

Coucals

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Adult Burchell's Coucal.

Naturally they are found in dense thickets, wetlands, tall grasslands, and riverine vegetation. Coucals are also located in gardens with plenty of dense shrubs and hedges. Sexes are alike and they are found either singly or in pairs which aggressively defend their territories against others of their own kind. Their territories are maintained largely through their calls which have been likened to water running

from a bottle - a loud descending "Doo-doo-doo-doo."

Management

My experience with Coucals is based on one African species - the Burchell's, *Centropus burchelli*, but in discussion with staff at Perth Zoo where they breed the Pheasant-tailed Coucal, *Centropus phasianus*, the captive management seems to differ little between species.

In aviculture these birds can be likened to giant shrikes. They feed on insects, particularly grasshoppers, reptiles, frogs, small birds, nestlings, and mice. Small prey is swallowed whole and larger prey is held in the foot and torn apart with the beak. Coucals are aggressive and cannot be mixed with smaller species of softbills or seedeaters. They are best kept with larger softbills with a similar nature,



Handfeeding a coucal chick.

photos courtesy of Glen Holland

such as Grey Hornbills and Longtailed Shrikes. Their aviary should include clumps of tall grass and a few clumps of reeds such as napier fodder or *Phragmites* and *Typha* (bullrush) which ideally should be planted around a shallow pan of water. Scattered clumps of dense shrubs and will also be utilized by the birds.

They have favorite perches in the aviary where they will sit and sun themselves in the early morning. The odd exposed dead tree stump will provide ideal sunning and viewing opportunities. While soaking up the sun, the head and neck feathers are puffed out and the wings drooped.

Their flight consists of a few quick wing beats and then a glide. Coucals do bathe but, unlike other birds, they simply walk through the water until their plumage is wet. They are relatively hardy birds which can withstand cold and wet weather for short periods but in severe climates which experience temperatures near freezing for extended periods, coucals will require additional shelter and warmth. As the sexes are alike, the birds should be surgically sexed.

Diet

In captivity they are best fed on 70% substitute foods such as minced chicken, pets mince, ox heart, and 30% natural food such as crickets, mealworms, mice and various insects. This natural food is particularly necessary if breeding is desired.

Breeding

In courtship there is no display, but the male approaches the female with food which he gives her and copulation takes place shortly thereafter. The nest is a ball-shaped structure and is constructed of thick blades of grass and twigs, then lined with leaves. It is placed in a dense shrub or creeper. At the Johannesburg Zoo I saw a nest which had been built in a thick clump of grass and was placed about 50 cm [19.5 inches] above the ground. Both sexes incubate the 3-5 white eggs for 16 days.

The newly hatched chicks are unusual in appearance, the skin is black and leathery with a few long white down feathers. They are sometimes double brooded. They fledge at 14 - 21 days, at which stage they are

about half the size of the adults and seem to fledge prematurely as they are unable to fly well for some time after fledging. Immatures are pale versions of the adults with most of the plumage covered by light barring. Unlike the adults, the chicks have a short stumpy tail. They utter a "kurrch" sound repeatedly.


Hand Rearing

The chicks are not easy to hand raise and natural foods are essential. Food is offered in a forceps tweezers. Minced chicken and ox heart strips are added to the diet and dipped in a commercial hand rearing formula, with a multi-vitamin and calcium supplement added to this.

The bulk of the hand rearing diet must consist of crickets, grasshoppers, baby mice, chopped reptiles, etc. The bones, skin, and feathers are left in the food and the chicks will form pellets from this. They have a large gape and are easy to feed. Initially they require force feeding but soon begin to beg for food. When begging for food, they make a "chirring" sound with the mouth open, and the tongue, which

has a black marking on it, is vibrated. The first food item is usually swallowed immediately, but the second and third are held in the beak for a while before being tossed into the back of the mouth. Their droppings are rather messy and smelly, and the bedding material needs to be changed regularly.

Fledged chicks enjoy the sun and, after a night indoors, when placed in the sun they immediately raise the feathers on the back. At the same time the wings are dropped downwards and forwards. This exposes the skin of the back to the warm sun and this brings the birds obvious pleasure. Fledglings have sudden bursts of energy, and will dash about for a few minutes as if being chased by a predator.

Hand reared birds remain very tame and one which I raised would put his head down and boom out it's call if a visitor showed it any attention. I have not experienced any serious problems with their aggression towards people but did once have a tame one bite my lip after I had imitated its call while it was sitting on my shoulder. 

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