

Old World Flycatchers



This fact sheet gives an overview on keeping Old World Flycatchers.

Flycatchers are becoming more and more popular within aviculture. With many

different live foods easily available and universal soft foods, we now have more opportunity to settle birds into an aviary properly and hopefully allow them to breed.

The flycatchers form a large and important group of birds from all over the world. This fact sheet looks in particular at the so-called "Old World Flycatchers". The old world referred to geographically, covers Africa, Asia and Australia, where-in 328 species of flycatcher can be divided into three groups, the "Typical Flycatchers", "Monarch Flycatchers" and the "Fantailed Flycatchers". The "Typical Flycatchers" which also includes the species that are found in Europe, show the characteristic of "hawking its prey", sitting on a perch waiting for an insect to pass. The bird will then launch itself at the insect, and take it in mid air in its beak and then return to the same perch to dine. The hunting flight is quick and very successful. Its path sometimes looking like a figure of eight or circular motion.

Feeding flycatchers has always been difficult with freshly imported specimens. Some species dislike coming down onto the ground to find food. So care should be taken to ensure that food is well off of the ground, perhaps on a small shelf. As well as taking mealworms, waxmoth larvae, crickets and ant's eggs and a good quality universal soft food, it is beneficial to provide a constant supply of flies that can be taken in mid air.

During most of the year it is possible to purchase small quantities of maggots from a local fishing shop, these should be thoroughly cleaned before offering to the birds. The easiest method to achieve this is to allow the maggots to eat and run through bran for a couple of days. They can then be allowed to pupate in a specially constructed box. Very simply the box is made of plastic and is approximately 6 inches square, with small air holes in the sides, but not large enough for the emerging flies to escape through. The lid should be fairly tight. In the centre of the lid cut a small hole, to take a clear plastic tube about ½" in diameter. The principle behind this box is to allow the maggots to complete their metamorphosis into flies, and then for the flies to emerge from the box up the clear tube, where the bird can see and hunt the fly, as it takes off on its first and last flight.

The flycatchers obviously like to take the flies on the wing, but quite often other occupants of the aviary soon twig the new source of food and spend hours waiting for "lunchtime". Two words of warning though, firstly do not buy too many maggots at a time—a little and often. Find someone who goes fishing regularly and ask them for a few tablespoons. Secondly, ensure that the maggots are cleaned properly before they pupate so that no disease can be spread.

An alternative to maggots is fruit flies. Allowing fruit to rot down in a small

container will soon attract fruit flies to lay their small eggs on the fruit. Care should be taken to ensure that the fruit fly culture does not become too wet, as when the fruit rots it will produce a lot of liquid. Flycatchers, nectar feeders and many other soft-bills will often gorge themselves on either the eggs or the emerging flies.

All flycatchers like to bathe regularly. If given the opportunity they love to bathe under running water, waterfalls etc., so clean water should be available at all times.

Breeding flycatchers poses a great challenge to anyone breeding softbills. This is mainly due to the amount and types of insect that a breeding pair will need to raise a family. Small flies and larvae are needed for the first couple of days after the chicks hatch. Small insects such as green-fly or black-fly are eagerly taken, but other larger insects such as waxmoth larvae, ants, ants eggs, small brown crickets and mini mealworms should also be available at all times. Some breeders have been successful with pieces of ox heart or pinkie mice finely sliced.

Most species of flycatchers kept in large flights, usually become very tame towards their keepers. Some birds, usually cocks, will eagerly take a waxmoth larvae held in the fingers as a treat.

The **Blue-Throated Flycatcher** (*Cyornis rubeculoides*) likes to live amongst the forest undergrowth of the Himalayas through S E Asia to China. As a flycatcher its hunting habits differ from the main species of the family. Quite often after pouncing on its quarry it will not return to the same perch that it has just left, preferring instead to find the nearest perch to consume its catch. They are also well known for hunting on the floor, hoping to flush insects into an open space, where its ambush will be easier. Nests are usually found in small hollows amongst mossy banks or in a rock crevice. They have even been known to use nests deserted by other species. The hen will lay 3-5 eggs and incubation, which is completed by both birds, usually lasts for 11-12 days.

The **Verditer Flycatcher** (*Muscicapa (Eumyias) thalassina*) is readily available most of the time. It is also a good species of flycatcher for the beginner to start with. At approximately 6½" in length the cock bird is blue-green in overall colour, with a small patch of black at the base of the top beak. The hen is the same size and colour as the cock bird, but is slightly duller and greyer. They like to build a cup shaped nest, constructed of moss, bamboo leaves and small rootlets.

The **Japanese Blue and White Flycatcher** (*Cyanoptila cyanomenlana*) lives in

the wooded areas and mountain regions of N E and E Asia, including Manchuria, W China and Japan. It migrates through E and S China to its winter quarters in Vietnam, Malaya, Thailand and Hong Kong. The cock birds of this species are considered to be fine singers, pouring out their song throughout the breeding season. Again, a cup shaped nest is constructed using mosses, small leaves and bamboo leaves.

The **Narcissus Flycatcher** (*Ficedula narcissina*) is not available very often. It is known to be very difficult to keep alive, and so only experienced aviculturists should keep them. They come from E Asia, and are a brightly coloured member of the flycatcher family which breeds in China, Korea and Japan and then for winter migrates to the Philippines and the E Indies. It is well known for its melodical song. Both sexes are alike in overall colour but the female has a greener back, and less white on the wings.

The **Slaty Blue Flycatcher** (*Ficedula tricolor*) is sometimes confused with the Snowy-Browed Flycatcher (*Ficedula hyperythra*), but in fact is quite easily distinguishable because it lacks the white above the eye. They like to move amongst thickets and grass scrub, searching for their prey, and are mainly found amongst the coniferous forest of Kashmir to S W China.

The **Rufous Gorgeted Flycatcher** (*Ficedula strophciata*) is sometimes called the Orange-Gorgeted Flycatcher, and comes from central and S China and Tibet. They can be found in evergreen mountain forest and live up to a height of 10,000ft. They do not migrate in winter but prefer to move down to the foothill where they can find plenty of insects to over winter.

Successful breeding of all types of flycatcher are still few and far between. This is a challenge that many experienced breeders should take up and soon!!

This fact sheet has been produced for:
The NCA —Spring Gardens, Northampton NN1 1DR
www.nca.uk.net