

A Moveable Feast

Livefood is a waxbill must-have

By Ian Hinze

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Q: I'm interested in acquiring some waxbills with the goal of breeding them. I've read that these birds can only be bred with the use of livefood. Is this true?.

A: The majority of waxbills encountered in captivity can live on a daily diet of seeds and a little green food and eggfood, but the more delicate species also require daily amounts of livefood. When it comes to breeding, however, all waxbills require livefood, because without it nestlings will not survive. The exceptions are individuals, generally captive-bred, that dedicated breeders have skillfully and patiently managed to persuade to take only inanimate food, particularly eggfood. These individuals have gone on to rear their own offspring without any livefood, at which point one could say they are truly domesticated.

Species that can be successfully reared without livefood include the goldbreast (*Sporaeginthus subflava*), red avadavat or strawberry finch (*Amandava amandava*), red-billed firefinch (*Lagonosticta senegala*), red-cheeked cordon bleu (*Uraeginthus bengalus*), blue-headed cordon bleu (*U. cyanocephala*) and the black-rumped waxbill (*Estrilda troglodytes*). Wild, imported birds, however, are not so easily enticed into accepting eggfood alone, so do not withhold livefood from them.

Grow Your Own Livefood

Soft, white-skinned mini-mealworms, wax worms, white worms and fruit flies and their larvae are all easy to procure from specialist suppliers, but you can also grow them yourself. The mealworm and their larvae (*Tenebrio molitor*), are an aviculturist's favorite and often play a valuable part in waxbill breeding.

To breed mealworms:

1. Get some plastic trays, about 3 to 4 inches in depth,
2. Place equal amounts of larvae into each tray.
3. Cover the tray with an inch of chicken meal. (Do not use bran, because mealworms reared in bran will be deficient in calcium due to the phytic acid. Phytic acid handicaps the absorption of calcium, which mealworms already lack.)
4. Allow the mealworms to pupate and turn into beetles. These will lay eggs at the bottom of the trays. After six weeks, discard the beetles as their sexual life comes to an end. After the six weeks, the eggs will hatch. Once the larvae reach about 1 centimeter in length start to supply small amounts of sliced carrot every three days or so. (Mealworm beetles and their larvae require carrot for essential moisture.)

The tiny larvae will grow through a series of successive molts and become the whitish-skinned mealworms. Those that have just gone through a molt are the ones to your birds. Preferably, these shouldn't be more than 12-inch long.

Never use mealworms that possess hard, unmolted skins because they can be indigestible and potentially dangerous to nestlings. In time, you will be able to work out a rotating system with the trays, in which some will contain larvae at different stages of growth and others beetles and pupae.

Fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*) and their larvae are the best type of early livefood for the nestlings of most waxbill species. They can be propagated in old ice cream tubs.

To breed fruit flies:

1. Half-fill the tubs with tightly folded newspaper.
2. Place layer upon layer of chopped banana on top until it almost falls over the sides of the tubs. (The skins can be discarded.)
3. Put the tubs of bananas in the bird room, but out of reach of the birds, and don't allow the temperature to fall below 65-degrees Fahrenheit.
4. Place a container of fruit flies near the tubs and remove the lid.

Within two weeks, the bananas will have become mushy and swimming with larvae. These will eventually pupate up the sides of the tubs, and it is at this point that fresh tubs of bananas should be placed alongside the old tubs to enable the hatched-out fruit flies to lay their eggs. In a short time, you will be able to offer tubs full of flies and their larvae to the birds.

White worms (*Enchytraea albidus*) are another excellent food source for breeding waxbills and can easily propagate in large rectangular, plastic ice cream tubs.

To breed white worms:

1. Fill a tub with general potting compost (that doesn't contain too much gravel or peat) to a depth of about 3 inches
2. Mix with water to a crumbly damp consistency before firming it down.
3. Use a large spoon to scoop out a hole about 1-inch deep in the center and in each corner of the damp compost.
4. Place a level teaspoonful of white worms into each hole. On top of the worms, add a heaped teaspoonful of a porridge-type breakfast cereal that has been mixed with water to a whipped cream consistency. Cover over the worms and food with compost.
5. Drill some tiny holes in the ice cream tub lid, snap the lid onto the container and then place it in a dark, warm place of around 65-degrees Fahrenheit and make sure that the compost is kept damp throughout with a water mist spray. The optimum temperature for propagating the worms is 60- to 70-degrees Fahrenheit. If the temperature falls below 48-degrees Fahrenheit the worms will not breed, and if it rises above 82-degrees Fahrenheit the worms will perish. Check the food regularly and once it has largely disappeared, add more before covering it again with the substrate. When it is evident that enough white worms have been produced, start a second culture.

Try to build up enough cultures during the breeding season so your birds will never run short. A good way to feed the white worms is to take a handful of compost and worms together, and spread it out in a shallow receptacle that is placed on the cage floor to allow the birds to pick over the substrate and take their fill. Supply only enough of the worms to last them during the day, and then up the amount once any young hatch out.

Although some birds might initially shy away from the white worms, once they get used to worms, they take to them avidly. If the worms start to become too dry in the cage, they tend to mass together in a ball, in which the birds might find it difficult to separate. If this happens, spray the worms and the dry substrate with water, and they will untangle themselves.