



Buying, Acclimating and Keeping Insectivores

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Because of their sleek beauty, insectivores such as bee-eaters, flycatchers, robins, minivets, redstarts and the tiny babblers have always held a special place in aviculture. But in spite of their success in captivity, insectivores still appeal only to the specialist aviculturist since they are generally perceived as being difficult. It is certainly true that they are more demanding than omnivores like magpies, jays, and laughing thrushes, but once acclimated, insectivores are quite hardy and easy to keep.

Purchasing

Proper acclimation is the key to any kind of success. If you are acquiring birds that have already been successfully established by their previous keeper, simply continue with the same kind of food and husbandry tech-

niques. In theory, newly imported birds should also be acclimated and in good condition by the time the federal quarantine is complete. But in practice this is not always the case, and such birds may be in rather poor shape—you really need to see them yourself before making a purchase or ask a friend to select them on your behalf.

Buy birds that are lively, wide-eyed and can preferably be seen feeding. Feel the breast muscle to assess their overall body conditions and avoid specimens with respiratory problems or pasted feces around the vent. Do not worry greatly about feather condition since newly imported birds may be a little scruffy, and imperfect plumage alone is not an indication of poor health. It could, however, point to external parasites so examine the

plumage carefully, especially under the wings and around the vent. If the birds are otherwise healthy but just look a little raggedy, you may be able to negotiate a discount into the bargain and, once in your aviaries, they will quickly molt into beautiful specimens.

Having said that newly imported specimens may be scruffy, insectivores tend to emerge from their period of federal quarantine in fairly good condition. That is because they are best quarantined singly or in pairs and, if the diet is reasonable, the lack of cage-mate competition or aggression produces good specimens before the quarantine process is complete. I would be suspicious of specimens that look poorly, or even birds such as Scarlet Minivets or Carmine Bee-eaters that have lost the vibrancy of their red plumage. Although in itself this does not imply poor health, it does mean that the diet has lacked the necessary red coloring agent (such as canthaxanthin); and if this detail has been overlooked, other aspects of the diet may also have been deficient. As with most newly imported birds, the plumage of insectivores often benefits from being misted with a plant sprayer. This produces a cosmetic improvement as the birds begin to clean their feathers by preening. But more importantly, being cleaner, the birds are able to fly better and generally experience an increase in morale, leading to an increase in physical activity and food consumption. This is especially important with bee-eaters, which often lack the confidence to feed if their flying ability is impaired.

Acclimating

Newly imported birds often have some kind of internal parasite; and it is worth asking your veterinarian to examine a sample of the birds' feces under the microscope. Coccidia and worms are the commonest problems which if treated are seldom life-threatening. But even these diseases can be harmful to a bird that has been kept in a stressful environment and/or on a substandard diet. Although an insectivore can be kept alive for months on purely mealworms, waxworms, and crickets, it will slowly deteriorate, gradually lose condition and quickly lose

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the ability to breed or resist infection. Eventually it will die of malnutrition. This is because the commercially available livefoods do not provide the wide range of nutrients that are found in the numerous insect species eaten in the wild. And in captivity, balanced nutrition can only easily be supplied by artificial foods or supplements.

Feeding Easier Insectivores Such as Flycatchers

In Europe, proprietary foods such as Prosecto and Claus Fat Foodtype IV can be used for small insectivores. A number of aviculturists make their own diets based on various ingredients like "digestive biscuits." Such foods are not available in the United States but there are a number of proprietary softbill pellets from which even better insectivorous diets can be made.

To make your own insectivore food use 50% proprietary softbill pellets, 15% finely chopped hard boiled egg, 10% livefood, 10% powdered trout chow, 9% pureed apple, 6% tofu.

As with all diets, presentation is at least as important as the ingredients themselves. The pellets should be ground into very small pieces or a powder for the tiniest species. This will form the nutritional foundation of the diet, with all of the other ingredients making it more enticing and palatable. The ingredients must be mixed and squeezed together to make a diet that is crumbly but moist—tap water can be added if additional moisture is needed. The livefood should very preferably include mealworms, waxworms and appropriately sized crickets. Such a diet can be used to maintain, and bring into breeding condition most small and medium sized insectivores such as minivets and flycatchers. These are relatively easy species to maintain, and even newly imported ones take to the diet quite quickly. But for the more difficult insectivores, such as bee-eaters and certain trogons, the acclimation process may be more intricate and time-consuming

Feeding Difficult Insectivores Such as Bee-eaters

Occasionally, Carmine Bee-eaters *Merops nubicus* and White-throated Bee-eaters *Merops albicollis* are avail-

able in the United States and Europe. These African species are somewhat less demanding than the Asian bee eaters I have kept (Red-bearded *Nyctyornis amicta* and Blue-bearded *N. albertoni*). However, all bee-eaters have the potential to be very difficult to establish and may be reluctant to accept the captive diet. Various "meating off" techniques may be necessary to encourage the birds to eat the captive diet.

As with any bird that is being established, the first step is to identify the preferred food items. Mealworms and waxworms are usually the favorites of insectivores. These foods are not especially nutritious and are fattening, but I use them as the vehicle that delivers the nutritionally critical parts of the diet such as the powdered softbill pellets. The easier insectivores tend to eat the powdered (artificial) parts of the diet with little encouragement. But in the case of bee-eaters, I prefer a more direct approach, one that results in a wide range of foods being eaten.

Fill the food dish with a moistened mixture of ground softbill pellets, as described above. Sprinkle on top of the pellet mixture giant mealworms, crickets and waxworms that have all been dipped in a thick solution of nectar or honey. Partially roll the insects in the powdered pellets. Add some very finely chopped hard boiled egg and thinly sliced (1 mm) pinkie mice. Do not mix the ingredients together; it is important that they are kept separate so that the birds can pinpoint individual items and pick them up while hovering. Once or twice a week an insectivore supplement, such as Nekton

Tonic I, can beneficially be sprinkled over the food. For newly imported bee-eaters, live (and moving) insects may be needed initially to stimulate feeding activity. But once the birds are used to them, dead or live insects will be eaten with equal relish. Indeed, dead ones are best. Since the insects do not have to be bashed against a perch before they are eaten, the birds tend to consume much more of the nutritious powders sticking to them

For short periods of time (about a month) bee-eaters can be kept quite healthily in small cages, provided they are feeding properly. However, aviaries are required for long term health and are a requisite for breeding.

It is especially important that food pans are positioned where they can be easily seen and accessed by the birds. Nervous specimens will feed by hovering or snatch a carefully selected food item during a very fast fly-by. So it is necessary to place the food on a pedestal at least three feet above the ground in an open space that has no overhead obstacles that would hamper aerial maneuvering. Be sure not to put the food on the floor of the aviary or cage, unless the cage itself is raised or suspended. Bee-eaters are extremely reluctant to fly to ground level to feed, and may well starve to death even if suitable food is present.

For most insectivores, a powdery, loose and moist diet is required—this is so important that I crumble the food through my fingers before putting it in the cage. I believe such attention to detail is essential, and is the key to successfully breeding all birds, especially small insectivores. ➤

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