

# The Silver-eared Mesia

by Grant Rishman  
Victoria, British Columbia



Photo by Colin Knecht

*The Silver-eared Mesia is related to the popular Pekin Robin. It comes from India and southern Asian and makes a delightful aviary bird.*

Softbills in Canada are not the easiest of birds to obtain so a few years ago when we decided to add some Silver-eared Mesias to our collection we quickly realized that we would have to buy them from abroad. We imported about 20 birds from Holland. When they arrived in quarantine it was very disappointing to see that half the birds had no feathers on their head and back while the other half had no feathers at all. By the end of the 30 day quarantine all the birds, with one exception, looked quite good. We were very surprised at how much demand there was for these birds so all the birds were sold except one hen and "the bald guy." We housed these birds individually and it was a couple of months before the feathers started to appear. The wait was well worth it. The bird

eventually moulted all his feathers and was transformed from an "ugly duckling" into a beautiful, proud, male mesia. With the plumage came the song, seven to eight notes of pure energy. The song is more tuneful than the Pekin Robin and considerably louder. We are fortunate to have some understanding neighbours as the male can be heard one-half mile away!

In their natural habitat in Burma and the Himalayas, the Silver-eared Mesia (*Leiothrix argenteauris*) frequents secondary growth and abandoned cultivation clearings. It has been found as low as 1,000 feet in Burma, but it is much more common above 3,000 feet and has been reported as high as 7,000 feet in the Himalayas. Coming from this altitude the birds are incredibly hardy and

remain totally unconcerned if the winter temperature drops to below freezing. However, it is best if they have access to frost free accommodation when the temperature drops this low.

Over the years we have found that mesias have different temperaments when they start to breed. Some pairs are quite happy to share their aviaries with other species like Pekin Robins, doves, thrushes and even Green Singing Finches, while we have one pair that become positively murderous when they start nesting. The only nesting material that any of the mesias have used is coconut fibre. (One year we could not obtain any and the pairs laid their eggs on the bare nest — none hatched that year!)

Some pairs prefer to use a wicker



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\*\* Indicates 2 year term has been fulfilled. If no new interested party comes forward and indicates a desire to serve, incumbent remains in position.

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### AFA CONVENTION 1993

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plant pot as a nest while others prefer a covered wicker basket. Some birds also build their own nest in the bushes. I currently have one pair that has just started incubating their eggs in a giant "two hook" drinker.

Last year we decided to try one pair at liberty once the young had hatched. It worked very well . . . for about four hours, then the parents decided that it was much more fun to play in the garden. What a magnificent sight they made tumbling through the trees — but what about the chicks? At 6 p.m. both parents were back in the aviary but they were ignoring the chicks. We checked the chicks in the nest and found that both of them were very cold so we decided to remove them for hand-raising. We had handraised parrots before so softbills should not be that much different — should they?

The first lesson came when we discovered that baby mesias do not have a crop and the food goes straight down into the stomach. The second lesson came when we discovered that feeding once an hour was not going to be enough. The third lesson came the following morning when both chicks were dead.

Our mesias are housed in small flights 7' x 3' x 7' high. Any growing plants are soon destroyed so we cut fir and cedar branches and attach them to the wire with "twist ties." This appears to give them enough security. Their diet consists of soaked mynah pellets, diced fruit, Universal food and a few insects. When breeding, all hens have access to baked eggshells and can be seen consuming large amounts a couple of days before laying.

Both birds share the incubation, in some pairs the hen does most but on many occasions the male does most of the incubation while the hen does most of the feeding. Fertility is always very high and the three to four eggs hatch in 14 days. At this time the parents often become totally insectivorous themselves and

will always feed only insects to the young.

We feed mealworms, feeder guppies, and previously frozen crickets as the only livefood (the parents also take any house flies, earwigs, and moths that venture into the aviary). Nectar is also fed in the breeding season. For the first four days all the livefood is swallowed by the parents and then regurgitated to the chicks. By day 5 the chicks can be heard begging for food and whole insects are taken back to the nest. The chicks progress very well and fledge after only 12 days. Our Canadian show rules state that all current year birds must be closed rung so on the day they leave the nest they are banded with budgie bands. These can only be used on the day the chicks leave the nest. If used before the chicks fledge, the parents will throw the band out of the nest (with the chick still attached to it!). If used the day after the chicks fledge their feet are too big and the ring will not fit. The parents are always very concerned when we catch the chicks to ring them, once they are banded and released the parents are quite calm again and do not seem concerned by the leg bands.

When the chicks fledge they can barely fly and spend most of their time climbing through the branches or up the wire. The parents do not always sleep with the chicks when they fledge but they will always start feeding them again in the morning. If the weather deteriorates it may be worth moving the whole family into the shelter or birdroom for a few days. After a week the young are usually flying quite well and are becoming very inquisitive. When they are three weeks old the parents start to wean them from the exclusively insect diet onto the normal food. They remain dependent on their parents for about six weeks and should be removed at that time to allow the parents to raise further clutches. ●

*The welfare of all the members,  
birds and animals affected by  
Hurricane Andrew are in our  
thoughts and hearts.*