

Steere's Babbler

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In the early 1980s several new species of birds appeared on the U.S. and European markets. At that time Taiwan began to export many of its native bird species and among these was Steere's Babbler *Liochichla steerii*. The Steere's Babbler is endemic to Taiwan and is found in the shrubs and undergrowth of thick forests. Its habitat ranges from 3000 ft. to 8200 ft. (900-2500 m). Until recently this species has been quite common but from personal communications with several experts I have learned that it is now rare. This species is no longer exported by Taiwan.

The great majority of the Steere's Babblers that were imported into Europe were obtained by somewhat inexperienced aviculturists, mainly because they liked the bird. Being from Taiwan, the species is rather hardy. Most of the imported birds were housed in mixed aviaries where breeding was not expected. A few experi-

enced softbill aviculturists, however, kept these birds alone in large, well planted outdoor aviaries. Under these conditions successful breeding proved to be not too difficult. Because so few imported Steere's Babblers survived, and breeding successes occurred in so few collections, the total population of this species in Europe is very small and is now threatened in its captive population. The only way to save this species is to begin a serious breeding program for it.

It is my understanding that there is an existing breeding program for this babbler in the United States. Perhaps it would be beneficial for the U.S. breeders to be informed of the experiences of a Dutch breeder who has had good breeding success with Steere's Babbler.

Early in 1984 the Dutch aviculturist obtained six recently imported, unsexed Steere's Babblers and put them in an unheated indoor enclosure. During their first two months two of the birds spent most of their time together to the exclusion of the others. Those two birds were removed and placed in an outdoor aviary measuring 6 1/2 ft. wide X 6 1/2 ft. high x 13 ft. long. The remaining four birds were placed

in an aviary of the same dimensions. There was no sight or vocal contact between these two aviaries. Both aviaries were heavily planted with shrubs and trees and several nesting places (cups, boxes and old blackbird nests) were added. The two Steere's Babblers shared their aviary with a pair of Japanese Quail while the group of four babblers were housed alone. During the next three years very little occurred in these aviaries except for an occasional start of nest building that was never completed. During this time one of the four birds housed together died. It proved to be a male.

In 1988 the two birds (now known as a pair) housed alone built a nest using an old blackbird nest as a base. They completed the nest with some moss, dried grass and feathers. Three eggs were laid and all hatched after an incubation period of 15 days. Their diet included normal insect food, some fruit and some live food consisting of mealworms and crickets. The amount of live food was greatly increased when there were babies. The young flourished and fledged after 15 days. One month after fledging, the juveniles were removed from the parents and placed in the aviary housing the other three babblers.

In 1989 the pair produced six young (a seventh baby died at three days old) from two clutches (three and four eggs). Three new groups of two birds each were now formed (two 1988 young, a 1988 young with an imported bird, and two imported birds together). The latter two combinations of birds proved to be true pairs and produced one baby each in 1989 (inexperience?).

During the following years these three breeding pairs produced many young. Because of the small genetic base, though, new genetic stock is badly needed. This is a problem in the Netherlands as very few Steere's Babblers can be found and many of them are related. The aviculturist who raised the birds spoken of in this article has given birds to other Dutch aviculturists and the species has been bred to the fourth generation.

The experience of the Dutch aviculturists shows that reproduction of the Steere's Babbler is possible and, hopefully, American aviculturists will work closely together to build a strong population of this species. ➔

If you have raised Steere's Babblers, contact Maarten de Ruiter at Domaine de Cambron, 31, B-7g40, Cambron Casteaux, Belgium

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