

# There Are More Kinds Of Birds Than Simply Parrots

By Paula Strasser



*Toco Toucan*

**A**lthough it is generally thought that bird-keeping started in prehistory by the keeping of fowl domesticated for food, the first instances of aviculture appear to have occurred in Egypt two thousand to twenty-five hundred years ago. Prior to that, aviculture was merely the keeping of birds trapped or hunted and waiting to be eaten and no efforts toward captive breeding were documented.

Red Junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*), the ancestor of our modern poultry, were rare in ancient Egypt, brought to that country by traders from Asia. They were kept, not for food or eggs, but as pets, often shown in tomb paintings in fowl yards with other geese, ducks and ibis.

The Sacred Ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*), a large black-and-white marsh bird, was considered the manifestation of the god Thoth. More than 1.5 million ibis mummies were found in the funerary city of Sakkara, near Cairo, dating back to the Greco-Roman period of ancient Egyptian history. The mummies were fetishes, purchased from priests and used as offerings to the gods. But while there were millions of mummies, carefully wound in linen, there was never any indication that the wild Sacred Ibis population was affected. But there is evidence that these birds were bred in captivity, with bird keepers using beehive-shaped

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ovens to artificially incubate their eggs. These ovens were used well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century to incubate poultry and pigeons and they can still be seen in Egypt today, though they are not used.

Other birds raised in captivity by the ancient Egyptians were Ostriches (*Struthio camelus*) (though they were mostly hunted and raised mostly for plumes and eggs), various waterfowl, hawks and the most sacred bird of all, the "Horus Falcon," probably a Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*). By medieval times, birds were regularly kept and bred for food, for falconry and as cage birds, though mostly for the upper classes.

As the Age of Exploration commenced at the end of the Middle Ages, explorers brought to Europe wonderful birds from the Americas, Africa and Asia. Many of these were kept in garden aviaries and, of course, some bred there, although the records are spotty and inconsistent. The new scientific methods of categorizing specimens of adult birds, nestlings, nests and eggs encouraged collecting and exhibiting but rarely breeding.

Moving toward modern times, birds and animals from far-off places were increasingly traded, bought and sold to be shown off in new zoological gardens and extensive private collections. Canaries were established as household pets long before this and, of course, poultry birds such as chickens, ducks, turkeys and guineafowl had long been established as domesticated.

John Gould, the great bird illustrator and describer, brought the first Budgies (*Melopsittacus undulates*) to Europe in 1840 and by 1863 they were breeding as readily as canaries (Hopkinson 1926, pg 100). The period of time from roughly 1800 to 1920 saw first breedings of now-common birds such as Zebra Finches (*Taeniopygia guttata*) (1903), Gouldian Finches (*Chloebia gouldiae*) (1893), Indian Hill Mynahs (*Gracula religiosa*) (1909), Blue and Gold Macaws (*Ara arana*) (1833), African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus eritacus*) (1822) and Peach-faced Lovebirds (*Agapornis roseicollis*) (1873).

The rise of the indoor planted aviaries seen in European Zoos and eventually in American Zoos throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (The Pittsburgh Conservatory-Aviary, the first of the indoor planted exhibits in the US, opened in 1952) encouraged bird-keeping in the European fashion. Bird shows were common and the breeding and keeping of birds other than parrots was arguably more common than psitticulture, with the exception of Budgies and Peach-faced Lovebirds. As a child I remember Hartz Mountain Budgies in Woolworth's; indeed, one of these birds was my first introduction to bird-keeping.

After Australia shut down exportation of their native cockatoos, lorries and other birds in the 1960s, a shift in American avi-



**Nicobar Pigeon**  
Photo by Matt Schmit



culture became evident. Concentration on Australian parrots for the pet market took precedence over garden aviaries and softbill show birds, especially for new aviculturists entering the fancy. When quarantine of US birds began in 1974, the expense of bringing in wild-caught pet parrots caused more people to consider captive breeding parrots over other types of birds. Advancements in incubation and hand-rearing techniques throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the passage of the Wild Bird Conservation Act in 1992 and its full implementation a few years later completed the shift. What began as a few parrot people and a lot of people with pheasant and softbill collections had shifted 180 degrees. Today, the largest numbers of birds in the private sector are parrots; from Budgies to Hyacinth Macaws.

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But of the nearly 8000 species of birds in the world, parrots make up a tiny minority. And, in terms of species kept, there are still more types of OTHER kinds of birds in private collections than parrots. Zoos generally have very few parrots and only breed a few rarities; nearly 25 years ago they came to the realization that the private sector did a better job with parrots and it would be best to concentrate on species of birds not easily kept by private aviculturists.

It is my belief that there is a bird out there for every kind of person, with the possible exceptions of the absolute phobic type or the complete neat freak. There are more kinds of birds than simply parrots and here is a brief overview.

First, in terms of domestic fowl, there are hundreds of kinds of chickens, ducks, turkeys and guinea fowl. Many of them have magnificent plumage, provide eggs and meat and can certainly rival any dog as a sentry or guard.

Although ratites are readily ranched, their discussion here will be limited, as they require a great deal of room and really are not suited to a backyard collection!

Pheasants of many types have long been kept in captivity, from peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) to the magnificent Golden, Silver and Lady Amherst Pheasants (*Chrysolophus picta, amherstidae*), with their beautiful plumage, calm manners and adaptability to many different climate types. While they will not do well inside a house, they do not require huge amounts of room. A pair of Golden Pheasants can do nicely in a pen about 8' x 12' covered with soft aviary netting, as when these birds panic they do fly straight up. Feeding of gallinaceous birds is easy; the basis being the scratch grains and gamebird foods available in feed stores. They also relish fruit, chopped vegetables and mealworms. Given the chance, they will scratch to uncover their own insects as well. Small gallinaceous birds such as Roulrouls (*Rollulus roulroul*) do well in mixed species aviaries and are small enough not to interfere with other birds.

While waterfowl can be a wonderful addition to a water environment, with many kinds available and needing to be worked with to increase their numbers, for those of us in California, the water requirement just can't be met. But, for those people living in areas where water availability is not a problem, a pond with several pairs of Mandarin or Wood Ducks (*Aix galericulata, A.sponsa*), pochards, teal (*Netta sp*) or Ruddy Ducks (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) can provide a lovely, easy avicultural experience. Predator protection is a must, as is a covered aviary or pinioning of the ducklings. Geese and swans are also beautiful and easy avicultural subjects but they can be aggressive and are not recommended for families with young children. Waterfowl do not require a complicated diet for the most part and adults do fine on a diet similar to that of the gallinaceous birds, with the addition of chopped greens, especially if their pond does not grow much in the way of plant material.

Cranes have been kept in captivity for a very long time; Hopkinson (1926) suggests that Demoiselles (*Anthropoides virgo*), the smallest of the 15 crane species, were bred before 1794 in Europe. However, breeding pairs of cranes can become quite aggressive and even the Demoiselles, at 3 feet tall, can be fearless in the protection of their nests and chicks. The most commonly available cranes for the private aviculturist, beside the Demoiselles, are the African Crowned Cranes (*Balearica sp*) and less commonly, Saurus (*Grus antigone*), Common (*G. grus*) and Stanley Cranes (*G. paradiseal*). The beautiful white Siberian (*G. leucogeranus*), Red-crowned (*G. japonensis*), Black-necked (*G. nigricollis*) and Whooping (*G.americana*) Cranes are generally not available for private aviculturists except under special circumstances because they are all endangered, as are White-naped cranes (*G. vipio*). Commercial crane diets are available and recommended for these birds.

Other birds in the family Gruidae, rails and gallinules among them, are often kept in zoos but rarely as subjects in private collections. They can be aggressive to other birds and as a result do not always work well in mixed collections. One of my favorites, the little Red and White Crake (*Laterallus leucopyrrhus*), has been gone from American aviculture for more than 15 years. At one time, however, it bred prolifically.



Grossbeak.  
Photo by Margrethe Warden



Laughing Kookabura  
Photo by Matt Schmit



Red & Yellow Barbet  
Photo by Margrethe Warden



Black Back Grossbeak  
Photo by Margrethe Warden

Private aviculturists have had success with Sunbitterns (*Europygia helias*), a good aviary bird and not a problem to house with others. Their carnivorous diet of pinkie mice, crickets, mealworms, frogs, lizards, small fish and insects doesn't encourage keeping them in a small home aviary. They will nest close to people and don't seem to be particularly flustered by visitors, making them excellent zoo subjects.

Pigeons and doves comprise a very large family of birds. Many of them are stunning, with iridescent feathers, quiet voices and good community relations. There are large pigeons, like the Crowned Pigeons (Common, *Goura cristata*; Victoria *G.victoria* and Sheepmaker's, *G.scheepmakeri*), fruit doves like the Pied Imperial Pigeon (*Ducula bicolor*) or the Jambu Fruit Dove (*Ptilinopus jambu*), community nesters like the Nicobar Pigeon (*Caloenis nicobar*), or little seed-eating pigeons like the Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*), commonly kept in finch aviaries. Diets are varied among the family but center along the lines of fruit and seeds or a commercial pellet. Doves prefer planted aviaries and will often readily build nests, hatch and rear their own chicks.

Turacos are wonderful aviary birds. Most are either green or deep purple, with red primary feathers that flash when they fly. Good-natured for the most part, when hand-raised they remain tame and will fly to the bird keeper for a handout of a grape or a blueberry. They can, however, be aggressive toward their mates. As a general rule, it is not a good idea to keep more than a single pair of green turacos or a single pair of purple turacos in the same aviary. A pair of each should get along provided they have enough flight space. They are fruit and leaf eaters and should have a varied fruit diet with chopped greens and a good, low-iron softbill pellet. They need room to show off their fluid movements, half flight-half running, and are not happy in a small flight. They will pull leaves off trees but if the plants are big enough the damage won't be too severe.

Mousebirds are among the most underestimated birds around. Four species are commonly found in captivity: Speckled (*Colius striatus*), White-backed (*C. colius*) Blue-naped (*Urocolius macrourus*) and Red-faced (*U. indicus*). As aviary birds they tend to get along with other species, but can be exceedingly aggressive to their own species. In my aviaries, I can keep Blue-naped Mousebirds in groups (2 hens, one male), but keep Speckleds as individual pairs. To introduce new birds into establish pairs' territories is inviting disaster. Their diet is a basic softbilled diet: chopped fruit, greens, soaked pellets. Once they figure out a safe place to nest, they will hatch out numerous clutches. If babies are pulled at 10 days old, only a week or so of handfeeding is required before weaning. Hand-raised mousebirds rival any parrot as a pet in terms of affectionate attention to their person. They don't scream,

they don't talk, they don't bite hard, they don't destroy furniture, and although they are softbills, they are no harder to keep clean than any other bird. Their soft colors don't rival a gaudy Amazon, but their pet potential for the average new bird owner is much better.

Hornbills and toucans make the most delightful bird companions anyone could ask for. There are fewer hornbills in American aviculture and most are kept in large breeding aviaries of zoos. The small Tockus hornbills (Grey, *T. nasutus*; Red-billed, *T. erythrorhynchus*; Yellow-billed, *T. flavirostris*; von der Deckens, *T. deckeni*) can be found occasionally as hand-raised pets. The Tockus hornbills are quite carnivorous and require live food such as crickets and mealworms on a daily basis. They also relish the occasional pinkie mouse, fruit and a good softbill pellet. This is true of the African hornbills in general. Asian hornbills require more fruit and a low-iron softbill pellet. Their diet is identical to that of the whole Ramphastid family, the toucans. Because they are subject to iron-storage disease, care must be taken with their diet, which cannot include citrus, tomatoes or other high-acid foods.

Toucans and hornbills need relatively more space than a comparably-sized parrot. They don't use their beaks and feet for climbing and fly-hop from perch to perch. They make affectionate pets and, as long as the cage size is suitable, can be kept in the house as a family pet. They are intensely curious, bright birds and their propensity for playing with whatever comes their way can lead to trouble, as they swallow anything that comes into their beaks. Grey Hornbills relish dust-baths and will simulate dustbathing on a carpet.



Vanderdecken Hornbill  
Photo by Matt Schmit



Button Quail  
Photo by Margrethe Warden



Domestic Chicken



Red & Yellow Barbet  
Photo by Margrethe Warden





Bearded Barbet.  
Photo by Matt Schmit

Some say the Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottus*) is the best songster in the world. Others swear by the Nightingale (*Lucinia megarhynchus*). But in the world of American aviculture, arguably the best songbird available is the Shama Thrush (*Copsychus malabarica*). The male's song is loud, brash and intricate. The female's is demure, soft and sometimes hard to hear. Originally from Southeast Asia, the birds are taken by their owners to parks in Asia (and in the US now, too) for song competitions. Their diet is the standard softbill diet of fruit and pellets with live food such as crickets and mealworms available all year round and waxworms during the breeding season. The males can be very aggressive toward new mates, though birds that have been raised together since they were young seldom have problems. They will breed fairly readily in an English Budgie box or a gourd but, although many chicks fledge, they are not all that easy to raise to adulthood. The male Shama must be removed from his family after the youngsters have been fledged for a couple of weeks; he will be ready to breed again and will kill the chicks. The female will wean them and once they are removed from the flight, he can come back and the hen will be receptive. Shamas are good community aviary birds EXCEPT with Dhyal (*C. saularis*) thrushes, Fairy Bluebirds (*Irena puella*) and other intense singers.

Sadly, Fairy Bluebirds are not common anymore, and their numbers are dwindling fast. Both the male and female sing with a sharp, short call note, often repeated many times. Some aviculturists have had success breeding Fairy Bluebirds in open, roofed boxes in a dark private spot in the aviary. Theirs is a diet similar to Shamas and Dhyals.

Troupials, orioles, oropendolas and caciques make fascinating and flashy avicultural subjects, but they are seldom found in the private sector due to export restrictions from their (mostly) South American countries of origin. If they can be found, they have fluid calls and displays. They all build pendulous nests from tree branches that can sometimes hang down several feet, depending on the species.

Tanagers are common aviary birds and there are many different kinds still available to American aviculture. Blue-grey Tanagers (*Thraupis episcopus*) are hardy, robust birds that can stay outside year round in temperate climates. Others, such as Golden Tanagers (*Tangara arthus*) and some other of the smaller birds will require supplemental heat in the winter. The standard softbill diet of fruit and soaked pellets, with a granulated omnivorous mixture and plenty of mealworms and crickets is recommended for tanagers.

There are myriad kinds of finches available to American aviculture, and many make fine additions to a mixed softbill flight. Despite being mostly seed eaters, most finches relish the fruit in the standard softbill diet.

Crows, jays and magpies are among the most intelligent of all animals, but it is illegal to keep US native species. Fortunately, African Pied Crows (*Corvus albus*), Magpie Jays (*Calocitta sp*), Red-billed Blue Magpies (*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*) and sometimes Eurasian Jays (*Garrulus glandarius*) can be found. They like a large aviary, are largely carnivorous and adept at tool-using.

Kookaburras (*Dacelo gigas*) are becoming quite popular as pets, despite their dietary requirements of mice, mealworms, crickets and Bird of Prey meat. Hand-raised, they are quite affectionate pets. Outside in the aviary, their laughing call can carry for a long distance.

The attitude that softbills are difficult to care for, poor prospects as pets and generally uninteresting has resulted in fewer species available to the softbill fancier. In truth, the vast majority of softbills are no harder to care for than the average parrot. Their flight requirements may be different, diets heavy on fruit and pellets with no seeds, but the work involved is not much more than a parrot of similar size.

This is just the briefest introduction to birds other than parrots. None of the species included in this paper, with the exception of some of the pheasants, are completely self-sustaining and able to withstand much of a population decline. 🐦

#### BASIC SOFTBILL DIET

Amounts and kinds of fruits vary with availability and price  
Papaya, Apples, Sweet Potato, Yam or Winter Squash (cooked), Blueberries, Grapes

Additions available seasonally and added to the basic mix daily:  
Bananas, Nectarines, Peaches, Plums, Melon, Mango, Pears

For birds NOT susceptible to iron storage disease, oranges, kiwi and strawberries may be added as chunks of fruit or diced.

Mazuri® ZuLife™ Low Iron Soft-Bill pellets offered dry or soaked and added to fruit mix

Crickets (frozen then thawed), mealworms and waxworms

#### References:

Hopkinson, Emilius, 1926. Records of Birds Bred in Captivity H.F. & G. Witherby, Holborn, Great Britain

Scientific names from:  
Clements, James F. 2000. Birds of the World: A Checklist Ibis Publishing Co. Vista, CA.



Shama Thrush. Photo by Matt Schmit

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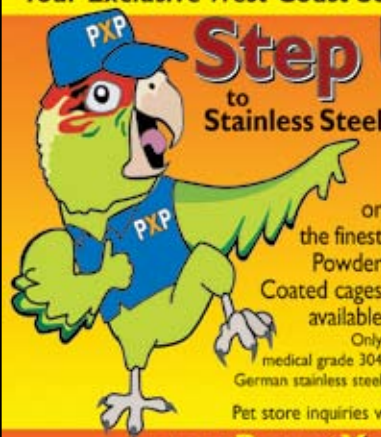
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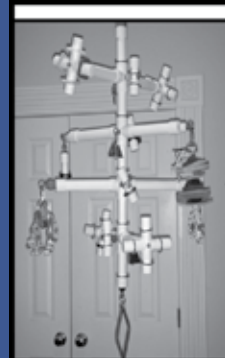
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