



## The care of Zosterops in captivity

Zosterops are a family of Asian and, to a lesser extent, African birds resembling Warblers in both their looks and in some of their habits. The most common Zosterops, or White-eye as they are sometimes known, that has been kept in aviculture is the Indian or Oriental Zosterop – *Zosterops palpebrosa*.

As the name suggests, Oriental Zosterops are found in the Indian subcontinent eastwards all the way through Southeast Asia to the Islands of Sumbawa & Flores in Indonesia. The Indian Zosterop is one of the smaller species in the family being about 4” (10 cm). The upper body is bright green, black eye with the white eye-rings that are the common feature in all the species, the throat is yellow, belly is grey-white, bill and legs are also grey-white. Sexes are alike. Young birds are greener and duller in coloration than adults. African Zosterop species, such as the Kikuyu Zosterop, tend to be larger and more rounded than the Asian species.

Many hundreds, if not thousands, of Oriental Zosterops were imported each year and were always recommended as a good softbill for novices to start with. Despite their appearance, they are quite straightforward to feed and are quite hardy. They require a good dry, draughtproof, frost-free shelter to house them and they will be happy. The food should be fed inside the shelter to protect it from the elements. They can be safely mixed with birds ranging in size from the smallest waxbills to Pekin Robins. They are readily tamed and will soon take mealworms from the hand of their owner. However, Zosterops are not easy to breed and with the current ban on importations of birds into the EU, any Zosterops in captivity should be kept by those who have the experience to encourage them to breed. Therefore the advice that these are beginner’s birds is no longer valid.

Zosterops should be offered a very varied diet that includes apples, pears and other soft fruits and berries, a good quality universal food, small live food and nectar. There are many commercial brands of nectar available nowadays. Formerly, birdkeepers would make up their own mix of dried baby food, granulated sugar, bee pollen and honey dissolved in hot water and allowed to cool. I used to provide a little spongecake, or jam Swiss Roll, over which I poured a little of the nectar mix. The nectar mix should be fed at least twice a day in hot weather to avoid it going bad. All food should be replenished everyday and any that is uneaten should be thrown away. Clean, fresh water should be available to them, even though you are providing nectar.

If conditions are right, which as previously stated is not straightforward to achieve, Indian Zosterops make good parents. Since these birds are difficult to sex, try to keep several in the aviary and a pair should become evident. They will build their own nest which is a shallow and cup-shaped in shrubs planted in the aviary. The normal clutch is of 2-4 pale, bluish eggs, incubation time is 12-14 days. Both sexes incubate the eggs, and if everything goes to plan, the young leave the nest after about 12 days. Plenty of live insects are needed to rear a nest of chicks, including greenfly, black fly and spiders. Encouraging fruitflies to breed in the aviary will help with livefood provision. A bucket, covered in aviary mesh, containing waste fruit and banana skins will usually be sufficient to provide the conditions for fruitfly breeding - if the temperature is high enough. If mealworms are fed you will notice that Zosterops will bang the heads of the mealworms against the perches before swallowing. Whether they are killing them or just stunning them I’m not sure, but it is interesting to watch.

Many countries, especially Vietnam, have a history of keeping Zosterops specifically as song-birds and there are regularly large competitions held in the big cities. Big prizes are awarded – even things such as fridges and washing machines – to the winners. The birds are kept in intricate and delicate looking Bamboo cages with porcelain feeding pots attached to them. These cages are very small and the birds are kept singly – their only interaction with other birds are at these singing competitions. Very few, if any of these, will have been bred in captivity. With the bird-flu concerns many countries in Asia now ban the capture and sale of cage birds, but in our experience this is not enforced.