



Softbills in a Mixed Species Aviary

by Dick Schroeder, Fallbrook, California

Softbills have been housed in a variety of enclosures for centuries. Probably the most common is the simple cage normally used for the household Canary. In the Orient where competitions are held among songbird enthusiasts, the highly ornate cages are worth more than many of the occupants. At the other extreme are the huge flight cages found in many zoos and wild animal parks. Many of these also include reptiles and mammals (those that don't eat birds, of course) as well as birds.

Birds can certainly be enjoyed in any or all of the above but to me the best way to keep softbills is in a fair sized, planted aviary. Too large and the birds are difficult to find, especially the smaller ones; too small, the plants soon take over and again, the birds can't be found.

What is "fair sized?" That, of course, depends on how much room you have available and what types of birds you wish to keep. Turacos need far more room than tanagers for example. I think the minimum size for both the birds and your enjoyment would be 32 square feet (4 ft. x 8 ft.). This should be as tall as is practical and probably could have one medium sized bushy plant along with six to eight, small, avian occupants. These would have to be in the Pekin Robin or leafbird size range. For those of you forced to keep your birds inside all year, this would fit most bird rooms that I've visited. Ideally, you can provide a larger flight outside.

We have kept softbills in many sized cages over the years. Certain species must be housed alone because of their aggressive nature, or it may be a species that is difficult to breed and must be kept one pair to a flight. For most medium sized softbills, about mynah sized, 4 ft. x 10 ft. or 12 ft. is plenty of room per pair. We breed our mynahs in much smaller flights. For turacos this would be a minimum. It would also be adequate for any of the smaller *Ramphastids*, such as Emerald Toucanets or Green Aracaris. Many of our softbills are still housed in flights of this size, generally planted with some shrub such as Cape Honeysuckle or *Ficus benjamina*.

Our most recent aviary and the last (right!) is about 500 square feet. It is nearly 10 ft. tall. One fourth of the roof is solid fiberglass. This is over the safety and feed area. Another fourth is lattice for partial shade (both for the birds as well as the plants. The remainder is

wire. This aviary is made with 1/2 in. x 3 in. mesh. The 3 in. dimension runs horizontally. One half of the west end is wrapped with a tightly woven shade cloth as a wind break. Our prevailing winds are off of the ocean. This is the same end as the safety and feed area, so it keeps rain from blowing in as well.

The aviary contains a wide variety of plants as well as birds. I'm sure the day will come when we will have to thin some of the larger plants, or at least top the taller growing species, such as star pine and *Podocarpus*. There are several palms in the aviary as well, but these are very slow growing and will end up being someone else's problem long after I'm gone.

We have provided flowering plants that many of the smaller birds enjoy. These include several *Grevilleas* as well as *Salvias* and Sweet Broom. There are also banana, bird of paradise, a couple of types of *Schefflera* as well as three species of *Ficus*. The ground cover is mainly *Gazania* and *Verbena*. There are hanging ferns as well, but these tend to take a beating even though there are no large birds in the flight. Currently the most destructive birds are the Stella's Lorikeets, which of course, are parrots, not softbills. They are also the only parrots in the flight.

Birds in this aviary include most of our odds and ends, mainly unpaired singles or multiples of the same sex. We do have a few pairs, and these include the above lorikeets as well as a pair of Bali (Rothchild's) Mynahs, White-edged Orioles, Red-winged Laughing Thrushes, Hardwick's Chloropsis (Orange-breasted Leafbird), D'arnud's Barbets, liocichlas, and Blacksmith Plovers. The unpaired species include, a female African Jacana, White-striped Tanagers, Bluehooded Euphonias, Pekin Robins, Pied Barbets, Black-headed Sibia, and Red-faced Mousebird.

None of these species are particularly aggressive with other birds. The Bali Mynah male is sometimes tough on the hen, and the plovers will defend an area around their nest, but nothing to the point of killing anything.

This is not the ideal set-up if breeding is your primary goal. We have



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plenty of other flights for that purpose. But many of the cavity nesters will be able to breed successfully in here. These include the barbets, lorikeets, and Bali Mynahs. The orioles have made a beautiful nest woven into one of the *Areca* palms fronds. The other species are cup nesters, so their nests and eggs will be open to predation by other birds. The worst of this group may be the Pekin Robin. Pekin Robins housed with finches have been known to eat all of the eggs and chicks in a producing aviary. The laughing thrushes would certainly be another predator. We have never had much problem with the Bali Mynahs in this respect, having housed them with smaller, breeding birds for years. It's a better chance that they will steal a hatchling, than an egg. The plovers too, should produce here. We have had Spur-winged Plovers successfully raise young on many occasions while housed with very similar species.

Many of the softbills that we keep cannot be housed with other birds due to their aggressive nature. These include the toucans, to whom a smaller bird is a snack, any of the jays and hill mynahs are far too aggressive. Also, many of the larger babblers, such as the White-crested Laughing Jay Thrush, will kill and eat smaller birds.

We have purposely not placed tucanos in this new flight, even though they would find it much to their liking. They really enjoy swinging on hanging plants, so these would be instantly decimated. Interestingly, another of the hanging plant destroyers is the African Jacana. Normally thought of as a ground dweller (or lily pad dweller), it roosts at night on any of the hanging pots, and breaks off or flattens the foliage. Also, pairs of mousebirds would have the foliage in shreds in short order. If it's green they'll eat it or attempt to. There aren't even any weeds in the holding flight for the baby mousebirds.

Speaking of eating, how are all of these mixed species fed? They really aren't difficult to feed at all. We make up a mix that has something for everyone. This is the same diet that we feed to our individually-housed pairs. In the large, mixed aviaries that we have had in the past, we found it better to feed

in one or two locations so that a bully could not keep another bird from eating. Since the plovers and the jacana are on the ground, we place a feed pan on the ground for them, which is shared by many of the other inhabitants as well. The main feed tray is on a wire platform accessed from the safety area.

Since many of the softbills (not to mention the lorikeets) enjoy nectar, a bowl of either Avico Lory Life Nectar, or Avico Sunbird Nectar is offered daily. The leafbirds are into it nearly as quickly as the lorikeets. The tanagers and euphonias also see that there are no leftovers.

The main diet consists of about 30% soaked Kaytee mynah/softbill pellets. These are chosen because of their low iron content and also that most all of the birds will eat them. That they are soaked makes it possible for the smaller species to eat them as well. We also mix some of the dry pellets in, especially in the pan that goes on the floor, as the plovers eat them dry just fine. Another 30% is made up diced papaya. The remainder is diced apple, frozen mixed vegetables, banana, sliced grapes, avocado, or other fruit in season. An orange half is offered daily as well.

We give varying amounts of live food, depending on the season, breeding or maintenance. This consists of live mealworms, and frozen crickets. The crickets are frozen/thawed to keep them from escaping (too expensive). During breeding season or when young are in the nest, we dust the live food with a mineral powder made for dusting crickets used as lizard food. We have completely eliminated earlier calcium deficiency problems that had occurred prior to doing this. Many softbills will eat most anything offered, but will only feed live food to their young, so they do not receive the nutrients that would be found in the Kaytee pellets. We also occasionally (once or twice weekly) dust the fruit mix with Avico Lory Life Powder. This contains such things as spirulina, pollen, as well as natural coloring agents, vitamins, and minerals. If birds in the mixed flight have young, we also scatter mealworms on the aviary floor where they can be sought out from time to

time during the day. They are fed the dusted, live food twice daily when necessary. The fruit mix goes in in the morning and remains until the next day. All of the plants are watered daily and most of the birds bathe at this time, regardless of the temperature.

There is a small pond at one edge that they can drink from or bathe in. This is refilled daily as well. We have learned our lesson with having too much open water in an aviary such as this. It seems that if the birds breed, the fledglings always land in the water on their inaugural flight.

The main drawback to having aviaries such as this (besides spending too much time bird watching), is the lack of breeding success in such environments. As noted above, some species will do fine, but many others will not. We maintain this aviary as ornamental and any breeding success is just a bonus. All of the rare species (Bali Mynahs, Stella's Lorikeets, etc.) have counterparts in other breeding flights or cages, so we are still intently working with these species. Probably the biggest advantage to this type of set-up, besides the pleasure of enjoying the birds in flight, is that it offers a place to house all of the odd birds that would otherwise be tying up a breeding cage.

Why not pick a spot in the yard, lay out a spacious aviary, put in a couple of benches and build your own bird garden. You'll be glad you did. ➔



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