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BREEDING THE WHITE-COLLARED YUHINA

by P. Burden

The White-collared Yuhina *Yuhina diademata* is a small passerine measuring about 6in (15cm) long. It comes from south-west and south China, north Vietnam and north-east Burma (Howard and Moore, 1980). There is a coloured illustration of it on plate 23 of de Schauensee's *The Birds of China* (1984). Its most distinctive feature is its white collar. Many people mistakenly call this species the White-naped Yuhina but the White-naped Yuhina is *Y. bakeri*, which comes from the eastern Himalayas and Assam (Howard and Moore, 1980). My pair are larger than most and are probably the largest of all the yuhinas. As I know my pair so well, I can sex them, even though males and females look alike.

I bought the birds in December 1995 from a trade stand at the National Exhibition of Cage and Aviary Birds. They were put in an aviary measuring 9ft x 6ft x 7ft high (approx. 2.7m x 1.8m x 2.1m high) attached to an indoor flight 3ft x 9ft x 7ft high (approx. 1m x 2.7m x 2.1m high) in my garage, in which they like to feed on apple pushed through the wire. They also have other fruits according to the season and Vega Lage universal insectivorous mixture. They especially enjoy elderberries. The aviary is thickly planted and has the top and both ends covered with perspex. The left side has a panel attached so that neighbours cannot look in and to protect the birds from cats. Other occupants of the aviary have included Golden-breasted Waxbills *Amandava subflava* (which have bred), Red-billed Firefinches *Lagonosticta senegala*, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus *Uraeginthus bengalus* and a male rosefinch *Carpodacus* sp. They like to hawk insects and catch a lot of flies. Mealworms are offered only when they are breeding.

They nested 5ft (approx. 1.5m) above the aviary floor in a conifer bush, having also had the choice of privet bushes and bamboo. The cup-shaped nest consisted of hay, moss and feathers. The nest could easily be seen as could the sitting female which undertook perhaps seventy-five percent of the incubation.

The same place was used in 1996, 1997 and 1998, with two eggs being

laid each time, but it was not until 1998 that they were successful. I noticed on July 1st that the female was sitting tight. I noticed there were egg shells in the flight on July 16th and saw the head of a chick on July 22nd. Both young fledged on July 28th after I had seen them on the edge of the nest the previous day. They were paler, greyer, versions of their parents.

I separated them from their parents in October and exhibited them on two occasions, both times winning the award for best current year owner bred foreign bird. The parents have also been successful on the show bench and won numerous awards either shown as a pair or when exhibited individually. They can be aggressive to other small birds in the aviary but generally only when breeding. They appear to be hardy, easy to manage and make an ideal softbill for beginners.

References

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THREE MONTHS - THREE CONTINENTS

by Charlie Romer

As 1999 drew to a close, I had a particularly good reason for looking forward to the new Millennium. I thoroughly enjoy my work as a member of Melbourne Zoo's bird department and as the 1999-2000 breeding season neared its end there were a number of reasons for quiet satisfaction. Among our breeding successes were Superb Blue Wren *Malurus cyaneus*, Satin Bowerbird *Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*, Grey Shrike-Thrush *Colluricincla harmonica*, Yellow-backed Chattering Lory *Lorius garrulus flavopalliatu*s, King Parrot *Alisterus scapularis*, Purple-crowned Lorikeet *Glossopsitta porphyrocephala*, Red-tailed Black Cockatoo *Calyptrorhynchus magnificus*, Black-breasted Button-Quail *Turnix melanogaster*, Blue-billed Duck *Oxyura australis*, Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus* and Brolga *Grus rubicundus*. Because of import restrictions the zoo's bird collection consists mainly of indigenous species with just a few exotics such as Blue & Gold Macaw *Ara ararauna*, Sun Conure *Aratinga solstitialis*, Nanday Conure *Nandayus nenday*, Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus*, Dusky Lory *Pseudeos fuscata*, Red Lory *Eos bornea*, Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata* and Luzon Bleeding Heart *Gallicolumba luzonica*.

In addition to the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo, Black-breasted Button-Quail and Brolga, other rare or studbook species in the collection include Golden-shouldered Parrot *Psephotus chrysopterygius*, Sooty Owl *Tyto tenebricosa*, Australian Bustard *Choriotis australis* and Freckled Duck *Stictonetta naevosa*. Also of interest is a colony of Little Penguins *Eudyptula minor* which has been producing chicks regularly for more than 30 years.

In mid-1999, I applied for, and was subsequently awarded, a zoo-based scholarship which would enable me to visit macaw habitat in southern Peru and spend time at Loro Parque, Tenerife, to study the latest husbandry and bird management techniques which will be of considerable value at Melbourne Zoo where the bird department is undergoing considerable change, with staff development a key element. In February I embarked on the first leg of my journey - destination Cusco. That was the easy bit! I arrived during the rainy season and the grass landing strip which was my interim destination was too muddy for even the most intrepid aviator to attempt a landing. So I spent a frustrating five days kicking my heels and hoping each morning for news that conditions at the strip had improved. But if you are destined to be marooned somewhere in Peru, Cusco is a by no means boring location. It is an interesting place, dominated by Spanish colonial architecture built on visible foundations laid down by the Incas. It seemed to be populated by almost equal numbers of locals and tourists,

including many ubiquitous backpackers. A considerable volume of cars on its roads and streets means a steadily increasing pollution problem. But above all it is a mecca for sightseers. There are temples, Inca ruins, craft markets - and of course the celebrated Inca ruins at Machu Picchu, close enough for a day trip courtesy of Peru Rail.

Eventually, conditions at the landing strip improved sufficiently for me to board a light aircraft for the 45 minute flight. At the strip, Indian guides were waiting to take me on the next stage, a 2½ hour journey by motorised canoe along the Madre de Dios River to the base at Rio Blanco where I was to spend the next seven weeks assisting Odette Doust, a Dutch veterinarian, and her local research assistants. The project was in two phases; the first of which involved monitoring the growth rates and development of four endemic macaw species - Scarlet *Ara macao*, Green-winged *A. chloroptera*, Blue & Gold and Severe *A. severa*. Local Indians, whose detailed knowledge of the locality, not to mention their tree-climbing expertise which was put to good use retrieving young macaws from nests located considerable distances above the ground. In general, Scarlet and Severe Macaws preferred local, dead palm trees that rot from the top. When a section breaks-off it usually leaves an open cavity in which the birds nest. Sites in such locations presented particular dangers for the climbers who often had to negotiate areas of decayed wood up to 40ft (approx. 12m) above the ground. On the other hand, Green-winged Macaws preferred solid and very tall trees in which broken branches formed nesting cavities. Retrieval of nestlings from this environment posed additional problems as biting insects constantly swarmed round the climbers' bodies, especially, it seemed, their heads, making both ascents and descents particularly difficult and dangerous.

Retrieved birds were lowered to the ground in plastic baskets where blood samples, beak and cloacal swabs were taken, and they were weighed before being returned to the nest. It was a routine which took place approximately once a week until the birds fledged. The study site, on an area of privately owned land, was approximately 20sq. km. (approx. 8sq miles) in area.

The second phase involved retrieval of nestling Scarlet and Severe Macaws. These nests were located in trees close to the river which was in flood at the time. Rapidly rising water levels were obviously destined to destroy the entire site and nestlings were therefore taken for rearing. The young birds ranged in age from three to eight weeks old. They were moved to an Indian camp and housed in a typical hut of timber and palm leaf construction, supplemented with fly wire. They were raised in isolation by Odette Doust in order to minimise imprinting. The birds were fed a commercial hand-rearing formula supplemented with local fruits, collected by the Indians. These were typical of fruits which formed part of the diet of

wild birds and were scattered on the floor of the holding facility. Initially, brooding boxes were used but these were rendered obsolete as the youngsters became more wary and started to explore their environment. It was not long before they started to use perches fixed at various heights; they fledged when about three to four months old. The process was accelerated by use of a diet probably more varied and nutritious than they would have received in the wild.

The base was surrounded by pristine rainforest and wildlife was plentiful. Among the more significant mammal species were South American Tapir *Tapirus terrestris*, Jaguar *Panthera onca*, Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* and a variety of primates including howler *Alouatta* spp., spider *Ateles* spp. and Squirrel Monkeys *Saimiri sciureus*, and various tamarins *Saguinus* spp. In addition to previously mentioned macaw species, local avifauna included Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja*, King Vulture *Sarcoramphus papa*, Ornate Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus ornatus*, various trogons *Trogon* spp., quetzal *Pharomacrus* spp., jacamars *Brachygalba* spp., cotingas *Cotinga* spp., White-winged Trumpeter *Psophia leucoptera*, Spix's Guan *Penelope jacquacu*, Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga*, Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin* and a vast array of hummingbirds and various passerine species.

The prevailing climate was hot and oppressive - 'sticky' is probably the most apt word to describe it. Food deteriorated rapidly as a result of mould and was also lacking in variety. Having said that, how much better off we must have been compared to those who explored the area in a bygone era. The local tributary, inhabited as it was by many species of catfish, piranhas and a few Black Caiman *Melanosuchus niger*, still provided water for drinking and bathing as well as being our highway. The main rivers were black and muddy. Only the odd one was clear and inviting.

The final phase of the macaw project involved construction of an 80ft (approx. 24m) high feeding platform from which the artificially raised juveniles could feed, climb and generally integrate with non-captives of the same species before eventually moving back into the wild. So far as we know, this process was successful, although difficult to evaluate since first-year pressures such as lack of food in the dry season would present a major test of their survivability. There was also the question of predation of inexperienced birds by Harpy Eagle and other large raptors. It was regarded as a valuable training exercise to be utilised for more endangered macaw species. Future projects may include satellite telemetry to help monitor macaw populations, although at US\$5,000 (approx £3,000) per bird it is a high cost exercise. This technology was developed in the USA by NASA and is already in use in a project involving Harpy Eagles.

The area in which I was located in southern Peru's Madre de Dios region is adjacent to Manu National Park. Habitat ranges from tropical lowland

forest into higher elevations and cloud forest retains. There was little or no evidence of poaching and the hope is that experience gained here can be used to advantage with more conservation-needy species such as the Hyacinth *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* and Blue-throated Macaw *A. glaucogularis*.

After two months in the rainforest, and still amazed by the whole Amazonian experience, I left for Tenerife in the Canary Islands where I was to spend a few weeks at Loro Parque, the world's biggest collection of parrots with more than 300 species and subspecies. My role there was to assist and observe general husbandry and day-to-day happenings.

In the main visitors' area at the park more than 600 birds are exhibited in pairs. A separate breeding complex is located at La Vera approximately 2 km (1¼ miles) away, where 2,600 birds are housed in a state-of-the-art facility. More than 800 young are reared each season and this number is expected to increase as the facility expands.

Among endangered species in the collection are Spix's Macaw *Cyanopsitta spixii*, Blue-throated Macaw, Palm Cockatoo *Probosciger aterrimus*, rare island Amazons and lorikeets to name but a few. The emphasis on conservation is immense and substantial sums of money are contributed to projects involving such species as Red and Blue Lory *Eos histrio*, Moluccan Cockatoo *Cacatua moluccensis*, Red-vented Cockatoo *C. haematuropygia* and Yellow-eared Conure *Ognorhynchus icterotis*.

The Mediterranean climate with its mild winters is obviously excellent for bird-keeping and a further plus is the ready availability of excellent local produce. There is a significant commitment to staff development at the park. A highlight every four years is the World Parrot Convention which brings together leading veterinarians, conservationists, researchers and other specialists from around the world. Papers and findings are shared during this important gathering. During my short stay at Loro Parque I learned an enormous amount about techniques ranging from general husbandry to display. Staff were helpful and courteous, and the emphasis on conservation was inspiring. At Melbourne Zoo we aim to continue and develop this new relationship in the future.

My final destination was England where I spent a short while with my family and had a look at one or two collections. Chester Zoo, where I had worked before going to Australia, was inevitably top of my visiting list. As usual it was impossible not to be impressed by the collection there - especially some of the species not available 'Down Under', including Red Bird of Paradise *Paradisaea rubra*, St Lucia Amazon *Amazona versicolor*, a splendid collection of hornbills, Violaceous Touraco *Musophaga violacea*, Mauritius Kestrel *Falco punctatus*, Congo Peafowl *Afropavo congensis* and Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*.

Among the more significant mammal species were Black Rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis*, a nice social herd of Asiatic Elephant *Elephas maximus*,

in a spacious and well designed indoor/outdoor exhibit - and obviously doing well with one 18-months old calf and two pregnant cows. Philippine Spotted Deer *Cervus alfredi*, Babirusa *Babirusa babyrussa*, Rodrigues Fruit Bat *Pteropus rodricensis*, Buffy-headed Capuchin *Cebus xanthosternus* and Europe's largest Chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes* colony of some 30 animals were all impressive.

London Zoo was another must and here it was the small mammal collection which took my eye for it also includes many choice species not represented in Australian zoos including Silvery Marmoset *Callithrix argentata*, Golden-headed Lion Tamarin *Leontopithecus chrysomelas*, Goeldi's Monkey *Callimico goeldi* and Aye-Aye *Daubentonia madagascariensis*. Two other impressive - but very different - exhibits were Okapi *Okapia johnstoni* and Hyacinth Macaw.

Shortly afterwards I returned to a Melbourne winter and resumed my work at the zoo where I will share details of my experience with colleagues and hopefully help implement some of the new ideas I brought back from my travels. I am extremely grateful and privileged that Melbourne Zoo decided to facilitate the trip. To anyone with even the remotest interest in birds and who has the opportunity to visit either Loro Parque or South America's remaining rainforests I have just one recommendation: seize the opportunity with both hands and hold tight to it. Either or both will provide an unforgettable experience.

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HOW I CAME TO KEEP MOUSEBIRDS

by Kara Black

I guess I was under the impression that the only pet birds available were parrots. If you went to the bird shows in the Nashville area, you could easily see how I came to that conclusion. There was a sprinkling of canaries and budgerigars, a dusting of finches, and a full-blown infestation of larger squawking birds that frankly overwhelmed this former finch fanatic. Oh sure, I had the obligatory Cockatiel *Nymphicus hollandicus* back in my college days, but had since in my early thirties moved onto finches, opting for a quieter and less demanding exchange between pet and owner.

One day online I stumbled upon an article about mousebirds. How simply delicious, here was a creature with all the charm, affection and personality of my Cockatiel, if not more, and none of the noise: a marketing coup if ever there was one. I rejoiced for every neglected Cockatiel which along with its cage, had been relegated to a dark closet or an outside location somewhere to scream well out of its owner's earshot.

Going through a divorce has a way of simplifying one's life, and mine was no exception. I was eager to get back to the basics of avian husbandry. Breeding finches had evolved from a delight into a burden. I had become more concerned with producing chicks than marvelling at their creation. I was eager to return to the peaceful days in which hours were spent just watching my birds, much to the neglect of the rest of my life (and I wonder why my marriage did not work!). When I located a bird broker willing to trade several Pekin Robins *Leiothrix lutea* and a pair of Speckled Mousebirds *Colius striatus* for all of my Owl (Double-barred or Bichenov) Finches *Poephila bichenovii*, I was ecstatic.

I had read that mousebirds are superficially unremarkable in appearance and named more for the manner in which they creep and crawl than the way they look. Eleven to 14in (28cm-35.5cm) long, with long, stiff tail feathers which account for two-thirds of their total length, mousebirds are sexually monomorphic (the sexes do not differ in appearance). The six species include the Red-faced *C. indicus*, Red-backed *C. castanotus* and Blue-naped *C. macroura*, but I was obtaining the more common Speckled species.

Mousebirds, or colies, are considered prolific breeders, and I had high expectations. Often I observed them either courting or fighting. The male would delicately feed the female or she would feverishly chase him around the aviary, once actually drawing blood. On other occasions the male would hop methodically several times next to the female, which would then allow him to mount her. They preferred a cup-shaped nest in a low-growing shrub. She began the 18 day incubation period after the first egg was laid. Despite

their aggressive courtship and subsequent mating, my mousebirds produced only two clutches of two eggs, both of which were infertile. When I placed the mousebirds in the quarantine cage, they eagerly scrambled for the mashed fruit that I had prepared for them. Unlike my finches, the mousebirds actually held their food while chewing it, in a manner reminiscent of my Uncle Arnie after he had taken out his dentures for their nightly soak.



Malcolm Ellis

Speckled Mousebird

They absolutely loved banana, and almost anything else soft or cooked came a strong second. According to Martin Vince in his must-have book *Softbills* (Hancock House Publishers Ltd), they are frugivores that do well on a diet similar to the fruit based omnivores, but require a lower protein intake. He recommends a diet consisting of 55% fruit, 30% softbill pellets, 10% hard-boiled egg and 5% vegetables and greens. Due to their penchant for vegetation and soft fruits, mousebirds are considered pests in parts of Africa, and fruit farmers and gardeners do not look fondly upon them. I can certainly empathize with these sentiments, as my pair made short order of a hanging fern and totally ravished a ficus tree by summer's end.

When I moved to my new 'single again' home, I made sure I had enough money to build my lifelong dream of an outside aviary. A triangular-shaped structure attached to one corner of my deck, it was made using 2in x 2in (5cm x 5cm) pressure treated timber and 1/4in (6mm) vinegar-washed, galvanized wire mesh. It measured 14ft (approx. 4.2m) on its longest side

and was 9ft (approx. 2.7m) high. I added numerous plants, real and artificial, and several perches using branches placed between the taut wires. One-third of the structure butted up against my house where there was a 2ft (61cm) roof overhang and a vinyl side wall. I used a bug-zapper during the summer months to provide an endless supply of insects. Ignored for the most part by the mousebirds, the assortment of moths was relished by the Pekin Robins. I made a small pond from the upturned top of a rubber garbage can that balanced on a large plastic plant lid. An old recirculating pump made a delightful bubbling sound that, when turned on, encouraged all except the mousebirds to take a bath. They never bathed in water and certainly did not drink it, but I learned later that they were taking extravagant dust baths in the brightly coloured softbill pellets that I had mistakenly believed I was providing strictly for their nourishment.

My mousebirds loved the aviary and I would hear them making their cute little squeaks and 'giggles'. They were though rarely visible in their new accommodation. Whenever I walked by the aviary they would scurry to the top corner, where they would remain motionless until I left. Otherwise, most of their time was spent lounging in the hanging fern, perching vertically on the wire or scuttling rapidly about the floor. If you saw the film *Alien*, you may remember how after the embryo sprang from one of the crewmember's chest, it scurried across the floor. My mousebirds seemed to remind me of that image. At night, mousebirds prefer sleep in groups, and my pair was often found clinging torpidly together in tête-a-tête fashion appearing much like a Rorschach inkblot. In an attempt to conserve energy, mousebirds allow their body temperature to drop during the night. As a result, the early mornings would often reveal them fluffed-up in the first sun kissed corner of the aviary, much like the tumble-dried Pink Panther cartoon character that I used to love as a child.

By November, the temperature dropped occasionally into the 30s (fahrenheit) and, although they never seemed to mind the cold, I brought them inside. However, their copious droppings and banana slinging soon became a problem. I rushed to head-off future Saturdays spent wall-scraping by the timely introduction of bamboo print wallpaper, but the sight of my fruit splattered room soon overwhelmed me. One week of it and I was ready, to find them a new home.

As I continue my research into aviculture, I am inspired by all the unique species that God has created, and am eager to see which will be the next inhabitants to grace my aviary.

Kara Black lives in Tennessee, USA. It was through the softbill discussion group at Onelist.com that she learnt of the existence of the Avicultural Magazine.



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