



## Touracos

Touracos (Turacos) are a unique group of about 20 different species of large softbills that are popular among aviculturists. Touracos are named after the red pigment, Turacin, that occurs in the wing feathers of a number of the species. This pigment supposedly can be washed out, for example in a rain shower. These red feathers are most visible when the birds are in flight. These species usually have a green or purple colouring to the rest of the feathers. The Touracos that do not display this colouring in the wings are generally grey or blue. The grey birds are called Plantain-eaters and Go-away birds. A plantain is a relative of the banana that grows wild in Africa. Touracos eat more than just plantains, yet some species still get it attached to their name. All are frugivorous (fruit-eating) birds from all across the African continent.

These are large birds, and are highly active. Touracos tails are long and square at the end. Most species have some form of crest on their heads, this can vary from what can only be described as small colourful “Mohawks”, to long lacy-looking ornaments.

The call of most Touracos is not entirely unpleasant, but it is loud and they tend to start calling just before daybreak. This makes them decidedly unpopular with near neighbours.

A truly unique feature among the Touracos is the outer toe of each foot. Birds toe arrangement is either 2 in front, 2 in back or 3 in front, 1 in back. Touracos outer toe has the ability to swivel front and back. The result is an amazing ability to run along branches. Touracos are not powerful flyers. They tend to jump and flap a couple of times. Once in the trees, Touracos move quite clumsily.

Touracos can be divided into four groups, the Great Blue, the purple, the green, and the gray. The Great Blue Turaco is in a group by itself. In the wild it resides in the rainforests. This has never been common in captivity, mainly being restricted to zoos and birdgardens.

The “purple group” contains four species of predominantly purple colouration. The Violet and Lady Ross’s Touracos are the two species from the purple group more commonly found in captivity. The purple Touracos inhabit the rainforest and woodlands of Africa.

There are 20 different species of Touracos in the “green group”. The prevalent colouration is green, but that varies from lime green to shiny, dark emerald green. The green Touracos are found from the rainforest to the open forest of Africa. This crest can be tipped in varying colours and the shapes vary too.

“Gray Touracos” are savannah, thorn scrub and open woodland species. Three of the species are called Go-Away birds because their alarm calls sounds similar to someone saying “Go Away Go Away”. The five species of gray Touracos are the least colourful, being various mixes of blacks, grays, and whites.

The diet of the Touracos is mainly a variety of chopped fruit mixed with softbill pellets and sprinkled with vitamins and calcium. The birds stay in great health and reproduce readily on this diet. Live food is rarely taken, even when they have chicks. Green leafy foods are eagerly accepted.

The nests are simple structures of short twigs. In captivity the provision of baskets help with the strength of the nest and are readily accepted. Two eggs are the normal clutch. Touracos make wonderful parents. The gray Touracos tend to be slightly more delicate than the others.

When catching these birds, they quickly begin to pant and show signs of stress. Because of this and their highly active nature, Touracos are not suitable for cages. They require lots of space to move around. They are infrequently shown due to the size of the show cage they would require.

Touracos are best kept as individual pairs. Even males of different species will fight and so cannot be housed together. Touracos can be kept with other species of birds, though. Large softbills, such as Azure-winged Magpies can be kept with them perfectly well. Whilst not directly “attacked”, the smaller softbills and finches appear to be nervous of the Touracos movements and breeding suffers.

Anyone with the space, no near neighbours, and the time to chop fruit, will definitely find them a delight.