



Fairy Bluebirds

A popular and colorful Asiatic softbill that is occasionally bred.

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An adult male Fairy Bluebird *Irena puella* has brilliant shining blue and velvety-black plumage, offset by a striking red iris. This unusual color combination is a diagnostic and instantly recognizable feature in the field and in an aviary. The female is an attractive greenish blue overall, with a brighter colored rump. Immature birds resemble the female until around six months when they start to assume adult plumage.

Also known as the Blue-backed Fairy Bluebird, there are six subspecies recorded across its widespread range, which extends from India, south-western China, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Malaysia and across to Borneo, Sumatra, Java, and other Indonesian islands.

This medium-sized frugivorous species – just under 10 inches in length – inhabits humid, lowland tropical forests, including swamp forest, primary and secondary forest. They are usually seen singly or in small parties, especially when feeding at fruiting fig trees. Even though they are brightly colored, it is not easy to see them feeding in the treetops in tropical forests.

When flying from tree to tree in search of food, the brilliant blue



The male Fairy Bluebird is exceedingly beautiful and often rather tame in aviculture.

plumage glints in the sun, and this is when they are particularly visible. The flight is undulating.

Another species, the Black-mantled Fairy bluebird *I. cyanogaster* from the Philippines, has never been seen in aviculture, as far as is known. It is apparently an uncommon species.

Asiatic softbills have always had a tremendous following with aviculturists and softbill breeders. When the Fairy Bluebird was first bred at Keston Foreign Bird Farm in the UK in 1965, it was then one of the scarcer and more

desirable birds to keep.

Since the 1980s, they have been more readily obtainable, and small shipments were regularly imported into the USA and Europe. Initially, there was no great need to breed from them as there were sufficient numbers imported to replace aviary stock. They were most often kept as individuals or pairs in mixed collections in well-planted outdoor aviaries. Some attempted to breed, but rearing the young often proved unsuccessful under these conditions, probably

because of the competition for the available food supply.

Since then, a number of good breeding results have occurred with Fairy Bluebirds, and most breeders have had greatest success when a single breeding pair is housed in a planted aviary. Under these conditions, the food supply can be carefully controlled and altered as the breeding season approaches or when young are in the nest. Access to a heated indoor flight, maintained at 15°C (60°F), is important during inclement winter weather.

Dick Schroeder, the well-known softbill and lory breeder from California, stated (in litt.) that in the USA, zoos have had excellent breeding results with Fairy Bluebirds. This success should also extend into private aviculture where some breeders have the desired facilities to embark on a breeding program. Breeders can still obtain some imported stock in the USA on occasions.

While they are easily managed, a word of warning from a well-known breeder in the UK may prove helpful in the future, in averting a disaster. As already stated, Fairy Bluebirds are susceptible to wet conditions, and with the onset of winter in areas where the climate is often wet and damp, it is advisable to ensure that they are closed indoors. Conversely, in drier warmer areas, they can be allowed access outdoors, but close them indoors at night as frostbite is a problem that must be considered because Fairy Bluebirds have relatively small feet for their size.

One breeder who had continued success with Fairy Bluebirds is Phil Holland from Surrey in the UK. He fixed a woven basket – similar to that used for bread – measuring about six inches across, in a bush. In June, the female would build a loosely woven cup shaped nest – similar to a blackbird or thrushes – in which two heavily marked eggs were laid. Incubation, by the female alone, lasted for 13-14 days. The young were reared mainly on small crickets – dusted with a calcium and vitamin supplement. Waxmoth larvae proved useful and small white mealworms were offered



The female Fairy Bluebird lacks the iridescent blue of the male but is still attractive.

to the fledglings after they left the nest when 12-14 days old. The parents continued feeding the fledglings for another 2-3 weeks. One pair that he had was double-brooded on one occasion.

Their diet was mainly fruit-based using diced apples, grapes, and pear, plus other seasonal fruits. Dog crumbs were mixed in with the fruit. Softfood, mixed with grated cheese, is another alternative that may prove beneficial. Insectivorous mixture can be tried. Softbill pellets are available in the USA but not necessarily easily

obtainable in Europe. Persevere with different foods, but bear in mind that they are mostly fruit-eaters. Try feeding non-toxic rowan or cotoneaster berries. Other live food, such as smooth caterpillars etc. should be welcomed by the birds.

The beautiful and easily managed Fairy Bluebird which seems willing to breed when offered the right conditions, deserves greater attention from breeders in ensuring that this species survives in aviculture for generations to come. 