

# Breeding Honeycreepers in the Living Room

by Kimberly J. Rioux, Seattle, WA

**Y**es, it started at a bird fair. "What *are* those?" I asked. I was looking at the most spectacular blue and black bird I'd ever seen. I had to find out more. After some research I decided that I wanted a pair. A few months later an ad showed up in the Sunday paper and my first pair of honeycreepers came home that day.

The previous owner had bought them on a whim at a bird fair and discovered that keeping them in a small finch cage was less than ideal. My "rescue reflex" then kicked in and I started searching my entire region for any other unwanted honeycreepers. I ran an ad in the local paper and spread the word to everyone I knew that I was interested in them.

A local pet shop had purchased two pairs. After one of the males died, the extra hen was put in with the remaining pair where she was not well received. Of course she came home with me and I kept my eyes and ears open for any other birds.

About six months later the pair from the pet store had moved through two homes and was up for sale again. A local softbill enthusiast bought my first pair and I ended up with the "pet shop" pair and the extra hen.

My intent in this article is to illustrate how easy it is not only to care for these small softbills, but even to *breed* them. I hope to share how I have accomplished raising softbills in my living room, with minimal mess, and will include the details that help make this possible.

The hen (still lacking head feathers) lives in my kitchen in a cage that is 4 feet long, 2 feet deep and 4 feet tall on an 18 inch stand. The pair lives in the living room in a cage that is 3.5 feet long, 2.5 feet tall and 2.5 feet deep.

Both cages have full spectrum lighting and a heat lamp. I also provide fresh bath water daily. The cages have a combination of silk and natural plants. Cages stay cleaner if they are large, and the perches are hung from the top of the cage rather than supported from the sides. This allows feces to fall within the cage, rather than "decorating" nearby walls and furniture.

Although I had been told by the vendor that these birds could subsist on pellets alone, I suspected that those beautiful, long bills were designed for more than adornment. I provide Nekton Nektar-Plus in the Nektar feeding tubes. Each bird drinks about one tube (roughly 40 cc) of nectar per day. I continued to offer the pellets (small ZuPreem Fruit Blend—they avoid the green ones and eat the yellow ones only as a last resort) but I also offered a variety of other foods.

I tried some old recipes that included trout chow, eggs, and pound cake but the birds were unimpressed with my culinary skills. They did, however, appreciate my penchant for exotic fruits. They adore papaya and mango but also enjoy grapes (red globes with the ends cut off) and pears. They will pick at apple, orange, and, rarely, banana. I feed the fruit in large chunks hung on a skewer. This reduces prep time and the birds seem to enjoy tearing off bits of fruit. One of my birds had the tendency to fling the fruit so I provided his in an exterior, enclosed bird bath. This helps contain the mess and keep the plexiglass cage front clean.

I also cut about 10 small meal worms in half every day and laid them on the pellets. This is best accomplished by wing scissors to both pick up the meal worm and to cut it. I tried

using a knife but that resulted in an uncomfortable intimacy with the inner workings of a meal worm. When I fed the meal worms whole, I would discover escapees nestled in the papers used to line the cage. The birds also had to work quite hard, beating the meal worms on the branches which resulted in splattering bits of innards about.

When I brought the pair home the male was about two-thirds into his nuptial plumage. After about two months, the male attained full nuptial plumage and the pair acted like they were interested in raising a family. They searched for nesting material and mated frequently. I provided four inch sections of separated sisal rope, cotton rope prepared in the same way, goats hair (bought from a pet store as "nesting hair"), and the odd cob web. I tried adding a couple of spiders to the cage, thinking they would spin, but the honeycreepers made short work of them. I also offered Spanish moss (from a local nursery) and regular old moss (from my back yard).

The birds seemed to like everything except possibly the hair. They were particularly fond of the sisal, "weaving" it from various perches and ficus branches from which it inevitably fell (honeycreepers are notoriously poor nest builders). They obviously needed a little help.

I tried a number of nest options. They were completely uninterested in a covered finch basket as well as a plastic canary nest with liner. I also tried a woven, wicker and millet canary nest hung on the side of the cage with a silk ivy in front of it as well as a small wicker bowl-type basket placed in the small ficus tree. None of these options were acceptable and they continued their fruitless "weaving" efforts. Finally, I wove the canary nest liner (a natural sisal-type material) into a hanging silk ivy using very fine wire. The "nest" was surrounded on all sides by the ivy and away from any side of the cage.

It was a hit!! After a few minutes of initial protest, the female began investigating. They continued to drag nesting material about for two weeks or so usually placing it in the vicinity of the nest. Finally, while I was out of town,

my husband called to tell me that the hen had disappeared into the nest and stayed there all day. I called this "day one."

Thirteen days later she was out, looking for food. Thanks to *The Life of the Tanager* (Alexander Skutch), I knew we would have to provide lots of small insects. We had many fruit fly cultures both of wild-type and vestigial (or as the gal at the pet shop called it, "vegetable"). The cultures were purchased from a pet shop and a mail order house that specializes in reptiles and amphibians. The culture medium is fairly solid and the fruit flies breed on it. The vestigial fruit flies (so named because their wings are small and deformed) are handy because they cannot fly and the birds pick them off quickly.

Once the birds had a taste for fruit flies, we were able to serve them killed fruit flies and thus able to use our wild-type cultures without our living room being overrun. If the culture is placed in the freezer for 7-8 minutes and then removed, the flies are stunned. They can then be tapped into a bowl and returned to the freezer. After about 15-20 minutes the flies will be dead. The culture, after remaining in the freezer for only 7-8 minutes and then returning to room temperature, will be unharmed and will grow more fruit flies in a few days.

I also ordered mini-mealworms and pinhead crickets. The mini meal worms can be fed whole. I feed the meal worms apples and whole wheat bread or oatmeal. I feel this increases their nutritional value as opposed to being fed on just wheat bran. Pinhead crickets are easy to manage because they cannot jump out of a clean, empty glass dish (I serve them in a small Corning Ware custard bowl). Crickets can be kept in a large glass or plastic container—even a zip lock bag that's left open and upright will confine them. Provide a little cardboard egg crate in the bottom of the container for hiding but make sure it is far enough from the top or they will jump off the egg crate and get some distance.

I returned when the babies were four days old and was amazed by how much they were eating already. My husband had done a fabulous job at

keeping enough food available for the growing family but their needs were increasing exponentially.

For a few days I ended up relying on meal worms because they were cheap and available. I later learned that they may be too rich in such large quantities (over 100 minis a day). I started using more pinhead crickets and soon the birds were eating over 100 a day as well as at least 50 mini meal worms. The hen continued to demand more insects, perching close to me and poking her beak through the wire. She landed on the dish containing insects before I even got the cage door closed. Additionally, I tried offering mashed hard boiled egg. The hen investigated immediately and even tasted the egg but she rejected this food.

When the chicks were about 10 days old, the hen began feeding them more fruit (papaya). At 11 days one chick started exercising its wings. The next day both babies were startled from the nest. I returned them but twenty minutes later, one was out of the nest again. This chick has never returned to the nest and its sibling left the nest the next day.

The mother continued to feed the babies and the father attempted to do so albeit, ineffectively. Occasionally he could coerce one of his offspring to accept food from him but usually his overtures were ignored. The male is a much more nervous bird than the hen. She fed her babies without protest, even while my Goldie's Lorikeet was poking his tongue through the cage wire, licking the babies' wings.

At the time of this writing (four weeks from the hatch date) the babies are not quite independent. The first food they took themselves was fruit, the tube of the nectar feeder being too narrow for their comparatively short, wide beaks.

Interestingly, starting about three or four days after fledging, the father has been attempting to mate with both of his offspring. His attempts have increased as the babies mature, often seizing the opportunity when the hen is feeding. The babies seem mildly annoyed by this behavior but there have been no problems. Both the cock and hen seem quite keen to return to nesting. They carry nesting materials

about and try out the two nests that are in the cage.

During this entire process, I was continually surprised by these birds' need for insects. Next time I know babies are on the way, I'll have four to six healthy, large cultures of fruit flies, 2000 - 3000 mini meal worms and 4000 - 5000 pin head crickets on hand.

These birds have been great fun and very rewarding. They are completely undaunted by noise, activity, and very irregular light cycles. They seem to me to be the perfect "starter" softbill since they are small, beautiful, and relatively easy to feed—at least when they are not raising young!

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