



Speckled Mousebirds by Ray Sherlock

Speckled Mousebirds – *Colius striatus* – are native to South Africa. Their habitat is forest edges and clearings and also parks and gardens in towns. They are rather drab, but very entertaining birds. The sexes are alike making buying true pairs difficult. They are fruit eaters and also eat some green food and livefood in the wild.

Mousebirds (there are several species in the family) are so called because of their habit of scurrying through the undergrowth. They have pampodactyl feet, which means that they can point all four toes forward. They are not very strong fliers, preferring to run along perches or aviary wire. They can perch normally, but prefer to hang from perches with splayed legs. At night they roost together in a tight ball, hanging from a favourite perch with heads up. With feathers fluffed up to keep warm, it is difficult to know how many there are in the group.

The first pair that I bred from were bought from a dealer in 2002. The dealer did not know if they were a true pair, but I bought them anyway as they were in such good condition. The birds were put into an indoor flight measuring 8ft long, 3ft wide and 8ft high. The birdroom where it is situated is heated to 65 C by an electric oil filled radiator. Lights are on from midday from midnight and work on a dimmer.

I have covered the walls and ceilings in the birdroom with white plastic cladding and the floors are tiled making cleaning very easy. The floors of the flights are filled with a wood-based cat litter, Mousebirds are very messy birds. I also keep Lorikeets and cat litter is the best floor covering that I've found. The birds also have access to an outside planted flight measuring 4ft long, 3ft wide and 6ft high. They dislike cold, damp weather and will sunbathe at every opportunity – mostly first thing in the morning to get warm.

I placed two open fronted boxes in the inside flight and placed a small amount of hay in each. I never saw the birds go near them, so I also placed a ceramic Canary nest pan 7ft high on the front wall of the aviary. I supplied more hay, Coconut fibre and Canary nesting material. I didn't see any nestbuilding or even see the birds carrying any material.

On the 1st November I noticed a twig sticking out of the nest pan. The only way I could inspect the nest was with a dental mirror. There was a single white egg in the nest. Two more eggs followed each laid two days apart. Both parents incubated day and night. /each time they went back to incubate they added nesting material around the edge of the nest and each time they left some material would fall out. One egg was thrown out of the nest and contained a fully-formed chick on the verge of hatching. Sadly, the chick died.

The first egg hatched on the 15th and the second on the following day. The chicks hatch blind and are grey in colour sparsely covered in grey down. For the first few days they resemble baby mice. The chicks have a very bright yellow tongue, which is visible when the chicks gape. Both parents fed the chicks on a great variety of fruit including sweet apple, banana, grape, pawpaw (papaya), mango, blackberry, elderberry, Sharon fruit, hawthorn, nectarines, peaches and anything else I could get my hands on. Haiths softbill food was eaten in large quantities, but all live food was ignored.

The chicks grew rapidly and both left the nest at 10 days old. They resemble the parents, except for their shorter crest and tail, darker bill and they are approximately half the size of an adult bird. The chicks couldn't fly, but ran up and down the aviary wire. Both were back in the nest each night. The parents continued to brood the chicks for a few nights. The adults were very vocal whenever I entered the bird room and would fly into the outside flight, calling the youngsters to join them. The young birds had no problem going through the bobhole into either flight. The next two rounds of eggs were all dead-in-shell, I think that this was due to interference from the two youngsters. They have now been moved to another aviary and the adults are now incubating again.

My Mousebirds have never bathed in water, as they prefer to dust bathe. I provide a shallow bowl filled with a mixture of play sand from a garden centre sold for children's sand pits and some peat. They never bathe together as a group – at least never more than two at once. Fresh drinking water is provided a couple of times a day as it soon gets soiled with fruit and droppings. Mousebird droppings are loose and end up everywhere. You must be prepared to clean the flights regularly. Mousebirds don't have down feathers and dislike wet weather, so must be protected from the worst of the British weather. In the wild, Mousebirds have been found dead hanging from a perch after a downpour. The birds get soaked and die from hypothermia.

In the USA Mousebirds are very popular and hand-reared birds make excellent pets. They are very playful and love human company. See the article by Jason Crean in Summer 2010 edition of "Foreign Birds" to find out more.