

# African Silverbills

by Diana Mosier, Dallas, TX  
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Many articles have data in them that is pertinent for a very long time, if not forever. We bring some of these articles "out of the past" to our contemporary readers. This serves at least two purposes - new material is presented to more recent members, and the fading memories of the old timers are refreshed. This Silverbill article is full of good information that is as important now as it was when written.

The African Silverbill, *Lonchura (Eodice) cantans*, is also known as the Warbling Silverbill; Order Passeriformes, Family Estrildidae. They average 11 centimeters in length. They are light sandy brown, darker brown on the wings and tail, and cream colored on their belly and tail coverts. There are four subspecies indigenous to West and Central Africa; they live in savannas, farmlands, and near villages. They are not dimorphic.

It is virtually impossible, in fact, to distinguish between the sexes until the chicks reach four months of age, at which time the male will begin to sing and display courtship behavior. This behavior may be only singing while bouncing up and down. It may also include what I call the "grass ceremony," which is singing and bouncing while holding a piece of grass in his bill.

Silverbills usually breed at eight to 10 months of age. Both the cock and the hen build the nest. He chooses and

brings the nesting material to the hen, who arranges it to her liking. I have found Silverbills favor freshly cut strands of Bermuda grass three inches or longer, however they will also use Bermuda hay, leaves, pieces of cottonballs, or other grasses that grow in their aviary. They seem to prefer the larger woven baskets (you can purchase them in any pet or feed store) to any other type of natural or man made housing. They also seem to prefer nesting in the open, where they can observe what's going on in the aviary, unlike Red-cheeked Cordon Bleus, who prefer to hide their nests from prying eyes.

I have observed Silverbills mate for life, rather than only for the breeding season. Also, they are very attentive to their mates, doing everything together from eating to sitting in the sun. It is very amusing to watch them preen each other, although the cock may pull feathers from the hen during mating.

I have noticed Silverbills, unlike some other finches, do not molt annually. The feathers are replaced as they wear out, the only heavy molt they experience is their adult molt which happens between six to eight months of age.

Although not as brightly colored as some finches imported from their area, they have a beautiful song (a testament to this is part of their name, *cantans*), and they are not aggressive, which makes them an excellent addition to anyone's aviary. Silverbills are also extremely hardy and can, therefore, be raised without much difficulty by even beginning aviculturists.

The hen lays four to six eggs per clutch, and has about five clutches per season. It would be wise, however, to limit them to three clutches if at all possible to have healthier young. Both

parents take turns incubating the eggs, which hatch in 14 to 17 days. It has been said that with Silverbills, nest monitoring is not possible. I find that to be untrue, at least with my birds. I admit, however, I don't monitor my nests more than once daily, usually in the morning while both parents are away from the nest.

Silverbills are excellent parents and, although I have heard they can be used as foster parents, I cannot substantiate this as I am against using any bird to raise the offspring of another. I do know, however, that Silverbills stuff their chicks more like Societies or Zebras than an African waxbill.

The chicks fledge in about 21 days, and the parents continue to feed them for the next 21 days. After the chicks are on their own, it is still possible distinguish them from their parents because their bills remain black. At between four to six months of age their bills turn silver, right about the time they start their adult molt.


Silverbills prefer greens and Spray millet. To this I add fresh fruits a vegetables daily. I have tried feeding frozen vegetables, but they were not eaten as readily (nor as quickly) as fresh food. I provide seeded grasses for them in their aviary, along with dandelion greens which I grow in flower pots and change weekly. I also sprout greens from their seed, a wheat grass, which they eat with gusto. To this I add a seed mixture of my own.

To provide calcium to their diet, I give them the standard cuttlebone but also provide eggshell. I bake the shells in the oven at 350° for 30 minutes. You can also buy sterilized eggshell which is just as good. To my seed mixture I add vitamins and proteins in the form of dried meat or fish that I grind to the consistency of coffee. I also feed a cornbread concoction which consists of three eggs, two tablespoons of peanut butter, and I substitute water instead of milk. Before feeding the cornbread, I add *lactobacillus acidophilus* to aid digestion. Along with all of this the birds get wheat bread, charcoal, oyster/gravel for grit, a salt/mineral block and, of course, live food.

I have found successful breeding and rearing of young requires abun-



*lata*, and *L. striata* Var. *domestica* so it would be best to add only bonded pairs if you have any of those birds in your aviary.

In conclusion, nothing is absolute in birdkeeping. Climate, housing, anything could make your birds perform differently from mine. Still, I hope this article has been of some help. So good luck with your Silverbills! I hope you enjoy your birds as much as I enjoy mine. 



These are some of the 23 African Silverbills donated by Diana Mosier to the Fort Worth Zoological Park in early 1993. All were hatched in her aviary and are now a conspicuous feature of the "World of Primates" exhibit.

dant and varied types of live food therefore I offer ants, fruit flies, earthworms, and mealworms.

I also try to simulate their environment by stocking my aviary with trees, shrubs, and high seeded grasses. There are sandstone rocks on the floor to keep their nails trim.

African Silverbills have been known to breed with *L. malabarica*, *L. punctu-*



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