

TOURACOS

(toor'-ä-kös')

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Touracos (family *Masophagidae*) are a spectacular group of unique softbill birds which range over scattered portions of the African continent. These pigeon-sized relatives of the cuckoo are extremely popular as avicultural subjects due to the relative ease of their captive maintenance, the brilliant coloration exhibited by many species, and their interesting and active behavior. Morony, *et. al.* (1975) list five genera representing a total of nineteen species. Of these, the members of the genus *Touraco* have received the most widespread avicultural attention.

Prior to the now infamous bird embargo of 1972 numbers of these birds were regularly imported. A review of the available literature indicates that a number of species have been bred successfully in captivity. Unfortunately, there are few published accounts of their successful breeding in this country. The fact that the majority of the reported successes occurred in relatively large, heavily planted aviaries may have led many aviculturists to believe they could not be easily raised in lesser facilities. This is not true.

While our initial touraco breeding at the Houston Zoo did, in fact, occur in a large, indoor conservatory aviary measuring eighty feet long, fifty feet wide, and twenty feet high, our most successful production has occurred in a series of small outdoor exhibits. Each of these units measures 7½ feet wide and 15 feet deep, with a 7 foot height in the open flight and a 10 foot height in the covered shelter.

In 1977, four pair of birds housed in these small aviaries reared a total of 21 chicks, seven white cheeks, *T. leucotis*, five red-crested, *T. erythrolophus*, seven Schalow's, *T. schalowi*, and two white-crested, *T. leucolophus*. Considering the fact that touracos only lay two eggs in a clutch, this is a remarkable testament to their reproductive potential in captivity.

Due to the extremely territorial behavior of adult pairs in breeding condition, we do not recommend attempting to breed touracos in colonies. We feel the major factor contributing to our success was the segregation of specimens into individual pairs. Accurately sexing them can present some problems, since they are not dimorphic. For making tentative determinations, we rely on behavioral interactions and pair-

ings in group situations. By banding, or otherwise identifying individuals in a group, the selection of true pairs is relatively easy. There are, however, always odd individuals which remain a question. For this reason, laparoscopy has proven to be a valuable tool. In the hands of a skilled clinician, the surgical risks are minimal, and the procedure is quick and conclusive.

Touracos reach sexual maturity during their first year. Most of our pairs nest almost randomly throughout the year with peak breeding activity occurring from December through July. Both adults share in the incubation process which averages 21 to 23 days for the species which have bred in the zoo's collection. The precocial young are covered with a dense coat of sooty black down and are fed by regurgitation. They develop rapidly and, surprisingly, leave the nest before they are fully fledged. During this critical period, they are closely tended by the adults as they clamour about in branches near the nest. At this age, except for the vivid red wing bar across the flight feathers, their somber juvenal plumage gives little hint of the dazzling adult coloration which is gradually acquired during their first few months of life.

Our basic husbandry program for this group of birds is quite simple. Being primarily frugivorous, their diet consists of a mixture of freshly diced fruits such as apple, banana, and papaya, plus whole grapes, chopped greens and soaked raisins. These items are sprinkled twice weekly with a vitamin/mineral supplement. Soaked Purina dog chow, dry mynah pellets, and game bird crumbles are also provided. Non-breeding birds are fed once daily, as early in the morning as the keeper work schedule permits. When young are being reared, a second feeding is offered late in the afternoon, and a few mealworms and small pieces of Zupreem bird of prey diet are added to their regular ration.

Nest building in touracos is reminiscent of pigeons and doves as they devote little effort or detail to nest construction. For this reason we provide them with a sturdy nesting platform. After experimenting with several types of nesting structures, we have found that there are definite advantages in using shallow wooden trays

which have at least three inch lips on the sides. This type of structure helps prevent eggs or young from falling from the nest and seems to provide the incubating birds with a sense of security. Standard produce flats work quite well for us. These are lined with hay and mounted in a corner of the shelter approximately seven feet above the ground. After adding a few twigs of their own, the birds seem totally satisfied with this arrangement.

On several occasions we have observed juveniles from the previous clutch assisting with brooding and rearing of their younger siblings. Removing the young once they are independent is usually necessary due to aggressive behavior which develops in the adults when they begin to recycle.

Because of our relatively mild climate we are able to house these birds outside throughout the year. During the winter months, a single infra-red heat lamp is provided in each shelter. Under these conditions the adult birds have proven quite hardy and have endured brief periods of freezing weather (down to 18° F. at night) without any apparent ill effects.

As a safety precaution, we have on occasion pulled chicks for hand-rearing during inclement weather and have found them very easy to raise. Our hand-rearing diet consists of:

- 1½ cups Gerber's Hi-Pro pablum
- Mix with warm water to a porridge-like consistency
- Add:
 - 4 Tbsp. soaked mynah pellets
 - 4 Tbsp. apple sauce
 - 2 Tbsp. Gerber's strained baby beef.
 - 3 drops ABDEC liquid vitamins

Although initial feedings are by eyedropper, once the chicks have become conditioned to handling, they begin to eat readily from a spoon. By the time they are three to four weeks old, they are usually eating by themselves.

While they become extremely tame when hand-reared, touracos are not really suitable as cage birds and can only be fully appreciated in facilities which afford them the opportunity for flight.

With proper care and attention, there is no reason these fascinating birds cannot become established as self-sustaining populations in our aviaries.



Schalow's Touraco, Tauraco schalowi



Lady Ross' Touraco, Musophaga rossae

Photos by R. Michael Bowerman.
The Houston Zoo.

Grey Touraco, *Corythaixoides concolor*



Purple-crested Touraco, *Tauraco porphyreolophus*

Red-crested Touraco, *Tauraco erythrolophus*

