

LIVE FOOD FOR AVIARY BIRDS

By Phil DIGNEY

The benefits of live food for aviary birds, as a replication of that aspect of their diet in the wild, cannot be over stated, both in terms of breeding success and contribution to overall and health and vitality of your collection. Live food is considered essential for the successful breeding and raising of a large variety of softbills, such as wrens, honeyeaters robins, finches, quail, dotterels and various other precocial species, and the supplying of such 2-3 times a week outside breeding, and daily during breeding, is often the trigger to induce breeding. The would-be parents associate the increase in variety and availability of live foods as a sign that they will be able to support and raise young successfully. This is a basic dynamic of bird reproduction in the wild. In a poor, dry or excessively aberrant winter/spring very few birds breed, and it is all connected to food availability.

Gents - housefly or blowfly. The housefly gent is a smaller, softer maggot than the rather rubbery blowfly gent and therefore a more desirable and suitable live food for most softbills. They are readily consumed by virtually all aviary birds outside the parrot family, however a couple of finch species, that is Zebras and Gouldians, may be a bit slower to take them than others. Both these finch species are not particularly big live food eaters, however virtually all other finch species, both Australian and foreign, relish such. If introducing as a new food source, some species of softbill may take a few days to indulge although how could one resist a bowl of wriggling maggots, err gents??

Gents survive in the fridge, in bran, for 9-10 days after which they begin to darken and die. If your fridge is running below typical fridge temperature (3 - 5 degrees) then they may begin dying after 6 or so days. They can be held outside the fridge, however will turn into pupae after 2 - 3 days if so. If outside the fridge for more than an hour or so, leave the lid off the plastic container as they will otherwise sweat and leave the bran in an attempt to escape the humidity. A particularly suitable live food for encouraging young quail and other precocial chicks to self feed, as to encourage fledging softbills to wean.

Fly pupae - each pupae is a "soup" of developing fly, and protein level of approx 21% (Soy Musca). Whilst not a wriggling food it is still a live food, and can be fed on its own in a dish or mixed in with insectivore mixes, for finches and all the other bird species mentioned so far. Kept in the fridge they remain alive and viable for 3 weeks, thereafter hatchability declines and they slowly die. It takes the pupae 5 days to emerge as fly, so even if stored at room temp after purchase there is 2 -3 days before they become flies. Some aviculturalists actually hold some out of the fridge and allow them to hatch. Once hatching begins they scatter them around the aviary floor. After hatching the fly cannot actually fly for several hours until their wings unfold, so they are readily chased and pounced upon by softbills, providing them with stimulation and enrichment. Pupae float so are excellent fed in a dish of water for stilts, dotterels, ducks and other water birds. Juicy, high in protein and the outer shell providing roughage, and with long fridge life they are arguably the best live food for the largest variety of aviary birds. Gang Gangs and lorikeets also consume pupae. Fridged below 2 degrees, they will not hatch after 5-6 days, and below zero will die but still remain a nutritious food source when raised to room temperature. They are popular with frog owners, providing frogs with much needed exercise as they have to work harder to nab flies than they do crickets.

Mealworms - these have received quite some bad press as regards nutritional value, however they do not contain the 50-60% fat content often cited. It is more in the order of 25%. An excellent live food for all bird species described here, they should still be fed as part of a broader live food diet as they contain a lot of exoskeleton and are less balanced in nutrition than say the fly. Held in the fridge they remain dormant and alive for up to 6 weeks after which they slowly die. Left out at room temperature they will turn into pupae after 8-12 days, however these are still an excellent live food for birds. Not only taken by virtually all softbills, honey eaters and insect eating birds but also many parrot species.

Crickets - Excellent live food for all described birds. Plenty of roughage, large soft abdomen, they are hard to beat for the raising of quality young wrens, robins and honeyeaters. The cricket tub can be put in the fridge for 10 minutes to slow them down before feeding *out*, or place a perch inside and halfway up a plastic tub such as a milk crate size toy box, and put the crickets in the bottom. They cannot escape but the birds can land inside the box and hawk the crickets, none escaping.

So live food will produce more, and better, young and keep your birds in great health and colour. They really are a must during breeding season to support the raising of hungry chicks. Try it!