



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

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Some Thoughts on Mealworms

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By Peter Phippen

[Mealworms](#) are actually the larval stage of a small beetle. For African finches in particular you must have them, unless you feed termites. I don't feed termites because they got into the fence once and so I'm not allowed to have them any more.

I keep the mealworms in the plastic children's hobby boxes that you can buy in most supermarkets. It is smooth plastic on the inside so they can't climb out. I fill these with bran. It is cheap to buy. [A large bag of unprocessed bran from the produce store](#) will last for years. I put in 3" of bran and then a layer of Hessian, then another 3" bran, then a layer of Hessian and so on. [Then you need some mealworms to start your colony.](#)

If you don't feed the worms to your birds they go into a chrysalid stage and then into a beetle. The beetles mate and each female lays about 300 eggs. These turn into 300 small worms that can't be seen. They grow fairly rapidly. So all you need is a few dozen worms or beetles to begin with.

You can breed them in anything. I have used old chests of drawers, an old metal trunk, and a lot of people seem to breed them successfully in the floor of their aviaries under a bag. I don't recommend the latter because mealworms are a host for worms and other parasites. If you breed them away from your aviary, there is less chance that they will carry these parasites.

The plastic boxes I mentioned earlier are very handy because they stack on top of each other. So as you set up more colonies you can stack them and not lose valuable floor space. I have 12 now and will be getting another six soon.

My aim is to eventually have about 30 of them. To get the worms out I feed the bran through a winnower hooked onto a vacuum cleaner. The bran goes into the winnower box and the worms just fall out underneath. The bran is put back into the box with any beetles and the process will continue.

You have to feed them, but they don't need much. I use bread and overripe fruit. I find bananas the best. A box of old bananas really kicks your colony along. Some people use flour and I also find carrots handy. If something goes off in your fruit bowl, just put it into the mealworm colony. They eat not just to obtain food but also for moisture.

For my African finches and Weavers they are a must. In the middle of the breeding season I feed at least 500 mealworms a day so I find it economical and convenient to have my own colonies.

The only problem I seem to have with them is if the [web moth](#) gets into the bran. They form long strands of a webby material which will infiltrate throughout the whole box. I usually leave them and sieve them once a year. By this time there are about 8,000 worms present.

With the dozen boxes I have now I still have to buy more worms each season to feed to the birds. This is because the breeding season begins in winter before the worms are really breeding well. They seem to breed best in spring and summer. I don't think you can replace them with a protein supplement as the fact that the birds are eating a wriggling, crawling insect seems to promote the breeding drive. If you want your birds to start breeding early, you need to pour the worms into them.

I can always tell which of my birds have young as they are the first to the dish once I put the worms into the aviary. Some of them will eat the worms out of my hand as I put them into the dish.

You have to be careful with some of the larger finches and birds such as Cardinals. They will gorge themselves on the mealworms and become quite overweight. In this case you will have to limit the number they are given or they will not breed well. The only time they are given unlimited access is when they have young.

[Aviculture Accessories stock everything you need to set up your own mealworm farm.](#)

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