

## ALSO FROM THE PAST

When going through some old papers a few days ago I came across a draft article I prepared on the Scarlet Robin dated 19/4/'66. Why it was never finished I don't know. I'm sure the then editor would have welcomed it, because then, as now, original articles were few and far between.

Prior to the 1972 National Parks & Wildlife Act many species of softbilled birds were kept, the Scarlet Robin being one of the more colourful and confiding. In those days the Scarlet Robin was one of the most common birds to be found in the Adelaide Hills. They would be seen sitting on a fence or post watching intently for insects, thinking back there almost seemed to be one every few hundred metres. Alas, this is not the case today. Urban encroachment and the use of pesticides that thin egg shells (causing breakages) have drastically reduced the numbers seen today.

It should be remembered the following article was based on my experiences over forty years ago; and that nutritional advances since then have greatly simplified the feeding, and colour retention, of softbilled birds.

### SCARLET ROBINS IN THE AVIARY

] By Richard Chilton

The Scarlet Robin (*Petroica multicolour*), the robin commonly seen in the Adelaide Hills, is an excellent aviary bird, combining an attractive plumage with inoffensive habits.



Male Scarlet Robin

The male is black on the throat, head, back and tail. Above the beak between the eyes is a white patch, which accounts for the sometimes used alternative name of White-capped Robin. The flights are white, shading to grey at the extremities. A rich orange-red covers the breast, while the abdomen and under-tail are greyish-white. The legs, feet, eyes and beak are black. In flight the most conspicuous feature is the white of the wings contrasting with the black of the back. By contrast the hen is a sombre bird indeed. The black areas of the male are replaced by a soft grey, the white by off-white and the bright breast by pale orange. The beak, feet and legs are steel-grey; eyes black. Both sexes are identical in size, being 5 inches (12.7cm) from the tip of the beak to the tip of the tail.

Unfortunately, Scarlet Robins lose the scarlet breast at their first captive moult, and replace it with orange. This is, no doubt, due to the lack of some essential ingredient in the foods we feed. [There are now food additives available to overcome this problem in those species prone to colour fading in captivity, I assume the Scarlet Robin would respond to such an additive. R.V.C.]

The distribution of the species is from eastern Queensland, through eastern New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia to Kangaroo Island and the Eyre Peninsula. It is also found in Tasmania, south-western West Australia, Norfolk

Island and several other South Pacific islands. It is a bird of the better coastal country rather than the inland; and is usually found, in pairs, in open forest country where they mainly take their food on the ground.

Scarlet Robins mix well with even the smallest of finches, taking no malicious interest in any other species, even those with a large proportion of red in their plumage. [I've kept them with Mistletoe Birds, Red-faced Parrotfinches, Fire Finches, *etc.* with no problems. R.V.C.] The only exceptions noted being other Australian robins.

They will eat a large variety of live-foods, such as white ants, mealworms, moths, earwigs, and crickets. Their staple aviary food being the white ant. Mealworms are much sought after, but as they can easily become addicted to these and refuse to eat anything else they should only be fed sparingly; two or three a day being the maximum. If too many mealworms are supplied they will soon lose condition, and although they may well live for some months on mealworms alone they will always have a "fluffed-up" appearance and will eventually die. In a well planted aviary much natural live food will be found by the birds, and this no doubt makes a welcome change of fare.

Bathing is a favourite pastime of the Scarlet Robin. Indeed, some individuals bathe so often they never seem to have time to completely dry. They become extremely tame in captivity and will soon perch on your hand to take food. Therefore, it is important to have a double safety door on the aviary as they can easily come out unknowingly perched on your shoulder or back.

[Australian softbills, which in the past were not accorded as much attention as they deserved, are now held in very small numbers; and it is therefore imperative an intensive effort be made to build up the numbers in captivity; as the various State fauna laws virtually preclude the possibility of taking more from the wild.

Softbills require very little in the way of extra care, particularly if you are already feeding live-food to finches. I strongly recommend that anyone having the chance of legally obtaining any of the Australian softbills, should do so and strive to increase the numbers, so these fascinating birds are preserved for future generations of aviculturists. They are an interesting group of birds, that will, I'm sure, give much pleasure. R.V.C.]