

## BREEDING THE HOUSE CROW *Corvus splendens*

by P. J. Cleeton

The House Crow as it tends to be called now, rather than the Indian House Crow, is normally found in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka, including the Maldives and Laccadive Islands, Bangladesh and the Himalayan foothills of Nepal and Bhutan, eastwards through Burma to extreme southern China, it is a vagrant to extreme southern Afghanistan (Madge and Burn, 1999). In addition it has been introduced into or found its way to a number of other countries, mainly on major shipping routes. It recently bred in the Netherlands and concern has been expressed that it may reach the UK. It is larger than the Jackdaw *C. monedula* but smaller than the Hooded Crow *C. corone*. Its call is a rather harsh 'caaa caaa', similar to that of the Raven *C. corax*.

Five House Crows were imported from Africa about six years ago for the making of a natural history film. When filming was completed the five crows went to The Tropical Bird Gardens, Rode, in Somerset, where they were kept together in a group. As the group showed no interest in breeding, Mike Curzon decided he would keep just a pair. In 1998, he phoned me and with his typical generosity, offered me the other three, two males and one female, for my collection.

The trio is housed in an aviary 20ft long x 10ft wide x 7ft high (approx. 6m long x 3m wide x 2.1m high), one of a row of seven flights all of which are the same size. Housed on one side of the House Crows' aviary is a pair of Ravens and on the other side is a pair of Yellow-billed Hornbills *Tockus flavirostris*. A half-open-fronted nest-box and a platform covered with *leylandii* trimmings were provided as possible nest sites.

In the wild this species feeds on small mammals, insects, young birds and eggs, fruit, a variety of grains, and any scraps it can scavenge. I find that chopped chicks, minced (ground) meat, dog chow, fruit and mealworms, etc. seem to keep them in good condition.

In 1999 a nest was built in the nest-box. It was built using a variety of twigs and grasses, and two chicks were hatched, but died after one week. Last year they built a large and impressive nest on the platform and laid five eggs in it. All five hatched and a variety of livefoods and pinky mice were provided. However, on the morning of the eighth day I went down and found all of them dead on the floor. This year they built another nest on the platform and laid four eggs in it, but as they did not seem very keen on incubating them I decided to put the eggs in an incubator.

Two proved to be clear, one contained a dead chick, and the other hatched. The chick was fed approximately every two hours from 7.00am to 9.00pm.



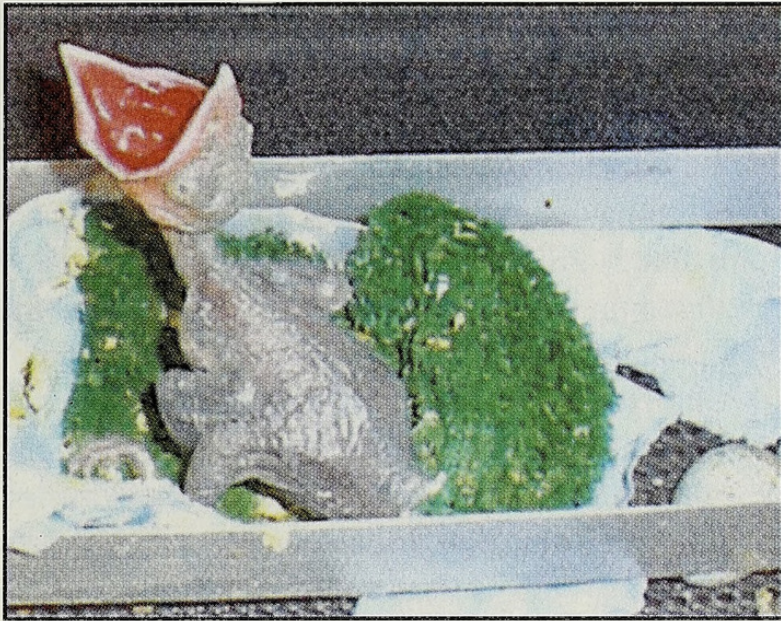


*Chris Isles*

**One of the breeding pair**

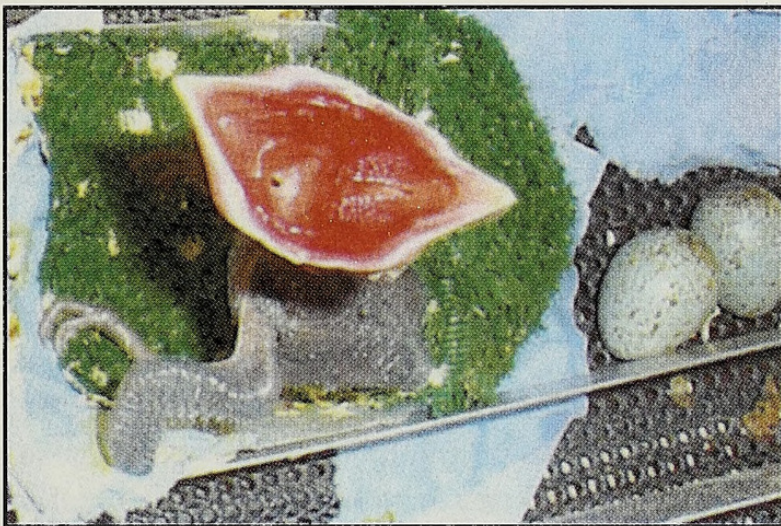
It was fed rat pups to which were added SA37 or ABEDEC vitamin and mineral supplements. They were diced very fine and kept in water. The chick was housed in a brooder set at 37°C (98.6°F) until its pin-feathers came through, after which the temperature was reduced slowly. It was kept on astro turf, as I find that keeping young birds on this helps prevent them developing splayed legs.





Chris Isles

**Chick at about 10 days old**



Chris Isles

**Chick and two unhatched eggs**

Mike, as the crow has been named, is fully weaned now and he or she will later be introduced into the group.

### Reference

Madge, S. and Burn, H. 1999. *Crows and Jays*. Paperback Edition, Helm Identification Guides. Christopher Helm/A. & C. Black, London .

As described above, the House Crow *Corvus splendens*, has been bred by P. J. Cleeton. This is probably the first successful breeding of this species in Great Britain or Ireland. Anyone who knows of a previous breeding is asked to inform the Hon. Secretary.



## NECKLACED AND OTHER LAUGHING THRUSHES

by Philip Schofield

I can not claim to have any great knowledge about laughing thrushes having owned only three individuals and not yet tried to breed any. However, a recent observation of predatory behaviour, referred to below, has fired me to record a few personal notes about the group.

Gruson (1976) listed 44 species of laughing thrushes in the genus *Garrulax*. There may though be 45, as Long et al. (1994) suggested that one of the subspecies of the Yellow-throated Laughing Thrush *G. galbanus* might be regarded as a full species. For many years British aviculture was effectively restricted to two species, the White-crested *G. leucolophus* and the White-throated *G. albogularis*, with others being imported only rarely. Boosey (1956), a leading importer during the pre- and immediately post-Second World War years, gave detailed treatment only to the White-crested with just a passing mention of the White-throated species. Sclater (1879) listed eight species (three of which were not then included in the genus *Garrulax*) as having been in the London Zoo collection. However, there were effectively only the White-crested and White-throated Laughing Thrushes in UK aviculture when I first encountered this group back in the mid-1960s. This was at the Norfolk Wildlife Park, where they shared a planted aviary with Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* and Green-winged Doves *Chalcophaps indica*. The overriding impression was how energetic and noisy *Garrulax* species are as a group in a large enclosure. About the same time, I remember seeing a single White-crested Laughing Thrush that shared a small aviary with a Pagoda Starling *Temenuchus* or *Sturnus pagodarum*. Very much a contact animal, the laughing thrush invariably roosted with a wing spread over the starling, in the absence of a more appropriate partner.

In July 1978, I saw Streaked Laughing Thrushes *G. lineatus* in the wild on several occasions on the Margalla Hills north of Islamabad, Pakistan. I remember them foraging on or near the ground in secondary scrub (the area had been overgrazed at one time by domestic livestock and then allowed to revert to a more natural state following their removal), and being difficult to keep in view for any length of time.

In 1987, a friend bought two recently imported White-crested Laughing Thrushes. These appear to have thrived ever since, and show no sign of old age 14 years later. They have lived on coarse grade commercial softbill food, along with fruit and mealworms each day. Aviary companions over the years have included Golden Pheasant *Chrysolophus pictus*, Silver Pheasant *Lophura nycthemera*, Eastern Rosella *Platycercus eximius* and



Redrump Parrakeet *Psephotus haematonotus*, all of which have bred successfully without any friction, although the pheasants were separated when they had chicks. At one time there was also a group of Senegal Doves *Streptopelia senegalensis*, apparently all females, which likewise were not molested. Latterly a single Nanday Conure *Nandayus nenday* has also lived happily with the laughing thrushes. This sort of co-existence requires plenty of space. In the early days the laughing thrushes lived in an aviary about 20ft x 15ft (approx. 6m x 4.5m); this has now been trebled in size. The parrakeets have prevented much plant growth, which may explain the lack of nesting behaviour by the laughing thrushes, which have flourished through some relatively severe winters with only overhead cover and shelter from wind and rain. The only indisposition has been an apparent infestation of gapeworms *Syngamus* spp., restricted to one of them and quickly cured with a game bird worming powder. As one would expect, these are a noisy pair of birds, whose cackling laughter is at its loudest during a summer rainstorm.

With the shift of bird imports from India to China and other countries in that region, a much wider variety of species has become available. The Foreign Bird Federation's *Breeding Register* listed a dozen (12) species as having been bred in the UK between 1992 and 1995. I acquired my first laughing thrush at a local bird sale in February 1998. It is a female Greater Necklaced *G. pectoralis* whose mate had escaped through the feeder hole of the parrot cage in which they were being transported. Left with the single bird, the owner was pleased to get rid of it. Initially its plumage was rough, and the bird was very nervous. I removed a metal closed ring, which came off easily, so was not necessarily evidence of captive breeding. I took it off because it was sufficiently loose fitting to catch on twigs and endanger the bird. June of that year found my single laughing thrush sharing an aviary some 9ft (approx. 2.7m) square with a pair of Indian Ring-necked Parrakeets *Psittacula krameri*. Despite the latter, there was a substantial *Lonicera nitida* bush in which the laughing thrush spent much of her time. As an importer was offering this species for sale, I ordered a male, having telephoned first to ensure that they were indeed Greater Necklaced Laughing Thrushes. When the bird arrived, it looked a bit small, but it was not until its release into the aviary that I could see that the new bird was a Lesser Necklaced Laughing Thrush *G. monileger*. This was confirmed by reference to King et al. (1975), to which readers are referred for detailed descriptions (p. 310) and illustrations (pl. 44). *G. pectoralis* appears to be about one-third larger, although only 1in (2.5cm) more in overall length (13in (33cm) compared to *G. monileger* which is 12in (30.5cm) long). The two other most obvious distinctive features are the striated grey cheek patches of *G. pectoralis* and the iris colour (not mentioned by King et al.) which is dark brown, whereas that of *G. monileger* is pale orange. In Grimmet et al. (1999) both species



are depicted (p.301) with brown eyes. The two birds were instantly compatible, and roosted pressed together that night. Having contacted the importer about his misidentification, he let me have a second *G. monileger* at a reduced price, and the three appeared to agree together, although I cannot remember their roosting behaviour as a trio. I hoped they might attempt to breed, with the single *G. pectoralis* helping to feed any young produced. Such a cooperative effort occurred at London Zoo, where a pair of White-throated helped feed the single youngster of a pair of Black-faced *G. perspicillatus*, both before and after it fledged (Yealland, 1965). Some eight weeks later upon returning from a short holiday, under a bush I discovered (unnoticed by the somewhat myopic friend who had kindly cared for the collection in my absence) the decomposed body of the believed female Lesser Necklaced Laughing Thrush, with no identifiable cause of death. I have been unable to obtain mates for the two survivors, and they remain a devoted couple, never more than a short distance apart. The bird that died had paler, more yellowy eyes than the surviving *G. monileger*, which could equally be a sexual, age or even individual difference.

The aviary has been extended to some 30ft (approx. 9m) long, and is currently shared by a male Grey Peacock Pheasant *Polyplectron bicalcaratum*, a group of young Golden Pheasants and a pair of Fulvous Whistling Ducks *Dendrocygna bicolor*. The Ring-necked Parrakeets have been joined by a pair of young Alexandrine Parrakeets *P. eupatria* and a Peach-faced Lovebird *Agapornis roseicollis*. The only aggression shown by the laughing thrushes to any of these is an occasional dive at the lovebird by the female *G. pectoralis*. This appears to be more playful than anything else, and is never followed through into an attack. The lovebird, a very assertive individual which has been seen to bluff the Alexandrines away from food, does not seem upset by these attentions. I would not trust *Garrulax* spp. with anything smaller, despite Lindholm's (1989) reference to a single White-crested living peacefully with Blue-capped Cordon-bleus *Uraeginthus cyanocephalus* at Cincinnati Zoo - significantly perhaps, he did not actually see the latter. A recent addition to my enclosure, awaiting breeding quarters elsewhere, is a pair of Common Mynahs *Acridotheres tristis*. The male *G. monileger* will set about these if they approach him too closely, but otherwise they are ignored. Before the Fulvous Whistling Ducks were introduced, a pair of Mandarin Ducks *Aix galericulata* nested in this aviary and on several occasions one or more of their eggs were found out of the nest-box and with holes pecked in them, presumably by the laughing thrushes.

Five parrot beaks have drastically reduced the plant life in this aviary, so plenty of leafy branches are supplied, which the parrakeets strip of leaves and bark while the laughing thrushes and mynahs search them for insects. There are logs on the aviary floor which I turn over every few days to expose



Cleeton, R.J. 2001. "Breeding The House Crow *Corvus Splendens*." *The Avicultural magazine* 107(4), 149–154.

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