

Mousebirds for Fun



by Kara Black
Nashville, TN

bling of canaries and budgies, a dusting of finches, and a full-blown infestation of larger squawking birds that frankly overwhelmed this former finch fanatic.

Oh sure, I had had the obligatory Cockatiel back in my college days, but had since settled on finches in my early thirties, opting for a more quiet and less demanding exchange between pet and owner.

One day online I stumbled upon an article on mousebirds (sometimes called colies). How simply delicious. Here was a creature with all the charm, affection, and personality of my Cockatiel, if not more, and none of the noise: a marketing coup if ever there was one.

I had recently worked at simplifying my life and was eager to get back to the basics of avian husbandry. Breeding finches had evolved from a delight into a burden. I had become more concerned with producing babies than marveling at their creation. I was eager to return to the peaceful days in which hours were spent just watching my birds, much to the neglect of the rest of my life. When I located someone willing to trade several Pekin Robins and a pair of Speckled Mousebirds, *Colius striatus*, for all of my Owl Finches, I was ecstatic.

I had once read that mousebirds

were "superficially unremarkable in appearance." Named more for the manner in which they creep and crawl than for the way they look, mousebirds are visually similar to Cockatiels but much drabber in color. Sexually monomorphic, (the sexes do not differ in appearance), they are 11 to 14 inches with a long, stiff tail comprising two-thirds of their total length. There are several species including the Red-faced, Red-backed, and Blue-naped Mousebirds, but I was obtaining the more common Speckled Mousebirds.

When I placed the mousebirds in the quarantine cage, they eagerly scrambled for the mashed fruit that I had prepared for them. Unlike my finches, these birds actually held their food while chewing, in a manner reminiscent of my Uncle Arnie after he had taken out his dentures for their nightly soaking. They absolutely loved bananas, and anything soft or cooked came in a strong second.

According to Martin Vince in his must-have book *Softbills*, they are considered frugivores that do well on a diet similar to the fruit-based omnivores, but require a lower protein intake. He recommends a diet of 55 percent fruit, 30 percent softbill pellets, 10 percent hard-boiled eggs, with 5 percent vegetables and greens. Due to their penchant for vegetation, Colies are considered pests in their native Africa, where they live in dry bushland up to the forest's edge. None of the species are endangered, but farmers and gardeners do not look fondly upon them. I can certainly empathize with those sentiments, as my pair made short order of a hanging fern and totally ravished a ficus tree by summer's end

After I moved to my new home, I made sure I had enough money to build my lifelong dream of an outside aviary — triangular shaped cage attached to one corner of my deck. The flight was made out of pressure treated 2 by 2 's and 1/4 inch vinegar-washed, galvanized wire. It measured 14 feet on its longest side and was 9 feet high. I had numerous plantings, real and otherwise, and several perching sites made from branches placed between the taut wires. One third of

I guess I was under the impression that the only pet birds available were parrots. If you went to the bird shows in the Nashville area, you could easily see how I had come to that conclusion. There were a sprin-

"Quality Leg Bands With A Worldwide Reputation!"

PARROT BANDS • COCKATIEL BANDS • LOVEBIRD BANDS • PARAKEET BANDS
 CANARY BANDS • FINCH BANDS • STAINLESS STEEL FEEDING NEEDLES
 ALL SIZES PLASTIC BANDS • FEEDING SYRINGES • CLAW SCISSORS
 BAND CUTTERS • PIPETTES • NETS

Closed Month of July

"New"
Stainless Steel Parrot Bands

L & M Bird Leg Bands
 P.O. Box 2943 • San Bernardino, CA 92406 Dept: AF
 Phone: (909) 882-4649 • Fax (909) 882-5231

Monday thru Friday 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. (Pacific Time) • E-mail: lmbird@earthlink.net

Since 1978

PARROT BANDS

Send self addressed stamped envelope for brochure!

VISA MasterCard

the cage butted up against my house where there was a two foot roof overhang and a vinyl-siding wall.

I used a bug zapper during the summer months for an endless supply of insects. Ignored for the most part by the mousebirds, the assortment of moths was relished by the Pekin Robins. I made a small pond from the upside-down top of a rubber garbage can that I balanced on a large plastic plant lid. An old recirculating pump made a delightful babbling noise that, when turned on, encouraged all except the mousebirds to take a bath. They never bathed in water and certainly didn't drink it, but I later learned that they were taking very extravagant dust baths in the brightly colored softbill pellets that I had mistakenly believed I was providing strictly for nourishment purposes.

My mousers loved the aviary. When they were exceptionally happy, you could hear them making their cute little squeaks and jibberings certainly well below urban decibel guidelines; however, they were rarely visible in their new accommodations. Whenever I walked by the aviary they would scurry up the wire to the top corner of the cage. Their feet were more or less level with their shoulders, and they remained motionless until I left.

Most of their time was spent either lounging in the hanging fern, perching vertically along the wires, or scuttling rapidly about the ground. Remember in the movie "Alien," after the embryo sprang from one of the crewmember's chest, how it scurried across the floor? For some reason, my mousebirds seemed to remind me of that image.


At night, Mousebirds prefer to sleep in groups, and my pair was often found clinging torpidly together in tete-a-tete fashion appearing much like a Rorschach inkblot. In an effort to conserve energy, mousebirds allow their body temperature to drop during the night. As a result, the early mornings would often reveal them fluffed up in the first sun-kissed corners of the flight.

Mousebirds, or colies, are considered prolific breeders, and I had high expectations. Often I observed them either loving or fighting. The male would delicately feed the hen or she would fever-

ishly chase him around the aviary, once actually drawing blood from her mate. They preferred a cup-shaped nest located in a low-lying shrub. The male would hop methodically several times next to the hen, which would then allow him to mount her. Laying anywhere from 4 to 6 eggs, she began the 18-day incubation period after the first egg was laid. Despite their aggressive courtship and subsequent mating, my mousebirds only produced two sets of two eggs, both of which were infertile.

By November, the low tempera-

tures occasionally dropped into the thirties and I brought the mousers inside. Of course fruit-eating birds of any sort will pose certain problems concerning banana flinging and loose droppings. Mousebirds are wonderful outdoor birds.

As I continue my aviculture into the new century I'll be watching and hoping the mousebirds have a better breeding season in 2000 than they had in 1999. And I am eager to see which will be the next addition to grace my aviary. 



MARION, ILLINOIS
"Growers of live pet foods"

Nutritionally Complete Selection of Live Pet Foods *for Birds*

• **STANDARD MEALWORMS** Mini, Sm., Md., Lg.



• **GIANT MEALWORMS**

• **SUPERWORMS** Sm., Md., Lg.



• **WAX WORMS**

• **CRICKETS** 10 standard sizes. Custom sizes available



• **OTHER WORMS & ACCESSORIES**

Enjoy the highest quality live pet foods from Timberline's state-of-the-art growing facilities. Featuring unmatched customer service with Timberline's extended business hours. And only Timberline offers Superworms in three sizes to accommodate all your needs.

GUARANTEED LIVE DELIVERY

Extended Customer Service Hours!

800-423-2248 • Fax (618) 997-4692 • www.timberlinefisheries.com