

## CHAPTER II: Mousebirds in the Wild

**A**lthough the main focus of this book is the mousebird in aviculture, to further an understanding of the mousebird, aspects of the birds in the wild must be delved into. Mousebirds can be found throughout most of Africa except for the northern and far most western regions. They are birds of the bushes and trees, with short flight patterns and coming to the ground occasionally to feed or dustbathe. They are highly sedentary birds and do not migrate, moving around only to different local feeding areas. The dryer, scrubland forests and savannas are the preferred habitat, avoiding the tropical rainforest areas of the Congo basin and the dry treeless deserts. They have proved adaptable and are found in many human inhabited areas such as farm and garden areas, as well as towns.

### **Sociability and Playfulness**

Mousebirds are extremely social and gregarious, spending their life in specific flocks, and solitary mousebirds in the wild are rare. Socializing to this degree offers health advantages as well as some protection from predators. Mousebirds forage for food, groom, bathe, and play together, as well as nest and raise young communally. They are territorial, and together will defend nest sites and food sources. Adults, and especially young birds, spend time with each other in complex play activities and play with objects in their environment such as twigs and leaves.

They have a hierarchical structure in which there is usually a dominant male and female. As in most societies, peace does not reign continuously. Squabbles, chases, and fights often break out, and usually the loser is allowed to escape. Birds, particularly young adults upon maturity, do leave one flock to join another, and strange mousebirds are viewed with suspicion before being accepted into a new flock.

Being very tactile creatures, mousebirds crave contact with others, following each other around and roosting next to one another. Allopreening and allofeeding behaviors, in which birds groom and feed each other, are common. They communicate well vocally with a variety of calls and whistles used for different purposes including alarm and greeting calls.

**Avicultural Comments:**

As will be discussed in the following chapters, mousebirds are so gregarious, they are not happy unless they have daily contact with another in their "flock", be it another mousebird, another type of bird, or a human.

Keeping a mousebird isolated from such contact would be cruel and heartless.

**Sunning, Clustering, and Torpor**

Mousebirds are often seen hanging from branches in clusters of two or more birds. They huddle against one another at night and at various times during the day, particularly in cold weather. They sleep hanging belly to belly, or several cluster into one ball. Clusters containing twenty-eight birds have been documented! They mesh so tightly that it is hard to see just how many birds are in a pile-up sometimes. Rarely will a mousebird sleep alone if others are around.

In a daily morning ritual, they seem to literally worship the sun's rays. Fluffing their feathers, spreading their wings, standing as erect as possible and stretching back with eyes closed in ecstasy, they are overcome with pleasure, sometimes to the point of losing their balance. Looking like a puff ball, they turn themselves, belly foremost, as if on a cooking spit, to expose all parts of their bodies, preening joyfully.

Sunning and clustering are activities not just for their mental well-being, their health is directly tied to the sun and each other. One of the most interesting things about mousebirds is their thermal physiology.

Clustering, sunning, torpor, and sociability are all evolutionary tactics that are interconnected to help ensure the mousebird's survival in an environment with food that is relatively low in energy and often unpredictable in availability. To reduce energy output, especially in harsh conditions, mousebirds huddle together to share body heat. Their body's metabolism can be dramatically lowered, sometimes by 90%, and the mousebird enters a torpid state similar to hummingbirds', where they appear to be in a deep sleep, and their bodies are actually cold to touch. In the morning, they warm up quickly by sunning themselves.

Using the solar radiation appears to be a significant energy saver as are the clustering and torpor techniques. Aiding digestion of fibrous plant material may also be a benefit of sunbathing. With the evolutionary advantage of being able to absorb solar heat quickly comes the trade-off

