

Success with Softbills

by Dianne M. Weber
Poughkeepsie, New York

Editor's Note:

An introduction to this excellent article comes from the author in her cover letter to the editors of the Watchbird magazine. It is very appropriate.

"Hidden in a narrow, somewhat deep valley called Peekskill Hollow, there is a place of mystery, wonderful songs and enchantment. A drive up the steep road presents a vista of nature and exotic flora. Barely visible through all this foliage are the aviaries of Reg Riedel. This article is about the man, his birds and gardens, and his love of all living things. He is a fascinating personality with a varied, adventurous and even sometimes unbelievable life starting from his childhood in war torn Europe to his present day accomplishments in breeding softbills...some rare and first-time breedings.

This article describes feeding and keeping of various types of softbills as well as how to purchase and maintain them. This account also includes information on beginner as well as intermediate birds for the prospective hobbyist. The chief focus is on Riedel's ideas on how to keep softbills successfully."

Like a cluster of gems set in a tiara, flowers encircle the hillside. Bright orange day lilies and poppies, Siberian and Japanese iris, like blue topaz, bee balm, lupines, delphiniums, chrysanthemums, and columbines grow against an emerald backdrop. Once this hill was forested and rocky outcrops were the only ornaments. Now it is a terraced vista of plants with small paths leading to the towering wire cages, the aviaries, where the softbills live. Bordering the aviaries and trailing up and around them are a multitude of vines. Morning glory, hybrid honeysuckle, passion vine, thunbergia, clematis and more add color, beauty and vegetation. The creator and keeper of this botanical wonderland is Reg Riedel: he is no less successful in keeping and breeding the softbills which live among these bowers of beauty.

In 1946, Europe was war torn and in a rubble. Hungry refugees sought scarce

food supplies and found little shelter. To avoid the labor camps and communism, the Riedel family decided to secretly migrate from Poland, their home, to western Germany. Since the trip was to be mostly a walking journey, they took just as much as could be carried. Reg, an eight-year-old, was allowed, with much begging and cajoling, to take a turtle and a four-week-old turkey chick. After nine months of walking, mostly at night, they arrived at a refugee camp. The boy still had his pets. The turkey was quite large and he had to guard it with his life, preventing other refugees from stealing it since food remained difficult to obtain. The turkey survived, and when the family managed to be placed on a farm, it lived a long life. Riedel's commitment to this particular turkey began his deep love of birds; but they had been a part of his earlier life as well.

"As long as I can remember," states Riedel, "there were always birds in the household." A major influence was his father. Breeding the more exotic types was difficult then because of lack of information and the absence of highly specialized foods. His father, however, was still able to breed canaries. At various times he had magpies, jackdaws and crows. Later on, the Riedels raised pheasants.

Later in Germany, Reg Riedel bred some European softbills and ornamental pheasants even though travel and life as a professional dancer prevented him from breeding on a larger scale. For the past 10 years he has been able to breed softbills, and in the United States a first breeding was the Velvet-fronted Nuthatch. In the ensuing years he has been the first to breed Siberian Azure Tits, Golden-napped Tanagers, Verditer Fly Catchers, Bearded Reedlings, and Cobalt Niltavas. As a result of his success with insect-eating birds that others, including zoos, have found nearly impossible to breed, Riedel has become well-known to zoos such as the N.Y. Zoological Society, the Central Park Zoo, San Diego Zoo and Cincinnati Zoo as well as several zoos in Germany and Holland. He has supplied them with captive-born young as well as advising them on the care and maintenance of the birds.

When Riedel graduated to keeping softbills, he learned that the feeding requirements are more restrictive than they are for hookbills. What is true for the serious breeder is also true for the hobbyist. Softbills need fresh food. The feeding requirements for softbills can be divided into the following categories: insect-eating, fruit-eating, omnivorous and nectar-eating birds.

By far the easiest to keep and feed are the omnivorous birds because their diet is varied and therefore more manageable. They can be fed fruits, tofu, pet food preparations such as dog and cat food as well as meal worms, crickets and fly larvae. Birds, such as the Pekin Robin, and some jays, will eat and survive for a short time on seeds of various types. Some of these foods can be obtained easily from grocery and pet stores; and, with vitamin and mineral supplements, a well-balanced diet can be obtained.

The insect-eaters such as the flycatchers can eat insects obtained from pet supply stores and specialized wholesalers. These insects can remain alive over several days in a container. It is possible to leave the birds with a full container for more than one day. Almost all birds, except doves and pigeons to some extent, are insectivorous. Many of the birds which are considered nectar-eating or seed-eating need the protein of insects to get into breeding condition.

With the development of nectar-plus, a commercially available nectar diet, it is now possible to keep the nectar-eating birds, such as hummingbirds, honey creepers and even sun birds. Nectar-eaters need a feeding two times a day—once in the morning and then in the evening. However, the drawback to the formula nectar is that it spoils rapidly and the remaining portions left in the feeding vessel must be discarded each day and the vessel cleaned. Adding fruit flies to the diet will stimulate breeding among the hummingbirds.

Unfortunately, the most labor intense birds to keep are those that are strictly fruit eaters such as the tanagers and some broad bills such as the Lesser Green Broadbill. This is unfortunate since some of the most beautiful and desirable softbills fall into this category. Fruit spoils very rapidly; therefore, fresh fruit must be chopped up and presented daily. This is an absolute must since eating spoiled fruit can kill the birds.

Riedel supplements the basic food mix with hard-boiled eggs and grated

carrots. Tofu is eaten by all the birds—even the finches. This mix is primarily for the insect-eating birds.

Another aspect of diet depends on the cleanliness of the environment. Keeping the cages as clean as possible is important to health. Riedel notes that the placement of water and food dishes is critical in that care must be taken not to place them under branches or any other perches on which the birds habitually sit for long periods of time or where they roost at night since they would then defecate onto those dishes. With cages, he suggests, for example, that finding a way of affixing the water dish up high in the cage is preferable to placing it on the floor. Both the food tray and water dish should be placed where they can be easily changed with as little disturbance as possible. For the aviary, there should be a feeding platform that is protected from the rain. Remember too, that water ferments even quicker than the food. As mentioned earlier, the humming bird feed must be kept very clean to prevent spoilage of the nectar. A lot of serious bird keepers disinfect their feeding tubes on a daily basis. Another group of birds which needs more care with cleaning are the fruit-eaters. Their stool tends to be looser and in larger quantity, therefore, the increase in cleaning is necessary.

The type of environment selected for the softbill is as important as the feed requirements. Whether the bird is being kept for breeding or not also influences the type of home it will have. Reg Riedel believes that the amount of space he gives his birds is one major factor making him successful as a breeder of softbills. He says, "Holding cages are okay, but once established for breeding, large aviaries are used." The selection of a cage, aviary or greenhouse is somewhat complex in that it depends on one's own finances, environment, facilities and the type of birds that one wishes to keep. All of these bird housings have their advantages and disadvantages, and the decision has in part to be made by how well the enthusiast can overcome or live with the disadvantages.

The traditional cage, of course, is the easiest to set up but is not suitable for many softbills. In addition, as Riedel points out, it should be shaped differently than the traditional bird cage such as those used for parrots. He recommends that its dimensions be horizontally rectangular rather than vertically tall. Although it's very difficult to give a

cage size, as a minimum he recommends a cage 4 ft. long by 2 1/2 ft. wide by 2 ft. tall. He claims that these dimensions are well suited for finches as well. In his experience, softbills and finches like to move horizontally more so than vertically. He offers a proof; some finches he had in a vertical cage became quieter and calmer when moved to a horizontal one.

The aviary, as Reg conceives of it, is a large, planted enclosure, most of it exposed to the outside with a provision for shelter from rain and cold. The aviary is a very desirable way of housing birds as it gives them a far more natural environment in addition to more room to fly around. Riedel believes that it is important to provide exposure to direct sunlight and air. He has seen that when his birds have the opportunity they will sun bathe, opening up their feathers and exposing their skin to the direct rays of the sun. The aviary also provides space for exercise which can prevent an overweight condition.

There are, however, some important disadvantages to the aviary. It is somewhat expensive, time-consuming and labor intensive to build. There is the very difficult problem of preventing predators from entering the aviary. This includes mice, rats, raccoons, snakes, possums, skunks and birds of prey. Riedel has found that the only fencing material that is truly effective is galvanized hardware cloth. The builder must find a way of preventing rats and mice from tunnel-

ing underground into the aviary. Riedel suggests that a double fence must be built or electric wires placed near the bottom and at the top of the enclosure to prevent raccoons from getting the birds. When he built his first aviaries the raccoons came and worked in pairs. One would climb on top of the aviary and scare the birds off their night perches. The birds would fly against the fencing and hold onto it with their feet. The raccoon on the ground could then grasp the toes of the bird and pull whatever parts he could through the wire, ripping the legs right out of the bird. The birds, unable to see well at night, were unable to fly to the sheltered roosting spots. A night light helped the birds to see and fly to safety.

Riedel notes that the size of the aviary is dictated, to a great extent, by the type of softbill one wishes to maintain. Size of the birds is not always the determining factor. It's more important to know the bird's behavior. Fairy bluebirds, for example, although fairly large, are somewhat quiet and given to sitting calmly in a tree for long periods of time. They do not need as much space as highly active birds such as the fly-catchers that are smaller in size. Turacos are highly desirable birds, easy to feed, hardy and fairly easy to breed, but they are also very active and must have quite large enclosures.

The type of plants or shrubbery desirable for an aviary depends to some extent again on the type of bird that will

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Natural blooms around the aviaries include rhododendron, azaleas, and mountain laurel. These enhance the natural beauty along with attracting native birds.



A hollow log with an entrance hole is used for a nesting pair of Royal Starlings.

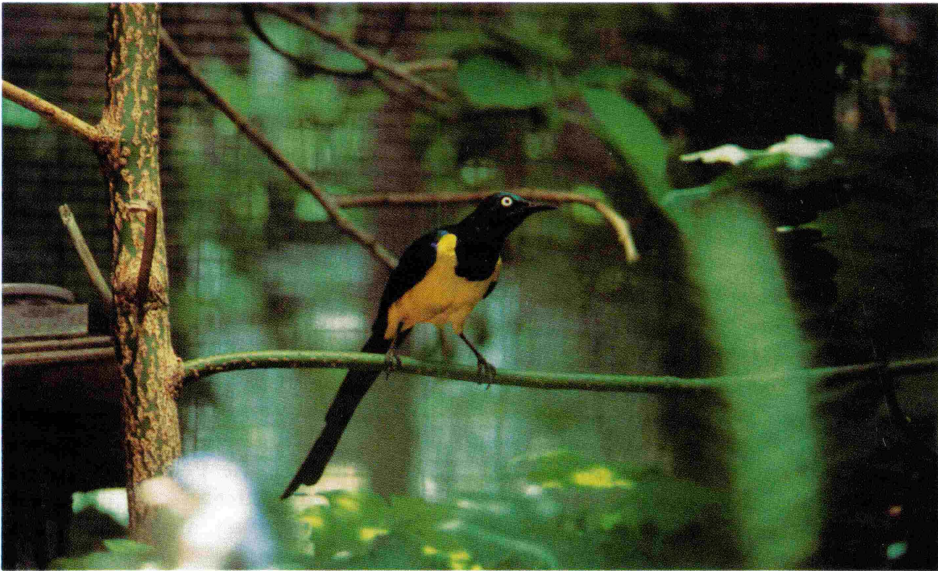


The Velvet-fronted Nuthatch is one of the unusual softbills reared by Reg Riedel. In fact, he reared this species for the first time in the U.S.



Reg Riedel uses the natural native flora in his aviary design. He has allowed this tree to grow through the top of one aviary.

Photos by Arnold Weber



This male African Royal Starling is brilliantly iridescent in coloration. It is part of a nesting pair.



live in it. In Riedel's aviaries, which are almost all outside, he has planted evergreens and deciduous trees. He finds that cedars and junipers are particularly well-suited since they are hardy and provide a lot of cover and nesting places. Some softbills like the honey creepers, tanagers, and euphonias like bromeliads for nesting. The location of the aviary is very important in relation to

This nesting female Violet-eared Waxbill is searching for insects within its planted aviary.



The immature plumage is very evident with this fledgling Cobalt Niltava.



Reg Riedel feeding male Cobalt Niltava.

its orientation to the sun. It's necessary to shelter the aviary from the north wind. Therefore, a south facing one is better. Riedel's aviaries benefit by having a high hill sheltering them from the north. According to Riedel, "Aviaries should provide fresh air, fresh growth, insects and entertainment for the birds."

The greenhouse is particularly suited to the enthusiast who wants to create a truly tropical environment. It has the advantage of possibly being an addition to the house that one can enjoy as another room. If done in this way, problems with heating are less than they would be with separate aviaries. Riedel cautions that it is important to know where one's softbills come from since some birds, although from the tropics, may in fact come from mountainous regions and may experience cool winter seasons. These birds may not be suitable for the greenhouse. The main problem with the greenhouse in summer is overheating as well as the difficulty of proper ventilation. These can be overcome with vents and various types of shading from the hot summer sun. In Riedel's experience it's very important to limit the number of birds one houses in the usual greenhouse. It's all too easy to keep adding more and more until the cleanliness of the room becomes a serious problem.

Although pet stores are the first choice among hobbyists selecting birds, the stores often have a limited stock of softbills and the staff little knowledge.

This is not to say that there aren't any pet shops where the proprietor and staff are not knowledgeable and helpful. But the prospective hobbyist needs to be very careful. Probably the only stores worth looking into are those that specialize in birds only. Pet shops are good, however, for supplies such as feeds, feeding trays, insect foods and the like.

Again, it should be said that if one does go to a pet shop, try to determine the knowledge of the proprietor by playing the innocent and asking questions regarding the birds he/she has. Know the answers from one's own research. For example, the prospective buyer might ask, "From what country do the birds come?" "What is its native habitat?" "What are they being fed?" These kinds of questions will help the hobbyist learn whether the proprietor has simply purchased his stock randomly from some wholesaler without particular regard to the softbills. Then it is also wise to look the birds over carefully as to their demeanor, feather condition, and the condition of the cage itself. Try to look at the feces — are they pure white with black granular centers indicating good health or runny, with yellow or greenish centers? Beware if the bird sits listlessly with its feathers puffed out. The birds should be lively, bright-eyed, with a sheen to the feathers.

The best way for obtaining softbills would be to read the classified ads of this magazine and others where importers of softbills are sometimes advertized. These people directly import wild-trapped birds and often operate their own quarantine station. Some of these people are very responsible and honest dealers. It should be understood that these are wild birds and therefore more nervous and delicate than home-bred ones. They are also under a great deal of stress having gone through capture and transfer from their country of origin to a quarantine station and then to the dealer.

Finally, Riedel believes that the best source for birds is a private breeder. Since most of these are dedicated hobbyists, they are concerned for the welfare of their breeding stock as well as the offspring they sell. If they have been successful at breeding for a number of years; it indicates that they know how to keep, feed, and care for the softbills they sell. If they are dedicated to the hobby, they will be most concerned about the buyer being successful himself and should be a gold mine of information.

For the beginner enthusiast, Riedel recommends the Pekin Robin. It is an attractive, trim southeast Asian bird that is omnivorous, hardy, a good eater, tolerant of housing conditions that more sensitive softbills are not, and a delightful singer. The cage size recommends is 4 ft. long by 2 1/2 ft. wide by 2 ft. tall. To make the cage interesting to the birds, add some branches in a corner or artificial flowers inside. These softbills like a quiet place for sleeping and roosting. A potted plant with vines hanging down is a good idea, too. A Pekin Robin has to be fed only once a day. A dish with some small seeds such as millet should be made available. No sunflowers or peanuts should be included, however. A softbill mix made with high protein items in a crumble mixture is best. A basic protein like cat food mixed with hard-boiled egg, chopped raisins and farmers' cheese add to the diet. Monkey chow can be pulverized and mixed with hard-boiled egg. Different bits of fruit and greens are good, too. Cucumbers are popular with the birds. Crickets — three or four times a day — and white meal worms add variety to the diet. On a bad, restricted diet, the birds will fade. Fresh water is important also.

Taming down the bird by hand feeding helps to make it more enjoyable. This is done by withholding the meal worms and any live food. Then feed the live food through the wire and eventually open the cage and give the bird free flight. Make sure no insects are available before the release for free flight and then put the fresh insects in the cage when desirous of returning the bird to the cage. Soon the softbills will learn the routine.

As much light as possible is good; a minimum of 12 hours of daylight is recommended for all softbills. For breeding they need between 14 and 16 hours of light. Finally, use common sense in raising a Pekin Robin.

An intermediate bird is the Silver-eared Mesia, which is larger and more colorful than the Pekin Robin; they are related. If one gives them an outdoor aviary, they can stay outside until the low 30's F. (This is also true for the Pekin Robins.)

Another softbill that has the same keeping and feeding is the Shama Thrush. It will not eat seeds, however. Though Shamas aren't brightly colored, they are still beautiful. It's larger than the Pekin Robin and the Silver-eared Mesia. The male is metallic blue-black on the

top, the chest is rust colored and it has a long, long tail for its body size. Shamas flash their tails frequently. The wonderful thing about the Shamas is that they are the kings of singers. Though, like many good singers, they don't all have the same song. The best singers are the wild caught Shamas, and the male usually sings around the nest while the female is eating. The male offspring learns the song from the parent. Even Shama females can sing, although not as strongly as the males. The Shamas can also withstand temperatures into the 30's F. and the feeding is the same as mentioned for the Pekin Robin. The Shamas come into a violent molt and drop nearly all the feathers. Make sure that they are protected and warm when molting. During the molt, they will not breed. The ideal is to have the molt after breeding.

Whether handfeeding a clutch of tanagers or transplanting one of the garden's splendors, Reg Riedel finds that to have success with either activity demands certain attributes. In raising softbills he uses a keen observation to learn their normal habits and determine changes. An in-depth knowledge about the species one is interested in means reading books and articles as well as learning by word of mouth. Telephoning people who have already raised a particular species helps immeasurably. Another trait is knowing when a bird is sick and determining what to do. Riedel feels it's a necessity to have a veterinarian who knows how to care for birds. And there are, he admits, a few disadvantages to maintaining softbills. Some of the smaller ones are delicate; they don't have the body mass to withstand the onslaught of disease. For others, the feeding requirements are demanding. Availability of certain species is another problem. The lack of exchange of information regarding softbills poses difficulty, too.

No matter what the disadvantage, Riedel can name a multitude of advantages to keeping his friends, the softbills. One of the attractions of these birds as compared with hookbills, for instance, is that they are, for the most part, non-destructive to plant life. So it's possible, with a careful selection of species, to create a total environment. If you stand on one of Riedel's hillside paths among the blossoms and gaze at the many colored birds flying in his aviaries, you'll agree that raising softbills can be a very rewarding success. ➤