

BREEDING THE WHITE-CROWNED ROBIN-CHAT

Cossypha albicapilla

by Gary Bralsford

The White-crowned Robin-Chat *Cossypha albicapilla* is the largest of the 15 species of robin-chats of the genus *Cossypha*. It measures 9in-10¼in (23cm-26cm) in length. The sexes are similar in appearance with the male, at least in the case of *C. a. giffardi*, being larger than the female.

The nominant subspecies *C. a. albicapilla*, found in West Africa from Senegal and The Gambia to northern Côte d'Ivoire, has a conspicuous white crown and nape (the feathers start off with a very narrow black edge that gradually wears off), black cheeks and blackish upperparts, with the rump and tail orange-rufous, except for the central tail feathers which are black. There is a small area of black on the chin (which readily distinguishes it from the similar though smaller Snowy-crowned species *C. niveicapilla*), otherwise the underparts are orange-rufous. *Cossypha a. giffardi*, found from southern Burkino Faso to Ghana and Nigeria eastwards to north-western Cameroon, has a mainly black crown and nape with scale-like white edges to the feathers. A third, isolated, eastern subspecies *C. a. omoensis*, restricted to south-eastern Sudan and south-western Ethiopia, is also described as having scale-like white edges to the feathers of the crown and nape.

The White-crowned Robin-Chat inhabits the belt of savannah stretching across Africa from Senegal and The Gambia to northern Nigeria, Cameroon and beyond. It lives in dense thickets, gallery forest (bordering rivers, streams and swamps) and large overgrown gardens. It forages mostly among leaf litter on the ground, looking mainly for insects. It is shy and is more often heard than seen.

It has a melodious song (like that of the Blackbird *Turdus merula*), but also a harsh, monosyllabic call.

The nest is described as a slight cup of rootlets and leaves placed low down in a hollow in the top of a small tree stump. Two to three eggs are laid, which have been described as pale grey green, profusely blotched and spotted with reddish brown and ashy violet. However, those laid by my birds were a deep red, what I would call maroon, in colour.

I currently have five White-crowned Robin-Chats, three males and two females, from which I have formed two pairs. I originally purchased two pairs in 2009 from a well-known birdkeeper in north-east England, who had bred them in the past, but found that they kept throwing the chicks out of the nest. I later picked up an additional male from a birdkeeping friend from Liverpool who gave it to me because he had recently lost the female. He

told me that the male had been singing and pursuing the female for several weeks and attempting to mate with her, then one morning he found her dead, possibly exhausted by the constant attention of the male.

I decided to pair the male I had obtained from Liverpool with one of the females from the original two pairs. The previous owner had told me that one of the males was more prolific than the other, so I chose him. I placed this pair and the remaining original pair in 10ft x 4ft x 6ft high (approx. 3m x 1.2m x 1.8m high) aviaries at opposite ends of the garden. If the two pairs were housed too close to each other, they would constantly cling to the wire and call. The male's constant whistles could at times become annoying, especially as they began at 5.00am each morning.

In each of the aviaries I fixed up small, finch-type half-open-fronted nest boxes, as the previous owner said they would not entertain larger boxes. I suppose the smaller boxes must give them a greater feeling of confidence and security. I then placed coconut fibre, straw and animal hair in a basket in each aviary and left them to help themselves. A few weeks later, in April 2010, I noticed that some of the nesting material had been placed in a water dish. I looked in both nest boxes and found that a nest was beginning to take shape in the smaller of the two boxes. It seemed very strange that they should choose such a small box. A week later the nest was completed, but I was concerned that there was no material at the bottom of the nest. I pushed a small bunch of fibres down into the nest, but this was removed as soon as I turned my back on them. Thereafter, I left them alone.

I wanted to ensure that during the first few weeks of their lives the chicks developed strong legs and were able to grip properly. Those bred in the past by the previous owner had problems with rickets and splayed legs, but this could have been due to a lack of calcium in their diet and the absence of a multivitamin supplement.

The female sat on the clutch of three eggs - which was one more than had been laid in the past - for about 14 days. That day I noticed eggshells on the floor, having three days earlier began providing extra livefood in case the chicks hatched earlier. I provided lots of small/medium brown crickets which I hoped the pair would feed to the chicks.

When I inspected the nest I found it contained two chicks and the remaining egg which was beginning to chip. When I returned at 9.00pm (21.00hrs) the two chicks and the egg were on the floor. There was no sign of blood and the chicks appeared uninjured and, strangely, looked to have been deliberately placed side by side on the floor. I placed them back in the nest in the hope that the birds would return to them, but when I checked early the following morning, they were back on the floor - only this time the chicks were dead - they had been battered and were covered with blood.



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