

Breeding Blue-grey Tanagers

By Sheryl Coffman



I'm up at 4:30 a.m., dragging around my cup of coffee, sampling what will become breakfast for my Blue-grey tanagers. Well worth the effort. These beautiful birds in shades of subtle blues attracted me to my first pair in November 2012. I knew that just keeping them would never satisfy me. I wanted to learn to reproduce them successfully.

I have spent at least 35 years breeding and studying exotic birds, currently caring for an estimated 400 birds and 35 different species. My primary field of study and research has focused on avian nutrition, and the nutritional composition of bird foods. Holding numerous wildlife certifications has given me a very unique opportunity of working closely with a wide variety of native song and water birds.

Despite my busy schedule, I am still regularly consulted for my expertise in avian nutrition and rehabilitation techniques, having developed an extensive network of professional relationships.

I live in the Texas Hill Country with Don, my husband, dogs, goats, tortoises, bunnies, and other numerous exotic and domestic birds, while also working in Chemical Engineering at The University of Texas.

The Blue-grey tanager is a medium sized tanager measuring a little over 7 inches (18 centimeters), with a pale sky-blue on the head and chest, dark blue body, a shade darker blue tail, light blue wings with dark blue on the wing edges. While both sexes are very similar in appearance, the color of the female is slightly greyer than that of the male. The color difference is hard to decipher unless several adults are together. Juveniles lack the bright colors of the adults. Their voices are a high and pleasant twittering.

The Blue-grey tanager is a tanager from the family *Thraupidae*. Its *Latin* name is *Thraupis episcopus*. It originates in South America and naturally occurs in southern Mexico to northeast Bolivia. It also occurs in the Amazon and northern Brazil. It is sometimes called Blue Jean on Trinidad and Tobago. There are 13 subspecies which tend to have different shades of blue to white on the shoulders. The breeding habitat is open woodland, cultivated areas and gardens. The Blue-grey tanager lives mainly on fruit, but will also take some nectar and insects.

The plan was to put my new tanagers in a planted flight where I could watch them chase insects and give them a sense of security. I thought that would be important to get them to breed. It was now November, and it can get very cold here in central Texas, so I brought the pair inside my bird room for the winter, thinking that in the spring they would return to the outside flight.

The pair was placed by themselves in a cage measuring 4' x 18' x 4' (122 cm x 46 cm x 122 cm) on a shelf. The top of the cage was about 7 feet (213 cm) off the floor. The room that housed them has windows that line the wall on two sides with two large skylights. During the day the room is pretty bright. If the sun shines, it shines part of the day in their cage. They also have a small full-spectrum light mounted on top of the cage which is left on 24 hours a day. When the birds are not nesting they spend a lot of time under the light sunbathing. The room varies in temperatures from 70°F (24°C) during the day to 50°F (10°C) at night.

The cage was filled with plastic plants and dried bamboo stalks. I also have a few live plants hanging on the outside of the cage.

The pair was very nervous and shy; and when I would come into the room they would retreat to the top of the cage to watch me. YouTube and zoos have reported semi-tame birds but mine didn't read those posts.

I left assorted nests from the previous inhabitants of waxbills. I thought the covered nests would give the pair something more solid to hide behind. Near the top corner I also placed two open canary nests in some plants.

Every morning they were given a dish of mixed fruit (papaya, mango, bananas, grapes, peaches, apple, corn, kale, pears, strawberries, pomegranates, pears and guava or whatever fruit looked good to me. Twice a week bee pollen and a calcium supplement was added.

They always have a dish of "Spring Oaks Birdie Softbill", an animal-based protein with herbs and flowers. Interested parties may contact me directly for additional information about this diet.

An animal or insect-based protein is essential for fast growing young to survive.

I began topping their food with pinky mice cut into pieces, several mice each day. From my experience I have found many birds to be opportunist feeders, eating foods we may not associate with their normal behavior.

Nesting started when I found small strips of white paper from the bottom of the cage that was carried up to the water and food dishes. I threw in some hay, feathers and coco fiber for them to utilize, thinking they were trying to build a nest in a plant or a canary nest.

A couple of weeks into this building process, two eggs were found in a seed dish high in the cage. They had a few strips of paper and a few pieces of hay, but made few improvements to their dish nest.

My supply of pinkie mice ran out after the chicks were about two weeks old and I started giving them fuzzies.(Fuzzies are baby mice that have fur) The mice were stripped of fur and



Seed cup adopted as nest site.



Young Blue-grey tanager hatchling.



Juvenile Blue-grey tanager chick.



Blue-grey tanager Fledgling.



Food bowl with fresh fruit, greens and proteins.



The Blue-grey tanager hen incubating her egg with a watchful eye.



Blue-grey tanager in planted aviary.

sliced up. The pair would completely consume the pinkie mice but left the head and tails of fuzzies. Chopped chicken hearts and liver were gobbled up. The chicks fledged in about 15 days.

I left the babies with the parents after they were weaned. Six weeks later the parents laid a second clutch, but those eggs were infertile.

My juveniles took about six months to color up, and they both appeared to be females. There were some disagreements among them at that time, so they were each removed to their own cage.

Some of the meat items and the "Birdie Gold Softbill" diet were not always regularly consumed when they were not actively breeding and/or had fledglings to feed, preferring their fresh fruit instead.

Shortly after the youngsters were moved, another clutch of two eggs was laid. The parents used a medium-sized finch nest that had a quarter-sized hole chewed in one side, thanks to a mouse chewing through it.

I would often see the female's tail sticking out of the entrance hole. The female was the only bird observed incubating. Again they played a lot with nesting materials, but few found their way into the nest. One baby hatched out, but was found dead about a week later on the floor of the cage, possibly because their light went out one night and I was also being stingy with the meat portions.

Their next clutch was laid in the same covered nest. In December of 2013 two babies hatched. They were eating pinkie mice and chopped chicken (hearts, liver) along with their usual fair of mixed fruit. The gape flanges were white, and the parents were pretty tolerant of me handling the babies to photograph from time to time, since I could not really see well in to the covered nest. They both fledged February 4, 2014.

I have immensely enjoyed these birds. I think they will be more beautiful in the natural sun. I will be moving them outside to the garden flights this summer, allowing them to enjoy a more natural setting, although they were easily kept and reproduced young inside much smaller quarters. My hope is that these birds will be raised in greater numbers to enhance our knowledge of avian softbills.

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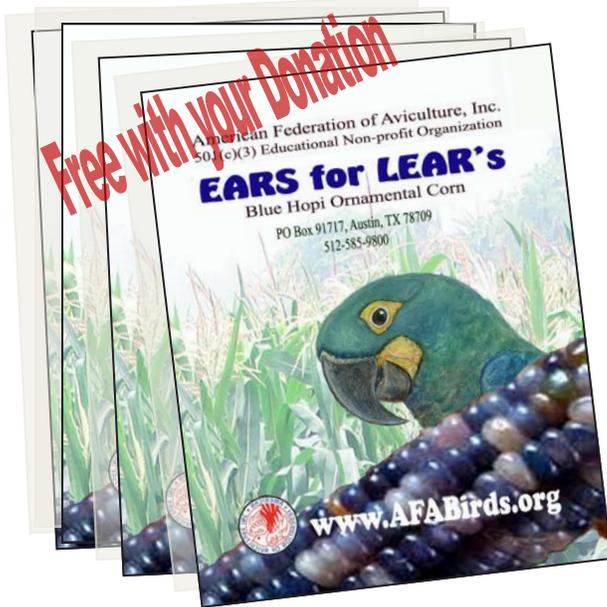
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Photo courtesy of Parrots International



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