

Breeding the Snowy-headed Robin Chat

(*Cossypha niveicapilla*)
at Disney's
Animal Kingdom

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Opening day for Disney's Animal Kingdom, April 22, 1998, was a very special day. Most notably, for the aviary keepers, it was the hatch date of our snowy-headed robin chat (*Cossypha niveicapilla*). This was the first chick to hatch in the Pangani Exploration Trail's newly opened African aviary.

Early British colonists saw a bird which, like the English "robin redbreast," had an orange breast, and so named it the Cape Robin. It is different, in that it has a white headstripe and an orange tail with black central feathers. The so-called robins were later found to have many relatives and so, for consistency, all these diverse species were called robins. There are at least 33 genera of robins endemic to the tropical Africa region. Because of their habit of searching through the understory for food and their ability to conceal themselves, they are not often mentioned in birding trips. Very little is known about most of the equatorial forest species.

The Snowy-headed Robin Chat is naturally widespread in the savanna and thick covered forest of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, and Southern Mali. They very much resemble the White-crowned Robin Chat (*Cossypha albicapilla*), but are smaller. The Snowy-headed averages 20-23cm (8"); 38-50g where as the

White-crowned is 23-26cm; 50- 60g. The color patterns of the mantle, tail and ventral sides are similar in both species. The voices and songs of both birds are unique. The Snowy-headed has a fast paced song, and often imitates the songs of other birds. The White-crowned Robin Chat's tempo is more varied and can be hesitant to lively.

Nests are usually well hidden in a hollow or branches of a tree or in other dense foliage. The nest is a shallow cup of grass, leaf debris, moss and soft twigs. The eggs are olive to chocolate brown, and oval. Two to three eggs is the normal clutch size.

Similarly to the thrushes of the genus *Turdus*, they are omnivorous. The diet consists mostly of insects, fruits and berries.

The captive born parents arrived from the Denver Zoo in September 1997. The male was 14 months old and the female about five years old. Both passed a routine quarantine period and were introduced on December 4, 1997 and appeared immediately compatible. The birds were moved to an acclimation cage in our free flight aviary and soon had access to the entire habitat by February 3, 1998.

The aviary is a multi-level, topographical enclosure: approximately 162 feet long, 62 feet wide and 45 feet high (50m x 20m x14m). It encompasses thickly planted oak, bamboo, and numerous varieties of tropical and sub-tropical flora. It also has a large 25-foot multi-level waterfall that cascades into a pond.

After release, the robin chats seemed to prefer the thicker areas of bamboo. They adapted readily to their new environment and were compatible with the established residents of the aviary. These include over 30 species such as Taveta Golden Weavers (*Ploceus castaneiceps*), Wattle Starlings (*Creatophora cinerea*), Racquet-tailed Rollers (*Coracias spatulata*), Carmine Bee-eaters (*Merops nubicus nubicus*), Hammerkops (*Scopus umbretta*), and Golden-breast-

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ed Starlings (*Cosmopsarus regius*).

Within a few days the birds were darting throughout the habitat and the melodious songs of the male were often heard in the mornings and at dusk.

By mid April the staff began to notice only the male out in the aviary. Then on April 15, 1998, a nest was discovered within a dark, densely planted area, not often frequented by the other birds. The nest was located 4-5 feet off the ground along a clay wall above the pond, near the waterfall. The four-inch cup-shaped nest was made of mostly pine needles, leaf debris and a few feathers.

When it was checked, to our surprise, it contained two chocolate brown eggs approximately one inch in length. On April 22, a chick was discovered in the nest and was judged to be two to three days old. The second egg was checked and found to have been punctured. It did not hatch.

Throughout the aviary there are a number of feeding stations. Some are shelves made from vinyl covered wire, attached, out of guest sight, to either the wire netting of the aviary itself or onto trees. Others are flat, rimmed platforms mounted on poles, again, out of guest view. Food bowls are placed in these stations. Soon after the chick was found, both parents were seen foraging at several stations and showing a preference for wax worms. Trips were made to the nest at approximately 20-minute intervals. Fecal sacs were seen being carried by the parents and dropped into the nearby pond. The parents' frequent trips in search of food allowed the nest to be checked with little disturbance. The chick grew rapidly and by April 28th was completely feathered, with fledging imminent. Thus, on April 30, it was decided that the chick would be removed to prevent its fledging into the waterfall or pond.

The chick was pulled and placed into an Accu-brood (a temperature controlled portable brood-

er) in a "nest" made from a bowl, with a start temperature of 95 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature was gradually lowered each day until it was maintained at 80 degrees. The fledgling weighed 32.4 grams: adults weigh between 35-38 grams.

The chick easily adapted to our hand feeding routine, which consisted of soaked Mazuri softbill pellets and chopped pinkies (minus the head and limbs), offered at a ratio of three bits pellet and one bit of pinkie which was fed at about two hour intervals from 05:00-20:00.

By May 2, the juvenile was hopping out and perching on the side of the bowl in which it had been placed. On the next day it was attempting to fly. Because of these activities, it was determined that the chick was ready for perching and was placed into a small cage. The cage was set up with a heat lamp to maintain a temperature of approximately 78 degrees F. It began to pick up mealworms and other food items on its own, and readily took the food directly from the end of the tweezers when offered.

Within the first week of being removed from the parents, the juvenile became very active and was moved to a larger cage to enable it to fly. By mid May the chick's weight had leveled off at approximately 32 grams. The first A.M. feeding was usually the best handfeeding session. Otherwise, the fledgling showed no interest in the keepers and preferred to eat from the food pan, with insects offered twice daily.

Also at this time, the molt into sub-adult plumage had begun. This could be seen starting from the tail and moving gradually to the head. Its breast feathers were erupting by the first week in June, giving it a mottled look. A physical exam was performed and blood was drawn for Zoogen sexing. (By looking at the genetic material from a bird's blood or a feather, scientists can determine whether a bird is a male or female). We determined this bird to be a

female.

As she was doing well in a large enclosure and had begun to slowly lose her bond with the keepers, it was agreed that the juvenile no longer needed to be handfed and was put on a feeding and diet routine par with the adults. (Unfortunately, several weeks later, she met with an accidental death).

As for the adults, the male robin chat was observed to have already begun to scout out new nest sites. On May 2, both birds were seen carrying leaf debris to a new nest site and by June 30, 1998 they had reclutched, with two eggs found.

We find the Snowy-heads to be agreeable inhabitants for our mixed species aviary. The male's song is wonderful to hear, the pair seems non-aggressive towards other birds, and chicks were relatively easy to raise.

Acknowledgements

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