

Pittas have long been popular avicultural subjects, which given the right conditions do well, except this is when it comes to breeding. Breeding successes remain relatively uncommon, probably due mainly to the fact that the male and female are so notoriously difficult to house together.

*This account of the breeding of the Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida cucullata* by the late Jean Delacour, selected by Ron Oxley, was first published in the magazine in 1934. A few years later M. Delacour also succeeded in breeding Elliot's Pitta *P. ellioti*. The next success to be reported in the magazine was probably not until 1962, when Charles Everitt described the breeding of the Bengal Pitta *P. brachyura* in 1961 in Edward Marshall Boehm's aviaries at Trenton, New Jersey, USA (*Avicultural Magazine*, 68, 1:33-35). Then in 1973, S. T. Johnstone reported the breeding of the Blue-winged Pitta *P. moluccensis* in 1972 at the Wildfowl Trust, Slimbridge (*Avicultural Magazine*, 79, 4:129 and 79, 6:229). It was thought to be the first species of pitta to be bred in the UK. This pitta is treated sometimes as a race of the Bengal species and sometimes as a full species in its own right. At least two other species have been bred in the UK, the Hooded Pitta at Birdland, Bourton-on-the-Water and the Banded Pitta *P. guajana* at Blackpool Zoo. If you know of other successes elsewhere, perhaps you will write and provide details.*

*It should be noted that the scientific name of the Hooded Pitta is now *P. sordida*. *P. s. cucullata* is one of 12 races of it listed by Howard and Moore (1980). -Ed.*

BREEDING THE HOODED PITTA

Pitta cucullata

by J. Delacour

Although many species of pittas have been introduced into Europe during the last 20 years, most of them very beautiful, none had so far bred or even nested in captivity.

Pittas are forest birds, living on the ground and only perching at night, and have insectivorous habits. They hop about noisily on the carpet of dead leaves, not wild, but often difficult to see. It was clear that a thickly planted aviary, with a moist atmosphere, was the only accommodation to try to induce them to nest, and I always thought my greenhouse aviaries were very suitable for the purpose. In fact, since the beginning, I always kept in them some pittas, in perfect condition. Their feet, which are very tender, kept in good order, and their colours, which often fade in cages, remained as bright as they are when at liberty.

Pittas prove quite harmless to other birds, even as small as

hummingbirds, but they are most intolerant to one another. It is almost impossible to keep two together, even in a large aviary and male and female of the same species, and this has been the principal obstacle to their breeding in confinement. In the early spring of 1933, however, I succeeded in keeping together two Hooded Pittas *Pitta cucullata*, a species which is often imported from India and extends to Indo-China and the Malay Peninsula. Both sexes are alike, of a pretty, soft green colour with a black and chestnut head, a crimson belly, and lovely shining blue patches on the wings and rump.

There was no doubt that the smaller bird was a female, as it had dropped a couple of eggs shortly after it had arrived. The other one was taller, with a stronger bill, and gave the impression of being a male, rightly enough. At a few days' intervals, in May 1933, both birds were let out in a large compartment of the tropical aviaries, 40ft x 15ft (approx. 12.2m x 4.5m) with a temperature of 65°-90°F (18.3°-32.2°C) all the year round. It is thickly furnished with tropical plants, and contains a blue waterlily pool. There are some 40-50 hummingbirds, sunbirds, and small insectivorous species, as well as a dozen Chinese Quails. None of them seems to be noticed by the pittas.

Each bird kept in a corner, under the thick vegetation; both were always quite tame, and readily fed at one's feet. When they met there was nothing more serious than a short fight, and for months they lived as far apart as they could from one another, in a state of armed peace. On 10th April 1934, the male started calling loudly from the top of a tree, where he seldom ascended before, and such serious struggles took place that I was almost obliged to separate the pittas; but at the same time they were seen casually picking up and carrying about nesting materials. I left them alone, and by 20th April they began to build a nest on the top of a dry stone wall, all covered with plants, about 4ft (approx. 1.2m) high. The male was the first and principal worker, but the female helped also. There were no more disputes now between them.

As the pittas were pulling out plants and roots, I provided them with small sticks, hay, dead leaves, and moss. All were used, and by the 20th the main work was completed. The nest, as is well known, at liberty, is a covered-up affair, the size of a football, with a large opening in front, level with the ground. The pittas then worked at the inside, lining it with fibres, moss, rootlets, and decayed leaves. On the 30th I saw the male feeding the female. The first egg was laid on 2nd May; it was short and rather rounded at both ends, white, spotted with pale reddish brown. Eggs were laid the next three days, and both sexes sat tightly on 6th May, frequently replacing one another every hour or so. Being very tame, one could touch them in the nest, but sometimes they became annoyed, and flew savagely at one's face.

The first egg hatched on 18th May; on the 20th there were three young birds, the fourth egg containing a well-developed chick dead in the shell.

A curious circumstance is that the chicks almost immediately poke their head out from their parent's breast, and even come out on the edge of the nest, probably on account of the heat. The result was that, twice in a few hours, I found one of them fallen on the ground below the wall. I put it back, without injury, but to avoid further accidents I built in front of the nest a small platform of sticks and hay, where they could comfortably disport themselves, and no more trouble occurred.

The chicks are naked, of a reddish flesh colour, the fore part of the head being black; the bill is orange yellow, as is the gape. Both parents fed the chicks mostly on cut up bullock's heart, with mealworms, a few earthworms, and insectile mixture. They are not difficult to feed, and I believe meat alone would be sufficient to rear them. Naturally they always had a liberal supply of it. On 24th May one young one disappeared, and was never found.

Feather sheaths quickly appeared, and the growth of the youngsters was very quick. They came out more and more on the platform now, so much so that on the 31st one was out of the nest, flying well enough. The weaker one also came out, but was found half drowned in the pond, and just saved. A small screen was put up to avoid further accidents. But it was to no avail, and this same young pitta was drowned on 5th June, after having been flying well for several days. Both parents fed the remaining young bird devotedly, and did not abandon and bully it as I had feared, as the mother had started laying again in the old nest on the 31st, while the male began another nest, further away, in a similar situation. Probably on account of the stimulating food, the female laid every day, as many as ten eggs, by 12th June. She insisted on laying in the old nest, and all but one egg dropped on the ground. The old nest had been kept very clean, the parents taking right away the droppings of the chicks, but the male had by then completed the new nest and would not go to the old one again. The birds were not sitting. On 13th June I removed the old nest and put eight eggs into the new one (I thought ten were too many). Very docile, the female went to the new nest and incubation started immediately. Two eggs, probably addled, were rejected after a few days. At the same time, both parents continued feeding their first young, now quite strong, and eating also by himself since 12th June. However, on the 21st I took him by hand (he is very tame), and removed him into another compartment, where he now lives happily.

The first plumage of the young Hooded Pitta is as follows: top of the head streaked dark brown and dull chestnut; underparts earthy brown, rather pale; belly and vent pale pink; nape black, upperparts blackish green; quills,

as in the adults, but duller; greater wing coverts dull black with whitish terminal and subterminal spots; lesser wing coverts blackish green; rump pale blue; bill brown with tip and gape yellow; legs and feet greyish pink.

Green feathers appeared very soon, and by 20th June had almost completely replaced the brown ones on the underparts. A complete moult into adult plumage took place on the beginning of August.

On 23rd June the head of the chick was observed, and four the following day. At once a platform was built in front of the nest. On 11th July, on my return from the Ornithological Congress at Oxford, the four young pittas were out of the nest, and they all have been fully reared.

But we now come to the sad end of the story, and we shall see that, like the thrushes, pittas have the most wicked and puzzling temper.

As soon as the young ones had left the nest, the male pitta, whose plumage, and especially the quills, were in a very worn state, started at once building another nest, this time on the ground, but against the wall. I provided him with the necessary materials; the female helped a little and, by 15th July, the nest was almost completed. I noticed that day that there was a fight between the two parents, but I thought it was only, as usual, an introduction to their mating, and paid little attention to it. The next day the female was chasing the male, who kept hidden most of the time, and I decided to keep a special watch on the pittas. I went into the greenhouse every hour or so, to see how matters were going on; it was very much the same. But at the end of the day the male was found dead in the pond. There is no doubt that the female, whose wings and other feathers were still perfect, pushed him into the water, and prevented him from getting out. He was in perfect health otherwise, and had no visible wounds.

The female has not laid up to now; it is very probable that the male wanted to breed again; but she refused to do so, hence the struggle with its tragic end. She carried on feeding the young ones and still is looking after them most devotedly to this day.

I only hope that, among the young birds, there will be a male to replace his father. I have also got now a pair of Macklot's Pittas in my greenhouses. But I have only three compartments large enough and suitable for the breeding of pittas.

The following article, also about the Hooded Pitta, was published first in 1959 (in Vol. 65, No. 2). A plate was reproduced as a colour frontispiece from an original painting by the author of the article, the late David Reid-Henry. It was reproduced in colour again in Vol. 100, No.2, 1994. - Ed.

THE HOODED PITTA

Pitta sordida cucullata

by D. M. Reid-Henry

This beautiful bird hails from the jungle-covered hills and mountains of Assam, Burma, Malaysia, and Siam.

Like most of the family it is a creature of the undergrowth where it occupies its time in scuffling about amongst the wet and decaying vegetation in the search of insects and grubs, spiders, worms, and small reptiles. These, with a few berries and other fruit, represent its diet-sheet. When appetite is satisfied the bird finds a perch on some fallen log or moss-covered boulder and spends considerable time if undisturbed preening or just sitting still.

When alarmed it slips quietly away, flying low for a short distance to a more secure position. The usual mode of progress for pittas is by means of a succession of prodigious hops with intervals between, when they stand erect on their long legs to listen or to look for food. They do not leave the forest undergrowth from choice during the day, but at night they mount high into trees to roost.

In a previous article, when I wrote of the Bengal Pitta (*Avicultural Magazine*, Vol. 64), I mentioned much in the way of general details about these birds, and I will content myself and, I hope, the readers by simply referring to that article. What would apply in the case of that bird also holds good here, at any rate as regards habits and treatment in captivity.

However, as pittas of one sort or another are now more easily obtainable than they have been in the past I would like to recommend them to any serious aviculturist who has some experience of keeping softbills. They do equally well in either planted aviary or a large cage provided they are kept warm *and with a soft floor*. A good insectivorous food supplemented with snails, centipedes, mealworms, or any other garden-inhabiting gentry will keep them well satisfied, whilst a barrow-load of dead leaves (preferably moist and well decayed) along with some rotting wood will give the owner some fine chances to watch the bird in action. Without this natural rubbish the bird will probably spend the day hidden as far from view as it can escape.

I only once possessed one of this species - in Calcutta, but I have seen many in other peoples' possession, and it was from one such bird, a perfectly tame and confiding creature, that I was able to make the drawings for the accompanying coloured plate.

About this plate I would like to make one point. Somewhere along the line of reproduction the green of the back has become too light. There is



Delacour, Jean. 1997. "Breeding The Hooded Pitta." *The Avicultural magazine* 103(3), 120–124.

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