

AREA INDIGENA

ROCK AND ROLL

The mountain rock thrush is a beautiful bird that has a spectacular courtship display, as SEBASTIANO PATERNO' of Italy explains.

Every year a number of fanciers take up softbill keeping, but either through mismanagement, inexperience or misfortune many give up in their first year. This gives softbills a bad name.

Live, moving prey is part of the natural food for softbill and it is essential for some birds species, so extra attention is needed in providing it. This trait is present in the thrush family and it is accentuated in the *Monticola* genus.

In Europe there are only two *Monticola* species – the Mountain Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*) and the Blue Rock Thrush (*M. solitarius*). I believe these two are the most beautiful species among the Turdidae family. These birds are reminders of my childhood and adolescence. Since I was 12 years old, I have hand-reared at least two broods a year.

For 25 years I bred these thrushes in large aviaries, although for the past five years I have limited myself to one pair of each species. They are excellent companions but rather expensive and, so far, there have been no mutations.

In winter, the sexes of the mountain rock thrush are alike. However, the male can be recognised by his redder flanks and by a white stain on his back. Both the male and female start a pre-nuptial moult from January 15-20 every year. The male's moult is more evident, and starts from the bottom of his flanks. The breast and flanks turn a warm orange-red, although the rest of the plumage continues moulting until early April. The head and the neck become a rare azure. Wing feathers, which are always black, are not affected by this Spring moult. The female is brown.

From the first days of March the male begins to sing in a fluted warble, similar to that of the Blue Rock Thrush. These birds will not tolerate cold, moist weather, so they should be kept at a temperature no lower than 10 – 12 °C. The male must be put in the aviary first. After a day or two, the female, settled inside a small cage, can join him. She is released into the aviary once she has befriended the male.

The nest is a half-open box as used for Starlings, but a half-open empty herring/kippers' tin has worked, hung up about 2,5 m from the ground. For nidification (nest building) they prefer the inside of a shelter in dim light.

The only clutch usually consists of four eggs, although this can range from 3 – 5. Brooding is undertaken by the female and generally takes two weeks.

Their spectacular "wedding parade" lasts just a few minutes. The first phase involves the male spending about 15 seconds performing long, nervous flights, and the first time I saw it I thought he had been frightened by a predator. Then he settles close to the female, who will allow him to approach for the first time.

He lowers his wings, lifts his head and neck, opens his beak and moves his head to and fro, singing softly and, almost whispering, fans his tail. With small steps he delicately approaches, getting closer and closer, and mates with the hypnotised, motionless hen.

Only the female builds the nest and the eggs are a bright sky-blue. After hatching the chicks are rose-coloured like Starlings, but with a different gape. I have always hand-reared the chicks, starting when they are six days old, with a commercial product, waxmoth larvae and a hand-rearing mixture that I prepare myself. The male feeds them for the first few days.

The hen will often not tolerate rings fitted to the legs of her offspring, so I am extremely careful when ringing them. I have found small, dead birds that had been expelled from the nest after ringing. A useful tip is to colour the rings with a violet felt-tip pen, as it seems the birds cannot see this colour.

Young birds are similar to the females, although the males have the unmistakable white stain on their back in their first year – the stain being hidden when the wings are closed. To distinguish the sexes, I advise plucking some of the back feathers immediately after weaning.

Not all females are ready for breeding in their first year. However, the males will be ready even if they are not in full breeding plumage.



Sebastiano Paterno'

Cage & Aviary Birds – IPC Media Magazine – London - August 28, 1999 issue.