

COLOUR FEEDING AND NUTRITION FOR SOFTBILLS

Colin Rich is one of the principals of a company known as Passwell which manufactures a range of products for use by aviculturists. He defined softbills as any bird which eats insects.

To conduct their research, Passwell set up a group of 6m x 10m planted aviaries. The plants provide some food for the birds together with some nesting material. Located in the Adelaide Hills, plants in the aviaries grow well and need to be trimmed back regularly. Because the birds needed to be caught regularly during the trials, trap feeding stations were built into each aviary. Using permits granted by National Parks, the company was able to trap wild birds to use in the trials.

The birds were placed into cabinets while they were familiarized with the artificial diet which would form the basis of their food during their time in captivity. The birds were encouraged to take the new diet by placing chopped up mealworms in the food. Over a period of time, generally 2 to 6 weeks, the amount of mealworms was gradually reduced. Once released into the aviary the birds were fed on a diet of soft food and nectar which contained various levels of carotenoids. Chats and robins, in particular, need a high protein diet.

Colin stated that keeping the birds alive was not a problem; keeping the colour was. In most cases, colour can be preserved by feeding the correct level of carotenoids.

Crimson chats have what is known as an eclipse plumage – that is to say, after the moult, the birds will display a duller plumage. As they come into breeding condition, they colour up. It is suspected that this colouring indicates to a mate that they are ready to breed.

In the wild birds generally eat the adult stage insects, not the pupae, maggot and larval stages which are commonly fed to birds kept in captivity. It may be for this reason that birds lose colour. All birds need carotenoids – no carotenoids leads to loss of colour fairly quickly.

As the trials progress, new things are being learnt about birds and there is not likely to be any one answer to the problems which are found with birds kept in captivity.

Based on a talk given by Colin Rich at the UBBSSA Seminar held at the Enfield Community Centre on Sunday 30th May 2004.