

# **AUSTRALIAN DOTTERELS**

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As the Australian or Inland Dotterel (*Peltohyas australis*) is relatively unknown, or at least fairly uncommon as yet in aviculture, a brief introduction may be in order. They are ground birds, closely resembling plovers, having long spindly legs and spending the majority of their time running along in search of insects and small seeds.

My first two birds were acquired in March 1979. They were aviary bred young, not fully coloured and very indistinctly marked. There was no difference in plumage to distinguish sexes, both were fawn all over with brownish/black-mottled markings on backs and wings. They have rounded heads, medium-sized beaks and very large beguiling eyes, a hint to their semi-nocturnal habits. This has never proved any problem in the aviary at any time.

## **Housing**

The dotterels are housed in a well-planted aviary, approximately 23m in length. It contains trees, shrubs and ground covers including clumps of grasses of various types. There is a good deal of open area with ironstone gravel, rocks and some open sandy areas. Seeding grasses are grown in areas around the sprinklers. Although my birds have been housed in the aviary described, their needs could be just as adequately catered for in a smaller and less planted area.

## **Food**

Mealworms are fed once a day, only 5 or 6 per bird, but the majority of their live food they catch for themselves. They like the egg-food mixture used for softbills but also have a dry seed mix made up of chicken crumbles (starter food), pannicum, black rape, niger and maw seed.

## **Behaviour**

Dotterels are an ideal ground bird in a mixed finch aviary. They do not show any aggression, or even indifference, to any other bird. Even king quail breed in with them. They like to flutter around sundown, seldom rising more than a few metres and only traversing 6 or 8 metres, but apart from this rarely fly, even when startled they prefer to freeze. They like a dust bath and also bathe in the pool, just bobbing up and down until their plumage is quite wet. Sprinklers don't hold much attraction other than to run in, snapping up insects disturbed by the spray.

## **Calls**

Australian Dotterels have three main calls :

1. a loud plink or "blip" sounding very like a large drip of water dropping into a bucket of water from a considerable height, often repeated several times to each other as a communication call;

2. a plaintive piping, very soft and used as a more intimate communication; and
3. a warning call towards another member of the group or any intruder near their nest site, a low toned "wook" "wook" "wook".

I have often heard calling on moonlit nights and the birds moving about in the aviary presumably hunting, but they never fly so this nocturnal life has no effect on the other inmates.

### **Habits**

One characteristic habit they have is a stomping up and down of the feet, a nervous gesture, used when they are upset or anxious. Dotterels dig for insects, not with their feet but with their beaks, scratching from side to side in a rapid action, sending dirt or husks out in either direction. They love to sunbake, usually just squatting down and occasionally stretching out a wing or a leg.

### **Progress**

Colouring up takes along time, at least 6 months, The fawn slowly becomes more deep and clear, the dark brown splotchy markings on the back, top of head and wings becomes more distinct. The black collar around the back of the neck, joining in a "Y" on the breast, together with the black eye stripe, took all of the 6 months to fully emerge, Any written information says there is no difference in plumage between sexes but I have noted a widening of the forehead band in some birds. After no breeding results in 3 years I was permitted 2 young from the wild in September 1982. These were young "flappers" or fledglings still unable to fly. They are now 2 years of age and following further failures to breed I had all the birds "Scientifically" sexed at the University of Adelaide using a hormone count on the birds faeces. All were proven to be hens, an explanation for there having been 14 nests - 44 eggs laid - 26 eggs brooded full time.

The birds had built nests, (a scrape in the ground lined with grass and debris in typical quail fashion) laid a full clutch of 3 (sometimes 6??? if two birds involved) alternated the brooding, covered eggs while absent from the nest, sat a full breeding period of 28 days or more, but unfortunately to no avail as not one fertile egg was involved!

In June 1982, 2 further "flappers" were taken from the wild. These too have been successfully reared and acclimatised into the aviary - hopefully one or both will prove to be cock birds and after 5 years of frustration I may at last breed these lovely, peaceful ground-dwellers.

### **Summary**

My personal opinion, even though they have not bred, is that they are ideal ground birds, docile, quiet, non-flighty and completely compatible with everything from the smallest Orange-breasted fledglings to baby quail chicks. Added to this they are easy to cater for foodwise, and accommodation and housing does not seem to worry them as long as there is an adequate area to hunt for food and bath in the dust on a sunny day.

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