

The Hoopoe

Upupa epops

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA



Thomas Bewick School,
circa 1800 woodcuts

Natural History

The Common Hoopoe, *Upupa epops*, is an interesting and unmistakable Old World bird distinguished by its high black-tipped crest, soft fawn color, black and white bands across its wings and tail, and its long, thin, pointed bill. Its soft call "hoop-hoop" probably gave rise to its onomatopoeic scientific and common names.

There are nine subspecies ranging over southern Europe and Asia through the Mid East southward into Africa and Madagascar.

Hoopoes prefer open and cultivated land and are usually seen alone or in very small groups of two or three birds. Although it will occasionally catch an insect on the wing (it is erratic but swift in flight), it is really a ground bird generally seen foraging along the ground bobbing its head and poking its long bill into everything. It leaves no stone unturned and no likely heap of dung or garbage unprobed (which is probably why it is found on the Old Testament list of forbidden foods). It searches for worms, grubs, ants, and any other insect it can find.

Strangely, the Hoopoe seems seldom or never to drink.

Hoopoes roost on roofs, in trees, on high walls, or in crevices in walls. They prefer nesting in tree cavities but will use crevices in walls or buildings. Some of the nests are lined with straw or feathers but most are not lined at all. And the Hoopoe is a *very* messy nester. They seem never to remove excreta or food debris and the nest becomes very smelly and foul. In a matter of days the clutch of 4-6 light blue eggs is stained a dirty brown by the bird's droppings. Don't foul your own nest does not apply to Hoopoes. On top of this, the female's preen gland has a strong, unpleasant musty smell thought to serve the same purpose as the scent glands of the skunk family -- protection.

The female alone incubates and the male brings food to her. She feeds the young whatever the male has brought until they are about four weeks old when she will venture off the nest to forage for food also.

In Aviculture

This sexually monomorphic species has proven to adapt well to captivity.

Although not endangered or vulnerable within its range, the Common Hoopoe has adapted well to the human invasion of its native habitats.

In captivity their diet consists mainly of insects, mealworms, crickets, and waxworms mixed with a bit of soaked dogfood and a small amount of ground meat mixed with a multivitamin and calcium supplement.

This species will use a variety of nesting situations. A hollowed out log usually works best but a nest box measuring 8 inches by 8 inches by 12 inches will work quite nicely. Pine shavings used as a nesting material works very well. Clutches consist from 1 to 5 eggs with both parents participating in the rearing of the clutch. It is not unusual for the pair to re-clutch and rear a second clutch for the season with young from the previous clutch helping in rearing the second clutch.

[Author's note: Thanks to Wayne Schulenburg of the San Diego Zoo for furnishing some data regarding the aviculture of Hoopoes. The Hoopoe is bred regularly at the San Diego Zoo.]



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