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I like not the term "softbill" but in aviculture we have inherited an idiosyncratic terminology that is best used if we are to communicate. Elsewhere in this issue you'll find several noble stabs at the definition of softbill so I'll not attempt it here.

The following books all deal with softbill birds, some exclusively as *The Bee-eaters* by C. H. Fry and some in conjunction with birds that are not softbills such as the old Bates and Busenbark bible, *Finches and Soft-billed Birds*.

Some of the books in this review are readily available at any book store while others are out of print and may be found through an antiquarian book dealer. I have learned from and enjoyed all of the books mentioned (they are from my own library) and, after all, isn't that what books are all about?

Finches and Soft-billed Birds by Henry J. Bates and Robert L. Busenbark, TFH Publications, Neptune City, N.J., 1970, hardbound, 735 pages, \$24.00.

For reasons unknown, I have two copies of this old avicultural standby (perhaps one from Bates and the other from Busenbark). I find myself referring to this title often. For our purposes here *Finches and Soft-billed Birds* is an excellent starting place in your effort to learn what is and what isn't a soft-billed bird.

Section III is titled "Softbills." It begins with chapter 20 — Pekin Nightingales, Related Species, and Jay Thrushes. This section continues through chapter 46 and includes Cocks-of-the-Rock, Cotingas, Umbrella Birds, Bell Birds (chapter 44), Crows, Ravens, Picathartes, and

Jays (chapter 34), Drongoes, Minivets, and Bee-eaters (chapter 25) just to cite a few examples.

This is an excellent encyclopedia of softbill birds but keep in mind it is about 20 years old. A few things have changed in aviculture recently. The same holds true for Bates and Busenbark's chapter on diet. It has a very good section on the diet for softbilled birds and it will lay an excellent foundation but modern avicultural science has, in some cases, enhanced our knowledge. Study Bates and Busenbark but don't neglect the more recent literature.

There are many good color photos in this volume that are good for identification purposes.

Foreign Bird Keeping by Edward J. Boosey, Iliffe Books Ltd., London, 1956, cloth, 384 pages.

As Boosey's book is about 35 years old, its price will vary according to where you find it. The cost will naturally be more at the antiquarian book shop than at the garage sale but it is something of a collector's item so snap it up if you find it. There is a 2nd edition dated 1962 that contains more on softbills than the first.

For me, the attraction of this book is the very charming dialogue used by Boosey. It is reminiscent of the way the Duke of Bedford wrote about his birds. Indeed, Bedford and Boosey were great friends so maybe that accounts for the stylistic similarity.

For each of the 50 or so softbill species Boosey lists, he writes an informative, intimate and often humorous account from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages. Of the Black-crested Yellow Bulbul Boosey says, "If this Bulbul were - as its

name implies - a yellow bird with a black crest, it would be very striking indeed, but actually its body colour is a dull yellowish olive-green, which is not an attractive combination with the black of the crest." Now that's an honest fellow. I wonder who misnamed this dullard of the Bulbul family.

The Fairy Bluebird, on the other hand, gets three full paragraphs of praise and description of its color. In addition to color, Boosey usually mentions several facts pertinent to the species at hand. He touches on the bird's hardiness, size of suitable aviary, type of specialty food the bird likes, nestbox preference and compatibility with other birds in a mixed aviary.

There are a number of black and white photos and too few color photos that illustrate the birds covered. Don't buy the volume for the artwork. It is, rather, most interesting from a historical standpoint. It opens the door to the wealthy, privileged English aviculturists who devoted their lives to the development of outstanding avian gardens and farms. These connoisseurs were (and are) on intimate terms with their birds and disseminate much valuable lore in their charming writings.

Read Boosey. He and Bedford can't be beat in this genre.

The Complete Cage and Aviary Bird Handbook by David Alderton, TFH Publications, Neptune City, N.J., 1986, hardbound, 160 pages, \$17.95.

This is a rather practical book that touches on most if not all aspects of aviculture albeit in a very brief manner, not getting into much depth. It is an excellent overview that can lead one to other volumes when a certain subject must be researched in detail.

Of special interest to fanciers of softbills is the section called Breeds and Species. This, of course, treats most families of birds that are found in aviaries including the Finches, Pigeons and Psittacines. Although the birds we call softbills are not labelled or highlighted, a careful reading of the various family categories reveals that the softbill portion begins under Tanagers. Alderton's first words under Tanagers are, "softbills are grouped together in aviculture on the basis of their feeding habits, rather than as part of a strict zoological classification." That's about as good a way as any to say it.

Now what are those feeding habits?

To his credit, Alderton gets right to the point. Members of the genus *Tangara* eat a variety of chopped fruit augmented with mynah pellets or sprinkled with a good insectile mixture. Some are fond of nectar. He goes on in some detail about the feeding and care of Tanagers in general. One fact hitherto unknown to me is that about one quarter of the known species in the world belong to this genus.

The best part of the Breeds and Species section of the book is the very outstanding photos used to illustrate the species. These are exceptional full color portraits that exhibit the bird exceedingly well. These are not half-baked backyard snapshots. It is worth the cost of the book just to look at these beautiful birds.

Besides Tanagers, other softbill families include Barbets and Hornbills, Toucans and Bulbuls, Leafbirds, Babbblers and Thrushes, White-eyes, Sunbirds and Hummingbirds, Mynahs and Starlings, and Crows and Toucacos. Each group is done up as well as the Tanager.

For the modest price this is an excellent, practical book that should grace your library.

The Bee-eaters by C. H. Fry, published by T & AD Poyser Ltd., Staffordshire, England, 1984, cloth, 304 pages, \$45.00.

Not everyone knows about Bee-eaters but their name tells it all. These birds eat bees. I guess that makes them softbills and qualified to be in this specialty edition of *Watch-bird*.

Come to think of it, not everyone even cares to know about Bee-eaters. But if you are a true bird lover and have a curious mind about natural history, birds in particular, then you'll find this rather esoteric book quite readable.

The author is obviously a professional ornithologist doing research through the auspices of research awards and travel grants and he gratefully acknowledges financial support from Aberdeen University, The American Museum of Natural History, The Royal Geographical Society and a host of other professional entities. Indeed, I should have been glad to see the A.F.A. listed as a benefactor here as it is in some other research programs.

To his great credit the author says in the preface, "If this book had been

addressed to biologists only, I would have entitled it *Evolutionary Biology of the Meropidae*, but it is intended for a broader readership and I have tried to write it accordingly, avoiding jargon and attempting to put across the one or two taxing biological concepts in everyday terms . . . at the same time I mean to publicize these admirable birds, that others may come to enjoy them too . . ."

The book is laid out in seven sections, the largest of which is Species Accounts. Herein each species is given the standard treatment you are probably familiar with from reading Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*, i.e., field characteristics, habitat, distribution, food, foraging, breeding, etc. Truthfully, these chapters became a little tedious for me as I am not that obsessed by Bee-eaters.

The chapter that fascinated me, however, was Food and Foraging. Bee-eaters eat the whole spectrum of day-flying insects with bees being the prey of choice. The Bee-eater perches in a spot where it has a wide view of mostly open ground. When it spots a bee, it makes a swift attack and snaps up the bee while on the wing. The bee is brought back to the perch where a curious rite called bee rubbing takes place. The bee is held sideways in the tip of the bird's rather long beak. First, bending to one side, the bird bashes the bee's head against the perch, ". . . then it transfers its grip to the tip of the abdomen almost too quickly for the eye to see, and bends the other way to subject the insect's tail-end to five or ten bouts of rapid rubbing. The beak is closed tight and held side-on to the perch, crushing both abdomen and sting, and while bee-rubbing the eyes are closed as venom and bowel-water are visibly discharged . . . a couple of sharp raps to the head completes the process which last up to 10 seconds, and the bee is swallowed!" Tough way to make a living.

The bee rubbing is done to each bee the bird catches. This is a method to de-venom the bees and is not used on insects the birds recognize as harmless non-stingers. The non-stingers are, however, beaten against the perch to incapacitate them before being swallowed. Bee-eaters do get stung occasionally and the author feels they have some immunity as the bee's venom is lethal enough to kill birds heavier than the Bee-eaters.

Sentinel feeding is the term to

describe the Bee-eater's technique of perching over an open airspace and giving chase to any suitable insect that passes by. The author once observed a Bee-eater launch his attack and snap up a wasp that he spotted against a backdrop of trees and a rainy sky at a distance of 80 to 95 metres. "What vision!" is the author's understated remark.

Only about one in four of these forays are successful. The insect escapes into brush or foliage quite often and the bird returns to its perch to await another victim. Some of the larger Bee-eaters seem to hunt in easy wheeling flights catching insect after insect without coming to perch between times. More research is needed.

That Bee-eaters can be kept in aviaries has been proven by the author. He did much research blowing bees one by one through a PVC tube into an aviary wherein was kept a few Red-throated Bee-eaters. He also refers to a Bee-eater he raised from the egg and kept in an aviary.

I found this book to be full of surprises. Indeed, it opened up a whole new family of softbilled birds to me. I think you'll enjoy it!

The Cotingas, by David Snow, British Museum (Natural History) Comstock Publishing Associates, a division of Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1982, cloth, 203 pages, probably about \$40.00.

In the preface, Snow gets right to the point we are interested in, "The cotingas are among the most diverse of passerine families. In size, they range from the huge, black Amazonia Umbrella bird, one of the largest of all passerines, down to the tiny Kinglet *Calyptura*, a bird about the size of a Goldcrest . . ." He goes on to explain the colors and the fact that cotingas generally "pluck fruit from trees in flight or snatch insects from the foliage and branches, but within this framework their feeding habits are varied."

So now we know that cotingas are a widely varied family of softbills. The first chapter goes into a geological history suggesting that when what is now South America broke off and shifted away from Africa it brought the ancestors of the cotingas with it. Many other South American birds are arrivals from the North when the South American continent hooked up with North America. Perhaps this knowledge is not necessary

to raise birds in captivity but I found it a delightful tidbit of trivial knowledge — the sort of stuff I love but can't make a living with.

There are informative chapters on origin, classification, distribution, sociobiology, color, display structures and breeding. All are full of interesting insights that would be helpful to the aviculturist trying to understand cotingas.

Largest by far, however, is the section devoted to the 25 genera of cotingas. Each species in each genus is very well illustrated by Martin Woodcock, an excellent artist. There are 21 color plates if I counted correctly and they show the beautiful and richly diverse colors and shapes of these marvelous softbills. There are distribution maps and numerous line drawings to enliven the volume. Looking at the beautiful illustrations, I decided to dump all my psittacines and lay in a thousand or so Bearded Bellbirds. I'll start tomorrow.

Bellbirds, Cocks-of-the-rock, Umbrella Birds, Fruit Crows, Snowy Cotingas, Blue Cotingas, on and on. What a list of avicultural diamonds. This book is worth its price if you never have a live bird at all. Shame on

you if you fail to add it to your library.

The Birds of Paradise by Michael Everett, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1978, cloth, 144 pages, prices vary depending upon where you find it. I paid \$30.00.

This is a very nice book done somewhat in the style of the old Gould monographs; that is, each species has a full page color plate alongside one page of notes. Indeed, many of the plates are Gould reproductions. I have a few original Gould's so I appreciate this format.

I doubt that there are any birds more colorful and showy than the birds of paradise and the bowerbirds. Many of them have weird wire-like feathers on their heads or, in place of a regulation tail, some have streamers originating around the ears and flowing double the length of the bird; there are crests, capes, breast shields, outrageous tails — in short, words can't describe these birds, the plates must be seen.

Alongside each plate is a page of brief notes giving distribution, description, breeding, and remarks. Herein you learn a little of the nesting habits (when known), the diet, and

some social behavior. Several species have just recently been discovered and the author would not be surprised if a couple additional species were to be found in the next few years.

Part of the difficulty in studying birds of paradise and bowerbirds is the remote, wild, mountainous habitat they live in. The book contains a very interesting chapter called Discovery and Exploitation. It goes back into history to 1511 when the first Europeans came upon New Guinea and it has been a rocky road ever since. Until just a few years ago (since World War II), the cannibalistic headhunters that peopled New Guinea were a serious threat to explorers. Even now, with most of the headhunters tame, the 16,000 foot mountains and thick jungle make expeditions very complicated.

There are birds of paradise in captivity and I hope aviculture does well for them. Papua, New Guinea is being ravaged for its timber and the habitats are changing. I recommend *Birds of Paradise* as an excellent book to give the amateur bird fancier a good overview of this magnificent family of birds. ●



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