. Mousebirds will naturally hang on the sides of the wire walls so they should be encouraged to perch and hang in the center by utilizing perches and toys such as strings of colorful beads.

Also, hanging on the side of the cage, causes feces to shoot out of the cage. Mousebirds are softbills, and their feces are loose and voluminous. This is the mousebird's worst fault! They are not neat either, and think nothing of jumping into their food bowl. Cages need to be rimmed with a cleanable surface, and the rim, cage, bottom, and perches need to be cleaned often. Dealing with the feces control problem is a small price to pay though for such a loving avian family member.

Conclusion

Mousebirds are truly wonderful birds and deserve a place in the future of aviculture. They make fine subjects for the aviary or home and mix well with other species.

Aviculturists need to be sure to close band their young so genetically diverse pairs can be set up. Inbreeding is starting to become a problem since there are so few mousebird breeders right now. With the Speckled species especially, pairs should be set up for breeding with thoughts to keeping the subspecies strains pure. Very little is known about mousebirds now but more will be discovered as more people work with them. This article will hopefully serve as an introduction to these birds and spark the interest of more bird lovers. 