

# Beyond the Psittacines: Could Babblers be right for you?

By Bryan J. Emery

I have always found softbills and finches to be very intriguing birds, but was afraid to have any because of “all the work they are”; something you hear from a lot of hookbill people. I think it has happened to all of us. You are with a group of friends and everyone talks about how difficult it is to keep softbills. How you need to spend countless hours chopping fruit and such. You also hear about the amazing expense of the food. I always just went along with it, but finally took the plunge into some of the non-psittacines. The intrigue of the birds had won me over. As much as I love my parrot-type birds, I don’t know why I spent so long without some of the others. I now have a mixed flight outside the kitchen window that houses songbirds. From dawn till dusk the house is filled with song. It is true the expense of fruit has gone up a bit from when I had just hookbills, but my seed bill has dropped to almost nothing.

Have you ever thought of keeping non parrot-type birds? If so, maybe Babblers are the birds for you. They have all of the personality of hookbills, but are in need of far less attention and often have very complex songs. It can be quite enjoyable to watch them in the aviary flying around, hopping from place to place. When you leave the realm of psittacines, you will discover a vast expanse of incredible other bird species. Most of us automatically think about Mynas and Toucans, but these are only a small part of what is out there. Different birds suit different people and I myself have fallen in love with the family known as Babblers. Babblers are mainly smaller to mid-sized old world tropical birds, mostly forest dwelling. They get their name from the constant small noises they make; if put in a quiet room you would be quite sure they never stopped “babbling”. The family includes many species, including laughing thrushes (*Garrulax sp.*), Yuhinas, Minlas, Pekin Robins (*Lieothrix lutea*), silver-eared Mesias (*Lieothrix argentarius*), and Sibas (*Heterophasia sp.*) among many others. Babblers are mostly insectivores, many of them spending a lot of time turning over leaves and such in search of insects (they catch a lot of their own food in the warmer months). Being that most babblers are from the forest, they often go from place to place in the aviary using short very rapid flights. It can be hard to watch them when they are flying as they can be so fast. Babblers are very inquisitive birds, spending a larger portion of their time exploring their surroundings and searching for food.

There are around 50 known species of Laughing Thrushes (*Garrulax*), with new species still being discovered. The Chestnut-eared Laughing thrush (*G. konkakhensis*) was only discovered in 1999 in central Vietnam. Laughing Thrushes vary in size and appearance, most being between nine and twelve inches in length and varying shades of brown, cream, rust, and white with many shades and some other colours present. Very ornate patterns are present on some species as well.



*Silver-eared Mesia*  
photo by Peter Karsten

Laughing Thrushes are known for being aggressive and should be housed one pair to a flight as they may cause harm to each other and smaller birds (and sometimes even larger birds), but there are always exceptions. Best breeding results are in single pair flights. The diet of most Laughing Thrushes is that of most insectivorous omnivores; insects mixed with pellets, diced fruit and a quality universal food or egg food with other “treats” added in for variety. Some softbill people also use a sponge cake or pound cake in their diets. Though often kept for appearance, laughing thrushes often have very clear melodious whistle or bell-like songs. Some laughing thrushes like the Hwamei (*G. canorus*) are very drab, in its case a soft ginger-brown with an eye streak of white. Nonetheless the Hwamei is much sought after for its incredible melodious song. Many Laughing Thrushes, as the name implies, have calls reminiscent of a distant human laugh. Laughing Thrushes are a very intriguing group of birds and well worth the work of diet preparation.

Yuhinas make up the 11 species of the namesake genus. These small four to five inch birds are mostly brown, grey, and chestnut in colour, often with very striking detailed plumage patterns. The most characteristic feature of these birds is a charming crest. Some species have a very prominent crest while some have a more diminutive crest. Many have the ability to move their crest. When I first saw a Striated

Yuhina (*Y. castaniceps*) at a bird show I was attracted to the little nondescript grey-brown bird and as I got closer to his cage, up went his crest and he had won me over right then and there. Yuhinas are often heard making the characteristic babbling noises common to the family, but many also have bell-like chirp or whistle songs. Diet is as for any small insectivorous omnivore. Yuhinas, though small in size, are very territorial and should be housed one pair to an aviary. They may tolerate other types of birds in the same space but never any other Yuhinas. These small birds with big attitudes are very inquisitive and love to investigate their aviary, and also may develop a bond with their keeper. They often show little fear of the person that brings them a food dish.

Pekin Robins (*L. lutea*) and Silver-Eared Mesias (*L. argenturis*) make up the genus *Lieoethrix*. These birds are forest dwellers and are often observed in flocks (Mesias are often in flocks of 30 or so) when not breeding. The Pekin Robin is a six inch bird with a base colour of olive and grey. It has an orange and yellow throat patch and orange and yellow shoulder and leading edge of the wing. Pekins are intriguing little babblers and often become very tame. They are known to take insects from their feeders hand or a pair of forceps. Though Pekins can be flocked when out of breeding season, they should not be kept with other Pekins when breeding as pairs have been known to kill other pairs over territory. The male has a beautiful whistling song and both the male and female babble short calls. Though their song is intriguing,



*Pekin Robin*  
photo by Peter Karsten

one should not overlook their appearance, for these birds are really quite striking. To maintain their colour in captivity, one should feed orange, red and yellow coloured fruits to the birds. I have heard of giving carrot juice

nectar to them for this purpose.

Silver-eared Mesias are about an inch or so larger than Pekin Robins. Mesias have a similar appearance to the Pekins, but they have a black head and silver cheek patches. They also have more orange and maroon colouring than the Pekin. If you have a happy pair, the male will sing a beautiful song that can be heard blocks away; on the other hand, if he decides he is mad his squawking calls can be just as loud.

Most babblers will thrive on a diet of mixed chopped fruit such as papaya, mango, apple, pear, mixed berries, and melon. As with other softbills, many people avoid citrus and acidic fruits as they aid in iron absorption which can possibly lead to Hemochromatosis, also known as iron storage disease. Softbill pellets (preferably under 100 ppm of iron) should be mixed with the diced fruit. I also add a high protein egg cake that I make and cut into small cubes so it can be consumed whole. The final part of the diet is the part they love the most, the insects. To keep costs down, many softbill keepers will culture insects to feed to their birds. However, many will still purchase some insects when their supply is diminished. As with anything, a good variety is very important. I feed common mealworms, lesser mealworms (also known as buffalo worms), wax worms (the larva of the greater wax moth) and crickets as the bulk of the insect diet. I sprinkle the insects onto the dishes of mixed food that are offered everyday. If birds are raising babies, it often becomes necessary to offer insects (supplemented with calcium) many times throughout the day, as this is often all that they will feed the nestlings. I prefer to raise my mealworms and buffalo worms on chick scratch and oatmeal with apple or orange for moisture. The wax worms that I grow are in a mixture of oatmeal pellets and honey, heated together with only enough honey to moisten the mixture. I also add powdered vitamin and mineral supplements to each mixture as the bugs you get out are only as good as what you put in. Since insects are deficient in calcium, a good calcium supplement would also be recommended to avoid calcium deficiency. I use a liquid combination calcium and vitamin D supplement that is put on the food mixture.

As with any bird, fresh clean water should be available at all times. I prefer to have 2 or 3 shallow water dishes in each flight at different levels. This allows the birds access to water for drinking and bathing. Also, if one bird tries to stop others from drinking, there are other dishes available to them. Many babblers tend to "eat on the run," and they will land on the food dish, grab something, and fly off to eat it. They can also be like this with drinking and bathing, making trips to the water dish for only a few seconds prior to flying off again.

Babblers are very intriguing birds that can very quickly make a place in your heart. With their wonderful antics and very personable nature, it would be hard for anyone not to love watching them for hours in a planted outdoor flight. They of course also often come with the added bonus of amazing repertoires of song and calls. In short, babblers are wonderful birds that can really brighten your day. ■



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