



Silverbills

There are 3 species of bird known as Silverbills – they are a type of Munia or Mannikin. There is the African Silverbill (*Lonchura cantans*), the Indian Silverbill (*Lonchura malabarica*) and the Pearl-headed Silverbill (*Lonchura griseicapilla*). This care sheet is primarily dealing with the African *Cantans*, but most of the advice is applicable to the Indian *malabarica* species. The Pearl-headed, sometimes known as the Grey-headed, is a more difficult species (in our experience) and ideally should not be kept by beginners.

The African Silverbill is found in west and central Africa where it is relatively common. This species was formerly imported into Europe in very large numbers. Since the import ban the breeding of this species has become more important to maintain the species in captivity.

African Silverbill is an adaptable, fairly easy-to-breed species. In recent years a number of colour variants have started to appear, the most often bred being the Chocolate. These variants are no more difficult to care for than the normal “wildtype”, although the breeders of these usually prefer cage breeding. The African Silverbill has many advantages for the beginner to birdkeeping. They are relatively easy to source and do not cost as much as some of the Munias. It is hardy and can withstand a reasonable range of temperatures. Personally, I would always give them access to dry, draughtproof housing during the colder months. It lives happily with other small seedeaters, but could be bullied by larger species. Several birdkeepers now consider the African Silverbill to be a semi-domesticated species and use them to foster the eggs of other species. Fostering is the incubating the eggs of other bird species and rearing the young as their own. This method is used to increase the numbers of species that are more easily disturbed affecting their breeding success.

African Silverbills are small birds approximately 4” – 4 ½” (10-12cm). Sexes are very much alike – any variations in plumage cannot be relied upon to be accurate in determining gender. The head is creamy-brown, with a body that is more yellowy brown. The wings are dark brown, the rump and tail are almost black. The belly is pale cream or buff. As you can probably tell by it’s name, the beak (or bill) is silvery grey. Legs are dull pink. Cocks will display in the breeding season, this being a little dance, whilst singing a quiet, but pleasant song. The only sure way to sex a hen is by waiting for it to lay eggs!

African Silverbills are essentially seedeaters. A quality canary seed and mixed millets (sometimes described as foreign finch mix) form the basic diet. Millet sprays are also relished and washed green food (Dandelion leaf is ideal), oystershell grit and cuttlefish bone should be provided. When breeding they will relish a little livefood in the form of mini-mealworms or waxworms. I also increase the protein levels of the diet by supplying a little moistened eggfood sprinkled with a mineral supplement. Soaked and/or sprouted seed is better than dry seed during the breeding season. Be careful that soaked seed does not become sour and is changed daily.

The African Silverbill has a very peaceful nature and breeds happily among other species of small birds, such as waxbills, in a mixed collection. There will be little or no disruption caused by the Silverbills. Be careful when housing them with either of the other Silverbill species or other Munias, such as Bengalese or Spice Birds, as they will hybridise. This is to be avoided, especially if you intend to show the youngsters, as many shows no longer have classes for hybrids.

When nesting the birds use soft materials such as coconut fibre, mosses, soft grasses and feathers, constructing a narrow tube-like entrance. This bird may sometimes develop the unfortunate habit layering nests. The bird constructs a nest, lays eggs and then immediately makes another nest on top. Four eggs form the normal clutch and the incubation period is 12 days. Youngster’s will fledge when 2-3 weeks old and be independent enough to be removed after a further 4 weeks.

It is quite possible for one pair of both Indian and African Silverbills to rear 20+ young ones in one season. The group may all be left together to form a colony and true pairs may be identified with split plastic rings. Several pairs often nest at the same time and may help each other while feeding the chicks, once they are all out on the perches. Indeed they have been observed feeding chicks from other species – it would appear that the urge to feed their chicks means that any gaping beak will be satisfied.