

# "But . . . what is a softbill . . . really?"

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*Softbill*— A relatively new term for a group of birds whose bills are not adapted to cracking seeds or tearing flesh as a general rule. Clive Roots, in his book "Softbilled Birds," gives this definition: "Cage and aviary birds with relatively soft bills which feed on insects and larger animal prey and soft plant material and whose young are helpless at birth." An addition to this is given by Richard Mark Martin in his book "Softbilled Birds in Cage or Aviary." He adds, "Any small to medium land bird which feeds on soft bodied food." This last precludes raptors, ducks, waders, finches and parrots leaving marginals such as crows. Other characteristics shared by most softbills are the absence of a crop and the style of feeding the altricial young by carrying morsels of food to them instead of by regurgitation.

They occur in five major classifications, with some overlapping.

1. Omnivores
2. Frugivores
3. Nectivores
4. Insectivores
5. Carnivores

Most common and familiar birds in this broad group are the native robins, jays, starlings, warblers, thrushes, etc. Closer to the equator, around the globe, more and more softbill species abound because of the greater year-round availability of fruits and insects. Our native softbills migrate to warmer climates because they need to follow a seasonal food supply. Many common zoo specimens on exhibit are softbills, for example the toucans, hornbills, tanagers, hummingbirds, babblers and honeycreepers.

Because "softbill" is not a specific term, it isn't possible to describe or illustrate a standard example in the way we can describe a finch or a parrot. The softbill species come from all parts of the world and include perching birds, terrestrial birds and some who spend the greatest portion of their lives air-borne. Some weave nests, some are cavity nesters, some are mud builders and some are brood-parasites.

The most varied and musical of songs and the most dazzling colors and combinations of color and iridescence come from this group. Softbill plumage is amazing in its' variety of types and textures.

Because they are not destructive to woodwork, perches, nestboxes or plants (with a few exceptions), and their droppings are not caustic, they can live in a symbiotic relationship with plants in an aviary. They will enjoy the fruits and flowers and the insects they attract. For pure aesthetic pleasure, a planted flight with a mixed collection of softbills is unbeatable. Relatively light gauge wire and light weight wooden framework will be enough for them. Many of them will sing brilliantly and many will reproduce with good management.

This category of birds deserves the attention of committed aviculturists and will repay your efforts handsomely. ●

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## Books About Softbills

prepared by Brenda Geesey

### Birdkeeper's Guide to Softbills

David Alderton  
Tetra Press  
201 Tabor Road  
Morris Plains, NJ 07950  
ISBN 3 923880 71 5

### New Softbill Handbook

Werner Steinigiweg  
Barron's Educational Series  
113 Crossways Park Drive  
Woodbury, NY 11797  
ISBN 0 8120 4075 9

### How to Keep Softbilled Birds in Cage or Aviary

Richard Mark Martin  
John Bartholomew & Son Limited  
12 Duncan Street  
Edinburgh, Scotland EH9 1TA  
ISBN 0 7028 8010 8

### Softbilled Birds

Clive Roots  
Arco Publishing Co.  
215 Park Avenue South  
New York, NY 10003  
ISBN 0 668 02434 8

### Finches & Softbilled Birds

Bates and Busenbark  
T.F.H. Publications Inc.  
211 W. Sylvania Ave.  
Neptune City, NJ 07753  
ISBN 0 87666 0421 4

### Guide to Pet Birds

Matthew Vriends  
Simon & Schuster Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020  
ISBN 0 671 50695 1

### Mynah Birds

Rosemary Low  
John Bartholomew & Son Limited  
12 Duncan Street  
Edinburgh, Scotland EH9 1TA  
ISBN 0 7028 1002 9

### Mynahs

Otto von Frisch  
Barron's Educational Series  
113 Crossways Park Drive  
Woodbury, NY 11797  
ISBN 0 8120 3688 3

### The Complete Cage and Aviary Bird Handbook

David Alderton  
T.F.H. Publications  
211 W. Sylvania Ave.  
Neptune City, NJ 07753  
ISBN 0 86622 113 1

### Encyclopedia of Aviculture

Richard Mark Martin  
Arco Publishing Inc.  
215 Park Avenue South  
New York, NY 10003  
ISBN 0 668 05782 3

### Practical Encyclopedia of Pet Birds for Home & Garden

Don Harper  
Crown Publishers Inc.  
225 Park Avenue South  
New York, NY 10003  
ISBN 0 517 56546 3

### Birds of the World

Oliver L. Austin, Jr.  
Golden Press, Inc.  
New York, NY  
L.C.C.C.N. 61-13290

## Societies That Promote Softbill Keeping & Management

**International Softbill Society**  
c/o Stephen H. Amos  
RFD 2, Box 113  
Glover, VT 05830  
\$20 yearly, individual

**National Finch & Softbill Society**  
c/o Russ Armitage, Jr.  
345 Boston Road  
Middletown, CT 06457  
\$15 yearly, individual ●