

Pekin Robins

Liothrix lutea

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA



The Pekin Robin, *Liothrix lutea*, also known as the Pekin Nightingale or the Japanese Nightingale, has long been one of the most popular cage and aviary soft-billed birds. Its warm colors, delightful song, and constant activity have endeared it to countless aviculturists. Many years ago when I kept Pekins, one of my choice forms of entertainment was to spike half an apple on a nail in the Pekin aviary. For them to destroy the apple was the work of a moment. They were better than an applesauce machine. These same little birds would come to my hand for a mealworm. And to see them perched together for the night nuzzling up against one another was a study in tenderness.

At that time, the 1960s, no one thought much of breeding Pekin Robins and, indeed, they had a reputation for being very difficult. They were easy and cheap to purchase so breeding was not deemed necessary. The general attitude can be seen in this extract from an old (about 1930) *Avicultural Bulletin*, the official organ of the Avicultural Society of America. The author states, "A while back I had an inquiry as to breeding these birds in captivity. My advice is, forget it. Nothing but a waste of time and effort. The best that can come of it is a lot of disappointment."

Although the species had been bred in Europe, the first breeding in the United States didn't take place until August of 1932. Mr. C.C. Broadwater was determined to breed the Pekins and after a couple of false starts in an aviary only 14 feet long and 14 feet high, he transferred the birds to a *real* aviary. The new aviary was 40 feet long, six feet wide, and 14 feet high. It contained 17 trees and many more bushes and shrubs. Here the Pekin Robins nested high in a tree and finally brought off a couple of young. Alas, this type of aviculture is on the wane. Who nowadays has an aviary that size to devote to a few little birds?

Fortunately, modern aviculture has advanced to the point where there are

many products available to help one keep and breed insectivorous birds. Even in the 1970 edition of *Finches and Softbilled Birds* by Bates and Busenbark, there is a passage stating, "The breeding of the Pekin Nightingale is rather frequent compared to most softbills...The aviary is best if planted and if a constant supply of fresh running water is give for frequent bathing during the nesting period."

In his 1980 book *An Encyclopedia of Softbilled Birds*, Dr. Matthew M. Vriends states, "In captivity they will use canary nesting "baskets," which must be placed in half-open nesting boxes. They will also build their own nests, and of course, these are also cup-shaped and made of straw, bark, moss, and thin roots and twigs. The nesting boxes should be hung in secluded locations. One should not be too sure the couple will breed, despite what we might hear. It seems many people are of the opinion that the breeding cycle will take place without a hitch. Nothing is further from the truth, even though success is often possible today thanks to the many ready-to-serve feeds available."

Dr. Vriends goes on to say that "Besides juicy fruits and greens (lettuce, endive, chickweed, and spinach), we should also serve various insects (beetles, ants eggs, mealworms, earthworms, etc.) and finely ground raw or cooked beef. They also enjoy various seeds (hemp, canary seed, etc.), but their main dish consists of a good concoction of universal food, chick rearing food, and soft food."

There are later books with, perhaps, more updated information but the basics for the Pekin Robin probably remain about the same. The avicultural literature has noted the progression of the Pekin Robin from a delightful but impossible to breed bird to a delightful but very breedable bird. This is an encouraging bit of news in the bird fancy.

I did not breed the Pekin Robins. But I have never enjoyed an aviary bird more. ➤

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