

# Breeding the White-eared Bulbul

(*Pycnonotus leucotis*)

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Are you aware the White-eared Bulbul is monitoring the goings-on in Afghanistan? Few people know this handsome, precocious softbill is flitting about the desert-dry lowlands from Afghanistan, south throughout Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, all around the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, as far west as Bahrain, and as far east as the Northern parts of India.

## Overall Description

There are over 137 species of the bulbul family; Pycnonotidae. The more common name, White-eared (*Pycnonotus leucotis*) is often confused with the White-

cheeked (*Pycnonotus leucogeny*) a much larger Himalayan bulbul with a very pronounced crest. (Beaman & Madge, *Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and Western Palearctic*, 1998).

The scientific name is required to insure written accuracy and some form of additional identification must accompany any reference to a 'bulbul' until everyone is sure which one they are discussing. This article is about the White-eared, *P. leucotis*.

This bulbul has a medium gray body, jet black head, subtle rounded black crest and a distinct white patch over the ear coverts; hence the name. Feet and



Photo by Vince and Sally Huntington

Adult pair of White-eared Bulbuls.

legs are mottled dark gray/brown.

An adult is 18cm (6-7 inches) long from tail tip to beak tip. The tail is jet black, with one eighth to one quarter inch white tips on the end of the feathers visible from above and below. Oddly, this bulbul, as with the White-spectacled, sometimes called 'Yellow-vented Bulbul (*P. xanthopygos*) has bright distinct yellow feathers in the vent area, visible only from below and behind.

### Personality

This is a very personable bird with size and behaviors similar to that of a Pekin Robin. They are bright, cheerful, busy, inquisitive, sociable and quick to connect and tolerate people. Like other bulbuls, they are excellent flyers, quick to dart about and maneuver in and out of tight areas. They can hover in place for 5-8 seconds, hawking insects, and will catch small things tossed to them in mid-air. No flying insect makes it through a bulbul flight.

They amuse themselves (and onlookers) by tossing and catching small paperclip-sized items. One hand-raised male ('Ali-Bulbul') has me trained. He flies to me with the paperclip, or other shiny object. It has become my job to hide it and switch it from hand to hand. His job is to keep track of the object, pecking at the hand he believes it is hidden in. If he picks the empty hand, he immediately goes to the other hand.

### Sex, Birds and 'oo-toodle-oo'

These birds are sexually monomorphic. The male courtship includes an eye-catching display wherein he leans forward and down, with both wings held up over his back, tips almost touching. He maintains this for about 10 seconds, then stands upright and expresses a "oo-toodle-oo" song. During the song he puffs up his body feathers and moves his wings slowly and deliberately, (as though he were paddling through water) sometimes for up to 30 seconds.

Both sexes exhibit a general greeting with the 'oo-toodle-oo' song, minus the display. Both sexes will cluck what appears to be a repeated alarm similar to the Pekin Robins 'pit-pit-pit-pit' sound.

### Hard to Find

I bought my first bulbul pair from an importer in California in 1997. I was intrigued because they were scarce, said to be non-aggressive, and could be kept with other non-aggressive finches and softbills.

I soon discovered, however, there was very little general information available on the species. While trying to figure the correct set-up for breeding, the hen died suddenly of unknown causes. I spent over three years assertively but vainly trying to find a replacement hen.

### Thank You, Mr. Cristo

While at the Pomona Bird Mart in March, 2001, I



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luckily ran into softbill enthusiast Roland Cristo who told me he had noticed a hen bulbul for sale nearby. I took a chance and bought the bird on faith it was a hen, put the two together and, *voilà* . . . had three clutches and six healthy birds the first year.

### Set-up for Settling In

Living in the moderate San Diego climate, I set the birds up in one of nine 6 x 5 x 7 foot covered outdoor flights. These flights have numerous species of finches and softbills visible to one another through 3 x 1/2 inch wire mesh. I keep the cement block floor covered with about two inches of easily replaceable sand. I rotate potted plants such as *Ficus benjamina*, small fuchsia trees and various cape honeysuckle plants. My eventual breeding-pair shared their flight with a breeding pair of African Red-headed Finches and four juvenile Buttonquail bottom-cleaners.

### Food & Water, Water & Food

I believe there should always be at least two sources of water for any flight and a non-spoiling dry-food (I prefer ZuPreem Cockatiel Fruit Blend Breeder Diet Pellets, in a gravity feeder) constantly available as snacks, especially if something compromises the perishable daily food (weather change, sudden insect appearance, owner delay, etc).

Note: Like Pekin Robins, bulbuls swallow ZuPreem whole.

For water supply, I prefer a 10-inch round, 1-inch deep dish on the ground for bathing and backup water. This is changed almost every day. A one-quart gravity flow Lyxit bottle is hung on the door, re-supplied and changed as required. The constant supply of dry (ZuPreem) for snacks hangs midway in the flight.

Daily the birds receive hard-boiled egg with Vionate vitamins, mealworms, gator-aid soaked ZuPreem pellets with Nekton-MSA and Nekton tonic-1, and fruit as available, such as banana, orange or apple slices, grapes and mango.

(Note - Nekton-MSA is 1/2 tsp per quart of gator-aid. Tonic-1 is 1 tbsl per quart of gator-aid.)

The hard-boiled egg (shells included) and mealworms are served in one 2 x 1 x 2 inch cup, hung on the door. The Vionate Vitamins are sprinkled with one tsp per hardboiled egg, *ala* Robert Black's method. Soaked ZuPreem pellets and fruit-of-the-day, in a separate container also on the door.

Although finch seed and millet were always available for the other birds and the quail in the flight, I never observed the bulbuls consume either.

As we do for most softbill species, in the spring, I up the number of mealworms from around 25 a day to around 250, to stimulate breeding.

### Nesting

In April, 2001 I made a 'howdy cage' *ala* Edith Pendleton's Brazilian Cardinal style cage as published in the *AFA Watchbird* circa 1997. This consists of a 15 x 12 x 12" inch wire cage, covered with green shade-cloth, open entirely on the front side, hung 4 1/2 feet above the ground. I wedged a large wicker cup-nest into the bottom wire of the howdy cage and spread two handfuls of coconut fiber throughout.

By mid May the bulbuls were carrying around coconut fibers and courting. In early June they were sitting on three light-beige-colored eggs, with multi-shaped speckles similar in size and shape to coarse ground pepper.

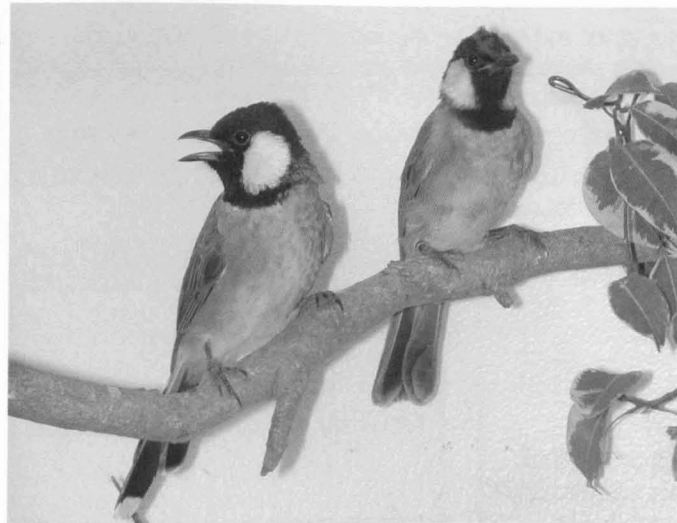
### Parenting

Both parents took turns incubating the eggs. While one sat eggs, the other would roost nearby, posturing by flapping and carrying-on when I got too close to the nest. Although I did inspect closely, they never became aggressive toward me, beyond threats and posturing. They tolerated me banding the young, (NFSS K band) at three days.

The chicks hatched on June 17th, 15 days after the first egg was laid. Since they were new parents I was afraid they might not care properly for the young. Cautiously, at three days old, I took one chick to hand raise, leaving the parents two birds. The 3-day-old-chick weighed 6.4 grams; similar in size to the two I left with the parents.

### Baby Diet

Initially, the parents primarily fed their chicks mealworms. I continued 250-300 large mealworms a day to the parents for the two chicks. After about one week, I saw them also carry and feed soaked pellets. The chicks fledged the end of June, about 15 days after hatching. They were easy to tell from the parents, as the young had gray heads and tails, were half the size of the parents, and were in heavy pinfeather. Initially they were very inactive, just sitting and waiting for the next feeding time.



Adult Bulbul with juvenile.

### I Become a Parent

I gave the chick the same basic diet as did the parents but it was necessary to adjust it somewhat due to its small size and its need for high protein. For instance, for the first two days, I fed every 15-20 minutes. As with other softbills I have raised, I did *not* feed at night, leaving the chick in the warm dark nest for up to nine hours.

During the day, I 'guttled' one large mealworm per feeding time and finger-fed these 'parts' straight to the begging beak, sometimes mixed with small hard-boiled egg chunks. The next 15-minute feeding time I would feed a Cockatiel ZuPreem pellet soaked as described above. The pellet was handfed whole to provide protein and liquid. Because of the need for a high-protein diet, fruit was not introduced to the chick until he fledged.

As a rule, the chick would beg for food and I would feed until the begging stopped and the chick turned away. In the beginning, this turn-away behavior was after one pellet or half a mealworm. After 3-5 days, it took two pellets and a whole mealworm to get the turn-away. In a sense, the chick told me when it had enough.

After two days or so, I began to feed every hour, (except at night) until it fledged.

### Housekeeping and Tracking.

As with many softbills, one indicator of a correct diet is that the droppings are encased in a clear mem-

brane that is easy for the parents (or me) to remove from the nest. Feeding as above, and maintaining a temperature of 98/99 degrees F. (by use of reptile heater) in the chick's nest seemed to be all that was necessary to maintain this indicator that all was going well.

### Aggressiveness

The only aggressiveness that took place seemed to be after the juveniles fledged. The pair of African Red-headed Finches that were previously 'okay' was suddenly not allowed within four feet of the fledged chicks. The bulbuls would chase, but never attack or harm the redheads.

At this point I removed the finches and their chicks but left the quail, which the bulbuls seemed to ignore. When the juvenile bulbuls attained adult plumage (around four months), I noted the parents would chase them about the flight, but, as with the Red-headed Finches, would not attack or injure. I removed the young, rather than chance injury.

When the first clutch was four weeks old, the parents laid two more eggs in the original immaculate nest. While one sat eggs, the other fed the existing young. Only one of the second clutch hatched. (I removed the un-hatched egg, which proved to have been infertile, when I banded the hatched chick, at three days.) By this time, the first clutch appeared to be



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feeding on their own.

### The Nursery Scale

Whenever I treat an ill bird or begin to hand raise one, I begin a record of weight, in grams, that I monitor as treatment progresses. Small gram scales are available at most bird marts.

For this chick, I kept the following records.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Weight/grams</u>	<u>Notes</u>
6-20	6.4	Began feeding, peeled worms, & ZuPreem.
6-21	7.9	
6-22	10.6	
6-23	14.4	
6-24	16.0	
6-25	19.5	First whole mealworm.
6-26	21.0	
6-27	22.6	
6-28	22.8	Fledged. Perched on side of nest to sleep.
6-29	23.9	
6-30	23.1	Can fly across the room – 15 feet.
7-01	24.5	
7-02	24.7	
7-03	25.8	Began bathing behavior.
7-04	27.7	
7-05	28.8	
7-06	30.6	Nibbling on soaked ZuPreem.

### A Third Clutch

When the 2nd clutch, single chick was four weeks old, the parents again laid eggs. This time, neither of the parents seemed interested in continuing to care for the fledged chick as they had with the first clutch. This single chick did not fair well after fledging and I decided to observe the behavior. It became very thin, as though it were not being fed. It died at five weeks old.

The last clutch again had three eggs, all of which hatched, fledged and are healthy.

After this third clutch, the parents did not nest again even though I did not disturb the set-up, and continued feeding the 250 mealworms a day. I can't say if they stopped nesting because of the presence of so many young, of fewer mealworms per capita, or if it was 'that time of the year.' (It was at this point, too, that I observed the chasing behavior and removed the older fledglings).

### Overall

I am very pleased to have had the experience of successfully breeding this relatively unknown bird. Some unanswered questions and points of interest:

- Because they have been sighted in the cold climates of Pakistan and Afghanistan, it would be interesting to learn if and when they migrate, or if the young make it through the tough winters in those areas.
- Did my pair stop nesting because of the lower

relative mealworm count or relatively high population?

- Because of the 'chasing' behavior toward their own fledged young, now in adult plumage, it appears as though they would not tolerate a colony situation in my size flights.

- What is the lifespan of this bulbul? My oldest bird is at least six years old and is still an active and healthy male.

### References

- Bates & Busenbark, *Finches and softbill Birds*. 1970.
- Beaman & Madge, *Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and Western Palearctic*, 1998.
- Black, Robert G. *Avian Nutrition*, 1999 (signed edition).
- Fleming, Robert. L. Sr. and Jr. and Lain, S.B. *Birds of Nepal*. With reference to Kashmir and Sikkim, 1976. (Signed edition)

### Internet sites.

- Yahoo, search: "Pycnonotus leucotis" resulted in 365 ornithological 'watcher' sites, which revealed numerous reports, accounts and confirmation of trips to bulbul areas. Dec 21-28, 2001.
- Yahoo, search: "Pycnonotus leucotis" revealed "white eared bulbul stamps", 1 from Bahrain and 1 from Iraq. See [www/bird-stamps.org/cspecies/126.htm](http://www/bird-stamps.org/cspecies/126.htm) Dec 21-28, 2001.

### About the Author

Sally Huntington has been active in breeding finches and softbills since the mid-1980s. She and her husband, Vince, have made numerous presentations on hand raising finches and softbills and their articles have appeared in several avian publications. Sally's watercolors of finches and softbills are renowned. The Huntingtons are commercial members of the AFA and their aviaries are MAP certified. ➔

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