

Bulbuls

by Grant Rishman
Victoria, BC, Canada

Few birds can have made such a contribution to softbill aviculture as the 120 species belonging to the bulbul family. They are very hardy and are quite easy to manage. The Red-whiskered Bulbul is undemanding and makes a perfect bird for the beginner, while there are also much rarer species to interest the more experienced aviculturists.

Bulbuls have a wide distribution throughout tropical Africa and Asia, with some species venturing as far north as China and Japan in the east and southern Turkey in the west. They are usually found inhabiting lowland and hill jungles, gardens and evergreen forests. Some species ascend the mountains to about 13,000 feet where they are often found moving through the trees in mixed species flocks with small babblers. Some species are very familiar, living in parks and gardens, while others are very secretive living in dense forests.

The African bulbuls are just as common as their Asian cousins in the wild but appear to be much rarer in captivity. The exporters from Africa tend to concentrate on the more beautiful finches and exotic reptiles.

When compared to other softbills the bulbuls are quite somberly colored, many have crests and show shades of brown, olive and yellow. However, it is their industrious, inquisitive and friendly nature that make them so popular in captivity. Many have pleasant little songs, while others are quite noisy and chatter constantly. When not breeding, the smaller species can be safely housed with other birds and I have even housed them with small finches. Some of the larger species, such as the Black Bulbul, need to be checked for aggressiveness in almost any mixed species flight.

Bulbuls are classified as "fruit-biased omnivores" and will thrive on a diet that includes various soft fruits, berries, soaked mynah pellets, insectile mix and insects. Some fanciers argue that they are frugivores and only

require fruit, however, I feel they would all suffer from malnutrition if maintained purely on fruit for any extended length of time. They do not like descending to the ground so all food and water should be offered from a platform a few feet up.

Members of this family are among the easiest softbills to breed but they should not be compared to the seed-eaters. Although their breeding stimuli are still largely unknown, more information will hopefully become available as more aviculturists specialize with this family. One major problem is that they are almost impossible to sex visually. As a general rule, the males are slightly larger and broader than their mates. This is not a very reliable method as it does not take into account the various subspecies.

When serious breeding is attempted, it is best to house each pair separately in a planted aviary. As the male displays he can be seen sitting next to his mate with his crest held down against his head and with his wings and tail lowered. The sound he makes could be likened to the "meow" of a cat. If they are housed with smaller birds, in the breeding season the male bulbul may become overly aggressive and if they are housed with larger birds they are often intimidated themselves.

My bulbuls have always built a shallow nest near the aviary roof (about seven feet up). The nest is a loose structure consisting of grass and coconut fibre. There are some reports of nest boxes being used, but this has not been the case in my experience. The two or three, sometimes four, off-white eggs are almost one inch long with the blunt end being covered in dark reddish markings. The hen does most of the incubating but the male may relieve her occasionally. The brooding bird lies very low in the nest with its crest held flat against the head and may easily be overlooked.

The eggs hatch after 12 to 14 days. For the first two or three days the adults will feed only livefood which is swallowed and then regurgitated to the chicks. From three days onwards the livefood is carried back to the nest in the parent's bill and is fed direct to the chicks. Large quantities of suitable livefood (mealworms, crickets, caterpillars, etc.) should be supplied at this time. The young develop quickly and fledge after two weeks. At this time

they are being fed the adult diet and remain dependent on their parents for another 2-1/2 weeks. When they are independent they should be removed from the breeding aviary before they are attacked by the adult male. Two or three nests in a season are not unusual.

The following paragraphs contain descriptions and other information on some of the interesting members of this family.

Red-whiskered Bulbul

(*Pycnonotus jocosus*)

Eight inches long; bill black; head and crest black; cheeks white with a red ear patch superimposed; upperparts brownish grey; throat white; undertail coverts red; legs and feet dark grey. Sexes similar.

This common bulbul has five different races coming from India. Three have white tips to their tail while the others lack these markings. It is the most frequently bred member of this family and usually raises its young without too much difficulty. They are very hardy and can overwinter with minimal heat. Other names: Red-eared Bulbul.

Red-vented Bulbul

(*Pycnonotus cafer*)

Eight inches long; bill black; crest and throat black; cheeks brown; upperparts and breast dark brown, the feathers are edged with white which gives a scale-like appearance; abdomen white; vent area red; legs and feet dark grey. Hen is slightly duller.

Another ideal softbill for the beginner, they are very hardy and easily maintained. These birds are cheerful and confident, quickly becoming tame and confiding. Their song is the same - cheerful and confident - and not too melodious! This species may use a wooden box or basket when breeding.

White-eared Bulbul

(*Pycnonotus aurigaster*)

Seven and one half inches long; bill black; head and crest dark brown; cheeks white; upperparts dull brown; throat black; breast and underparts greyish white; undertail coverts yellow (some subspecies have red undertail coverts); legs and feet dark grey. Sexes alike.

This is slightly smaller than the previous species and not quite as hardy. It should be overwintered at a



Bulbuls not only build natural nests (above) but will use an open wooden box or basket.



The Red-vented Bulbul is an ideal softbill for the beginner, being very hardy and easily maintained. Bulbuls, however, are not allowed in some states as they are considered agricultural pests.

minimum temperature of about 50°F. The two outstanding features of this species are the large circular white cheek patch and the forward pointing crest.

They can boast one of the more melodious songs which consists of three or four cheerful rollicking phrases syllabified as "take me with you" or "tea for two" in endless combinations.

Other names: Black-capped Bulbul, Yellow-vented Bulbul (this latter name does cause some confusion as it is the common name for *Pycnonotus goiavier*).

Finch-billed Bulbul

(*Spizixos canifrons*)

Eight inches long; bill grey; crest black; cheeks and throat grey; upperparts olive brown; breast olive green fading to yellow in the abdomen area; legs and feet brown. Sexes alike.

This species, and the closely related Collared Bulbul (*S. semitorques*), are characterized by their relatively thick bills. In addition to the diet already suggested, these species will readily accept seed. They are both very hardy and require minimal winter heat.

Black-crested Bulbul

(*Pycnonotus melanicterus*)

Seven and one half inches; bill black; head and crest black; upperparts brown; throat and underparts yellow; (subspecies *johnsoni* has a red throat); legs and feet dark grey. Sexes alike.

Although a common resident in Thailand and parts of India, this species is not often imported, probably due to the difficulties involved with transferring them to a domestic diet. Even when first imported these birds are very calm and are soon accepting mealworms and other treats straight from their keeper's hand. This species is not particularly hardy and should be overwintered at a minimum temperature of 50°F. Other names: Black-crested Yellow Bulbul.

In conclusion, although many members of this family do not sport bright and gaudy colors, it is their personality and confiding nature that has made them so popular. They are very easy to keep and, like all softbills, still present some challenges when it comes to breeding. The rewards more than make up for the extra effort involved. ●