



Pekin Robin Care

The Pekin Robin *Leiothrix lutea* was for many years a regularly imported and therefore common cage bird. Originating in China and south-east Asia it is also known as the Japanese Nightingale, Chinese Nightingale, Pekin and Red-billed Nightingale, all these names are rather confusing as it is neither a Robin nor a true Nightingale - it is a small Babbler. Now that the importation of them is banned, they have become more scarce and therefore have increased greatly in value. This has encouraged keepers to concentrate on breeding them.

Pekin Robins are quite easy to maintain in an aviary, but breeding is much more difficult. They are a delight in a spacious, planted flight. Mine was rather small at 8'x4'x6' tall. This had wooden sides and a wire netting front and roof, which was covered with plastic sheeting. They are good mixers, always curious and on the move. The cock has a charming song and this is surprisingly loud, but your neighbours will definitely not complain. They are not usually aggressive (although they have always had the reputation of being a nest robber), so one pair **could** be kept in a mixed flight of finches. Over the years Zebra Finches, Red-eared Waxbills, Bengalese and Red-billed Quelea all lived with mine in complete harmony, although not all at the same time. All these pairs did suffer from losses of eggs and the odd chick, but the Chinese Painted and Japanese Quail that I housed with them were unaffected, presumably due to their larger size.

Pekin Robins are very quick and fearless of their keeper, so you have to keep an eye on them when entering the aviary. Many is the time that I have had one that has escaped into the adjoining shed and had to be chased around as it searched for the odd spider or escaped Mealworm. They become quite tame, if bribed with livefood, and will soon learn to perch on your hand on the expectation of a titbit (very much like our European Robin).

The standard fare for Pekin Robins in captivity comprises a proprietary softbill food containing lots of dried insects. It is essential that this is accompanied with a wide range of ripe, sweet fruit and livefood. Grapes, Bananas, Orange and soft sweet Apple were the usual fruits supplied, but if other soft fruits were available, then these were fed. Banana always seemed to go bad quite quickly and this generated clouds of Fruitflies. These were appreciated by the Zosterops I also kept in the adjoining enclosure. As well as providing a constant supply of clean, fresh water I always added a small drinker of an artificial nectar that I made for my Lorikeets. They are also likely to have taken some of the eggfood originally intended for the finches in the flight. As with anything new, all foods given would be investigated and tried.

Breeding is not easily accomplished successfully. Sexes are alike, but as stated earlier the Cock has a sweet song, which the Hen does not have. Pekins will readily build nests and will utilise Canary pans or nest boxes to contain them, but will build in the planting. The 3 to 4 pale blue-green speckled eggs, if fertile, will hatch in 12-13 days. This is where the problem starts. Pekin Robins are heavily insectivorous, at least for the first few days after hatching, and you will need to supply masses of insects for them. Mealworms are a readily available source of this livefood, but wild caught spiders etc will give them variety. It is not unknown for a pair of Pekins with a nest of chicks to polish off 300+ mealworms each day. These should be fed regularly throughout the day to provide a continuous supply. A vitamin and mineral supplement could be fed to the mealworms to increase their nutritional value. Also some breeders dust a little of this directly onto the livefood. Calcium seems to be specifically important to success with Pekin Robins and several breeders have noted this.

As the chicks get older the parents may take some moistened eggfood and also start to include the fruit and insect mix from their normal diet. One time I was advised to provide a dog puppy pellet in the diet for my softbills. This was softened with water or nectar and many of the birds did very well, especially the Japanese Waxwings. However, these pellets did not agree with the very young chicks and they did not grow sufficiently well and were abandoned. If you are fortunate enough to hatch chicks then correct feeding is the key to success.

Young Pekin Robins grow up quickly and you may find that they fledge earlier than you would expect, at 10 -14 days, in fact they may hardly be feathered at this stage. This may be some predator avoidance mechanism that is instinctive, but it does give the birdkeeper a lot of worry. They become independent at approx 6 weeks of age. As with many birds young left with the parents may discourage further breeding activity, so removing them to their own accommodation to mature is advisable.