

Barbets—”The Ugly Ducklings of the  
Bird World”



This fact sheet gives an overview on keeping Barbets.



Barbets are often portrayed as difficult subjects for bird keeping. They are often regarded as uninteresting, ugly and aggressive. With their powerful large beaks surrounded with bristles, they will often attack larger birds than themselves and kill them. With this in mind they are not suitable for mixed collections. They have a unique charm and character of their own, and when kept as aviary birds will often become quite bold and take tit-bits from their keepers. From their anatomy, taxonomists are able to deduce that they are probably closely related to Honeyguides, Puffbirds and Toucans. With their large head, thick necks and large oversized beaks, relative in size to the body, they have the ability to inflict a nasty wound on their owner. They like to be accommodated in planted aviaries, moving amongst the bushes and shrubs searching for small insects and other tasty morsels.

All 72 members of the family are cavity nesters, either digging nesting cavities directly into the ground, soil banks, rotted trees or even termite mounds. Barbet species that are known to nest underground often use the same sites for many years, just enlarging the tunnels and forming a new nesting chamber when ready to breed. Extra "rear" or "escape" exits have also been noted in several cases. Species such as the D'Arnauds Barbet (*Trachyphonus darnaudii*) from Sudan or Tanzania like to burrow into the aviary floor, so when housing these and associate species care should be taken that they are not able to burrow out of the aviary.

Nest boxes can be provided for most of the species and are also used to sleep in. Hollow logs prove to be the most popular; especially Silver Birch or Weeping Willow. Barbets like to hollow their own nesting or sleeping chambers, so just provide the suitable logs and the Barbets do the rest. With the Giant Barbet (*Megalaima virens*), provide a nest box constructed in a similar fashion to a parakeet nest box (45° nest box – constructed using shuttering plywood) approximately 15" long by 6" wide and 6" deep. The entrance hole needs only to be approximately 2" across – the bird will enlarge the hole until it fits snugly through it. Small hollow logs about 10" in length and 3" in diameter, can be used as an entrance hole into the

man made nesting site. These appear to be quite successful and the birds quickly adapt to them. In the wild, Barbets are known to nest within Termite mounds and soft riverbanks. Barbets like to approach their nesting sites from below, so when using a man-made nest box try putting the entrance hole on the underside of the box as opposed to the side face.

Barbets are not very strong flyers. They have short stubby wings in comparison to their bodies. When housing any Barbet in an aviary they like to move around their flight hopping from branch to branch. When first imported they can be very delicate but they will acclimatize very quickly given the correct aviary. It is best to provide them with both an indoor heated area and also a well planted outside flight. The smaller Coppersmith and Tinker Barbets are extremely sensitive to the colder weather that we experience in the UK. They are also very susceptible to draughts and damp conditions, so it is best to bring them inside for the winter months.

Feeding all of the Barbet family is quite easy. The main diet consists of fresh fruits such as apple, pears, kiwi, banana, paw-paw and grapes cut into ¼" pieces and mixed with a good quality soft food. In addition most birds will take berries such as Elderberry, Cotoneaster, Hawthorn, Rosehips etc. They also love soaked Raisins, Sultanas, Currants and Dates or Figs. Live food in the form of mealworm, morios, crickets and ants eggs provide a welcome addition to the daily diet of fruit. Some barbets will also take raw meat in the form of mince. When feeding they like to eat fast so often get into a mess around the face and beak. Some birds like to feed and then bathe, so a stainless steel bowl should always be available with ¼" of water allowing the birds to jump straight into the water and clean any mess off of their faces.

Occasionally they will not clean themselves properly, especially around the base of the beak, so keep a close eye on their condition and catch and clean any barbets that have waste food around the nostrils. This also provides a chance to inspect the inside of the powerful beak. Barbets can be susceptible to a yeast type fungus that grows in the mouth, if found it can be easily treated. Consult with

your local avian veterinarian first; treatment is usually via brushing the affected area with an oral solution of "Nystatin".

Very few of the Barbet family have been bred in the UK. If you are lucky enough to get the adult birds to go to nest, additional foods can be offered such as pinkie mice (cut into small pieces), spiders and flying ants are also eagerly taken. A clutch of between 2-4 eggs are laid, which are white in colour. Incubation takes between 13-15 days depending upon the species.

### ***Barbet species:***

The **Coppersmith Barbet** (*Megalaima haemacephala*), from W Pakistan to SW China and across to Sumatra, Java and the Philippines, is a common resident up to 3,000 ft.. It is often found in wooded areas, gardens and cities. Species such as the Coppersmith and the Tinkerbird get their names from the monosyllabic call note that sounds like a metallic clanging which is repeated about 80 times per minute. The Coppersmith call note in particular sounds like a small hammer tapping on metal. Usually the hotter the day the more the bird will sing.

The **Yellow-Crowned Barbet** (*Megalaima henrici*) inhabits the forests of Thailand, Malaysia, Borneo and Sumatra and is a resident up to 2,500 feet above sea level. This species is not available very often. Both sexes are alike. Immature juvenile birds are duller in colour and can take up to 12 months to achieve the bright yellow crown on the top of the head.

The **Lineated Barbet** (*Megalaima lineata*) can be found from the Himalayas to Malaysia, Indo-China, Java and Bali. At 11½" in length it is not often visible in its wild environment, the streaked plumage helping to camouflage it.

The **Giant Barbet** also referred to as the "Great Barbet" (*Megalaima virens*) has 4 sub-species (the sub-species show very little differences

in colouring). At 13" in length it is the largest of the 72 species of Barbet. It ranges from Kashmir to S China and is a resident of forests and woodland at heights of 3,000 to 8,000 feet above sea level. The species is usually available within aviculture in *Megalaima virens marshallorum*, also referred to as the Himalayan Giant Barbet.

Six races of **Pied Barbet** (*Tricholaema leucomelas*) have been recorded, with very little difference in colouration being visible. The species comes from Zimbabwe, Botswana and S Africa. Despite their attractive small size (approximately 6") they should not be kept with any other birds. They have been known to attack birds at least twice their size and inflict quite severe wounds.

The **Red and Yellow Barbet** (*Trachyphonus erythrocephalus*) is to be found on the grasslands and bushy areas of E Ethiopia to Tanzania and is a ground loving species. As with some other African Barbet species, although quite aggressive towards other birds, they can be quite gregarious in nature. The previous years chicks often become nest helpers, assisting the parents to rear the current years chicks. They are known to feed together in groups of up to 10 birds and defend their nests against predators such as snakes, "mob-handed". A dominant pair forms the heart of the group with all other birds forming communal help.

Also called the "Groove Billed Barbet", the **Bearded Barbet** (*Lybius dubius*) is a W African species that is found in Senegambia to Chad. It usually lives in pairs and excavates a nesting chamber in a dead branch of a tree. The female lays 3-4 white eggs and both parents share the nesting duties. This species can be sexed by the small spots on their flanks under the wings. Quite simply, cock birds have small spots and hens do not.

Sexes of the **Fire Tufted Barbet** (*Psilopogon pyrolophus*) are alike. It is a common resident of the forests of Malaysia and Sumatra. This species appears to be sensitive to cold and damp conditions, therefore when keeping them a heated and draft free winter quarters must also be provided. This species has been kept in the past within mixed

collection of Touracos, Fruit Doves and Glossy Starlings.

The **Black Spotted Barbet** (*Capito niger*) from South America is not very often available. This species is easily sexed—the cock birds crown and under parts are yellow in colour, paling towards the belly with black spotted flanks. The hen bird is similar but the belly and under parts are also heavily spotted. The yellow colour can fade when kept in captivity. A first recorded breeding of this species was made in the UK at Winged World in 1971. This species constructed a tunnel leading to a larger nesting chamber. A nestling period of 34 days was recorded for this species.

This fact sheet has been produced for:  
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