

White-backed Mousebirds

by Jason Crean, NFSS Region 3 Vice President

Mousebirds are of the genus Colius and originate in Africa. They are primarily frugivorous and folivorous, eating a wide variety of fruits, leaves and some insects. Though these softbills appear to be "cardinal-like" in appearance, they are not seed eaters as they do not have a developed crop. They are a gregarious species, living in large groups and scurrying around tree branches with each other, a behavior that gave them their common name. They are peculiar in their posture as they hang from branches by their long toes and elongated feet, dangling their very long tail down below the body. They sleep in communal "clusters" where a group of birds, to maintain a comfortable temperature at night, will hang facing each other so their tails all hang down together. They also have a very pleasant "chirp" which can be very soft and pleasant.

The species we raise, the white-backed mousebird, has a grey body with a white stripe on its rump, bordered by two black stripes. Scientifically known as *Colius colius*, it also has a burgundy patch closer to the tail which is not usually visible unless the wings are spread. It is thought that, as with other birds with similar rump colors, these colors are only visible while in flight to surprise predators long enough to escape. They are also countershaded as their breast and belly are a buff color. One of their most intriguing characteristics is their crest that can become erect on their head and appears to be used for communication, much like other crested avian species. They also exhibit a beautiful silver beak with a black tip and a stiff tail that can extend to a length of over six inches, about half their overall

body length. They also have vivid reddish-orange feet and legs with long toes used for hanging.

DIET & HOUSING

They eat a diverse diet of fruits and have a voracious appetite! They will eat pieces of whole fruit with their small, pointed beak tips or consume diced fruits along with a pelleted diet. Larger softbill pellets that are soaked are preferred by most individuals though some dry finch pellets are accessible at all times. We prefer to mix a cockatiel sized pellet right in with the fruit and allow it to soften in the natural juices.

Common dietary items include apple, pear, orange, tangerine, grapes, blueberries, diced green, leafy vegetables, and their favorites, banana and melons including cantaloupe, honeydew, and papaya. These foods are either diced or put into the tray in chunks and covered with low-iron softbill pellets. Many mousebirds do prefer to pick at larger chunks throughout the day, especially fruits like bananas. For this reason, I place large slices of fruit into the tray and then add pellets and some diced fruit to it. In order to minimize mess, I put a tray of fruits and pellets on the floor of the cage where it can be seen no matter where the birds prefer to hang in their cage.

Diet preparation is quick and easy. As stated, I dice fruits without seeds and skins. I also recommend supplementing the diet with enrichment items like whole slices of fruit where the skins can be left intact. I add pellets to the diced fruit mixture and add that to the top

of the larger pieces. I also add leafy greens two to three times per week and increase that when chicks are in the nest. Each mousebird will eat approximately a ½ cup of food per feeding. We recommend feeding twice daily until they are about six months of age but one feeding should last throughout the day after they have matured.

I also use some whole food supplements that have helped my birds to thrive. Using tea is a staple for all of my birds and I use different teas in different situations. For mousebirds, I have found organic decaffeinated tea as a wonderful addition to the diet. The antioxidants, vitamin C, and other nutrients like vitamin B1, B2, and B6 makes this a superior addition to the avian diet. I will offer this steeped in their drinking water but also will mix in the ground tea leaves in with their diced fruit mixture. Other teas I offer include decaffeinated black teas and herbal teas like chamomile for calming nerve relaxation and digestion, rose hips for blood cleansing and potential fatigue, and peppermint for its antiseptic properties as well as its digestive benefits.

In the fruit mixture I add dried organic oregano as it has powerful antifungal properties that keeps fruit fresh longer as well as coconut oil. Coconut oil is a fantastic essential oil that is packed with Lauric acid, which promotes healthy metabolism and is known for its antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal properties, and MCTs (medium chain triglycerides) which increase available energy and are easily digestible.

Caging does need to be somewhat tall and wide to accommodate their tail. We prefer a cage that is at least thirty (30) inches tall and wide and fill the

cage with natural branches, especially willow varieties. Due to the fact that they hang on cage bars, it is helpful to hang a piece of thin Plexiglass or sit the cage on an easy-to-clean surface like so many other bird owners do for their psittacines. We also make sure to leave space on the floor for a plastic container for their dust bath which will be discussed later.

BEHAVIOR & BREEDING

Behaviors are unique in that they scurry about with quick jumping motions, a reason for their rodent name! They do love live plants so a well-planted aviary is a plus for breeding though they may be destructive to some plants. During breeding season, which indoors can be year-round, they will nest in just about anything like a canary open wicker nest or a finch covered wicker basket. I have even had very determined pairs toss out all of their food and stuff bedding into their stainless steel dish to lay eggs! I prefer the open top finch breeding box as it provides them security, is easy to inspect, and will hold the eggs and babies if parents are startled. They will also use just about anything to create a comfortable interior, including coconut fibers, cotton and cotton fibers, wood shavings and finely shredding paper. I have found dried leaves and twigs as well as mammal hair in their nests as well! Some birds have also completely built their own cup-like nests even though prefabricated nests are provided.

The reproductive cycle is somewhat shorter than that of psittacines and even other softbills as they can go to nest and lay a clutch of three to four eggs all within two to three days. The babies hatch after about 14 days, and they grow very fast. At day nine, they must be pulled if you are to hand-raise

them. At this point, they can be handled by using small forceps and giving them small bits of fruit and small soaked pellets. Another facet of hand-raising is the need to stimulate chicks to defecate, which the parents do by pecking at their vent opening to allow the solid waste out and remove it from the nest. Chicks also are adept at tilting their vent to release their feces out of the nest. We aid them in this behavior by lightly rubbing their vent with a paper towel. This only needs to be done the first few days until they have adjusted to their new diet and feeding regimen and can do it on their own. The babies have a short tail at this age and sleep with their tail straight up. We then feed them every hour from 6am until about midnight the first week, and then every 2 hours until weaning. They usually wean by 5 weeks of age though their adult plumage is not complete for another few months.

BRINGING HOME A PET MOUSEBIRD

When taking home a hand-raised pet, some may experience a little hyperactivity as they are quite inquisitive. Almost immediately they will want to be close to their human companions so holding them in the hand and offering them food from hands will help reinforce this bond. In no time, they will be hanging from your shirt allowing you to scratch them! Offer them a plate of food at the bottom of the cage so they can see it no matter where they are. They don't drink a great deal of water but a fresh supply should be available at all times.

They don't bathe in water, however, as they prefer to take dust baths. I mimic this condition by providing them with fine bedding, like Kaytee's Bird Cage Litter made of recycled newspaper granules that look similar to cat litter, in a deep disposable container on the floor

of the cage. They will almost immediately jump in and begin to roll in these granules. We recommend keeping this bath away from the food so as to avoid mixing bathing material in with their softfoods. Some mousebird enthusiasts have used children's play sand that has been sterilized to more closely imitate their natural bathing substrate.

Warmth is also key, especially for the first few potentially stressful days in their new home. Many birds, when in a new environment of any kind, will become stressed and warmth is important to make them as comfortable as possible. A heating pad under the cage or a heat lamp at a safe distance can really help though it is recommended you only use heat sources under close supervision. Keeping their cage in the warmest room in the house during this time is usually sufficient.

Mousebirds are a truly unique bird and make wonderful pets for owners who love them and train them properly. They love interacting with each other and humans if kept in the home and make a welcome addition in almost any family situation. We have thoroughly enjoyed our success in breeding this species and look forward to sharing this love with others further. We talk with many mousebird owners who have hand-raised birds as pets and their opinion is always positive. They have discovered the special qualities mentioned above in their own birds that have become part of their families. Families with children are particularly happy with this species as are apartment dwellers where noise must be limited. It is for these reasons mousebirds can be a wonderful addition to any home.

Author Biography

Jason Crean holds two degrees in Biology, a Master's Degree in Education, and a graduate certificate in Zoo & Aquarium Science. In addition to teaching biology and animal science at the high school and college level, he has aided in research and service work in the Genetics Lab at Chicago's Brookfield Zoo where he also teaches graduate courses in their Education Department. He also acts as an Avian Consultant to zoos and other institutions in the care, breeding, and propagation of avian species. He is the President of the Avicultural Society of Chicagoland and on the Boards of the American Federation of Aviculture and National Finch and Softbill Society. He is a breeder of softbills, specializing in aracaris and mousebirds. Visit his website at www.beaksbirdhouse.com

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