

# Remembering Arthur Douglas, 1916–2011

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Americans who might wonder what inspired Monty Python or *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* need look no further than England's public schools.

Arthur Douglas was teaching a class at Victoria Academy, on the Island of Jersey, when he noticed his students were distracted by the presence of the school's porter, standing in the door.

"The headmaster wishes to see you at your earliest convenience," the custodian/handyman announced.

"You mean right now?" asked Mr. Douglas.

"Yes, sir!" was the reply.

Leaving the porter in charge of the class, he stepped over a large and formidable dog into the headmaster's office, made uncomfortable by a blazing fireplace.

"I'm glad we could keep this in the family," said the headmaster.

"I can understand if you cannot afford a gold cigarette case, but gentlemen could at least offer ladies a cigarette from a silver one!"

It turned out that Mr. Douglas had committed the gross social sin of leaving an entire carton of American cigarettes on a table at a party. (Rationing had just ended).

"They were always having parties," he told me.

This was not the first time a faculty party had gotten him in trouble. He had received an invitation from the headmaster's wife, which read: "Mrs. XYZ requests the presence of Mr. Douglas at ....." to which he replied: "I should be delighted to accept."

When he subsequently found he had done something awful, he consulted "the colonel," one of the older teachers who appeared to know about such things.

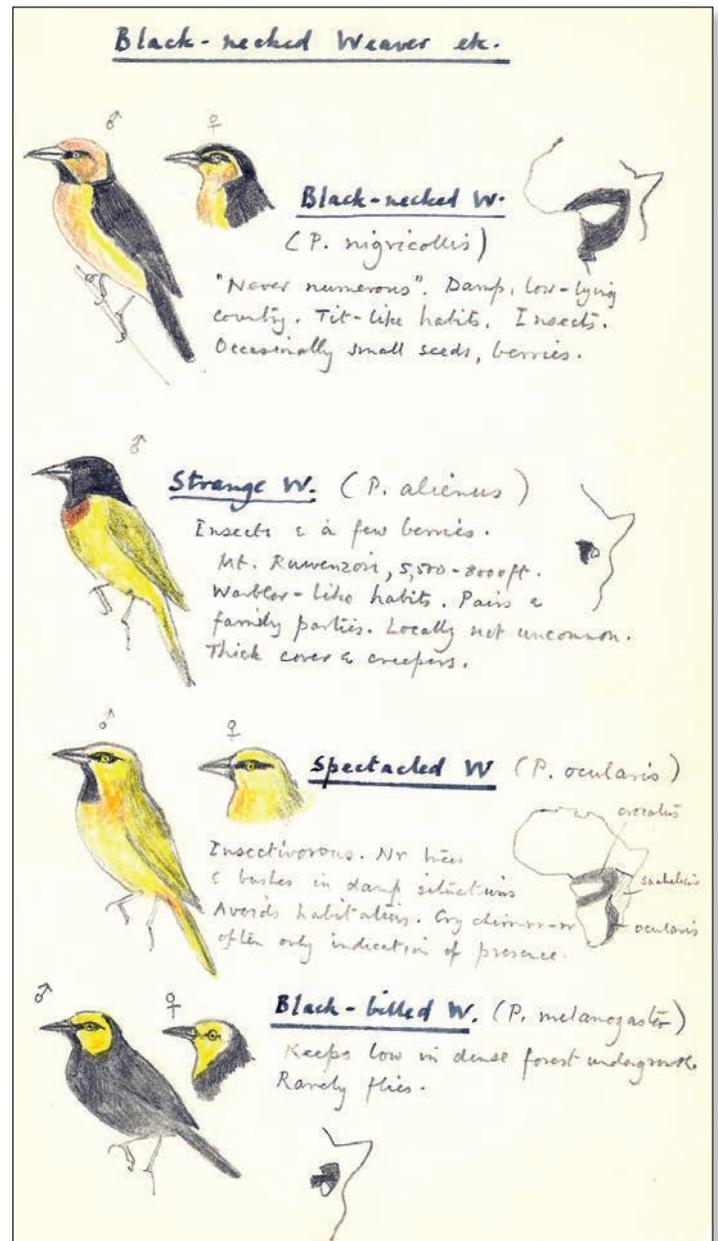
"Replying to a third person invitation in the first person—it isn't done!" the colonel explained.

So, when he was encouraged to apply at St. Mark's School of Dallas by two former colleagues who had already gone there, Douglas made the decision to come to Texas, where he would live the rest of his long life.

Dallas in 1955 was a very different place from Dallas today. St. Mark's, established by Episcopalians, was always a progressive institution, but the city at the time maintained some traditions that led to a degree of culture shock.

Initially Arthur Douglas' responsibilities at St. Mark's included art, Spanish, English literature and handwriting. This included enduring "Hark, hark the lark," from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, rendered in flat Texas accents, at break-neck speed, with "Doodlebugs" substituted for "Mary-buds":

Hark! hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings,  
And Phoebus' gins arise,  
His steeds to water at those springs  
On chalic'd flowers that lies;

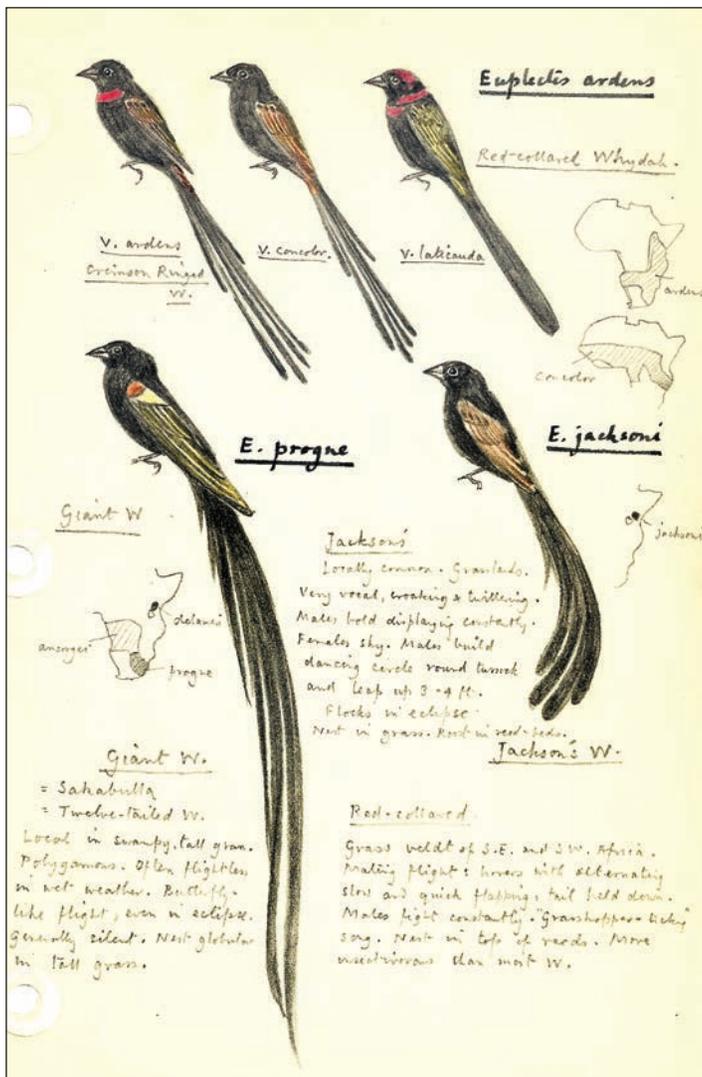


Some rarely kept Ploceus Weavers, from the notebook "Ploceid Finches."

And winking Mary-buds begin  
To ope their golden eyes;  
With everything that pretty is,  
My lady sweet, arise:  
Arise, arise!

After three years, he was transferred to the science department, where he taught first- through eighth-grade science for several years.

In 1963 he commenced teaching seventh-grade life science, which would become his signature course until his retirement in 1982. He made full use of the numerous St. Mark's resources,



**Nonparasitic Whydahs**

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incorporating into his curriculum a greenhouse, built in 1960, and the Texas Native Plant collection in the Math/Science Courtyard, both of which he designed, and, to a significant degree, stocked.

In the mid 197's, he was appointed Curator of Living Materials. The collection by that time included an aviary, which he designed in 1969. His students had the privilege of observing Mendel's Laws of Inheritance illustrated with a carefully maintained colony of budgies. Each year, birds of different colors would be combined in breeding groups, and the students would predict the proportions of green and yellow offspring, then have the opportunity to test this by collecting data and comparing it to their theoretical results.

It was only natural that Douglas should incorporate aviculture into his teaching. From his Yorkshire childhood onward, he was fascinated by birds and bird-keeping, avidly absorbing rich local traditions, and, at an early age, experimenting on his own.

About the time he began his career as an art teacher in 1937, he was keeping British soft-billed birds.

In a paper he delivered at the AFA's fifth annual Convention in Florida in 1979, he recalled: "I first kept warblers and other small insectivorous birds in the late 1930s. I found that about half a dozen was as many as I could care for properly by the methods considered ideal at that time. A few acquaintances in the neighborhood kept soft-billed birds and we used to exchange views and experiences. We all fed our birds in much the same way. The local bird shop supplied an insectile mixture considered to be of superior quality. It was certainly expensive. We raised mealworms. We could buy blowfly maggots in convenient quantities at a fishing tackle shop in town, and we used to devote an unconscionable amount of our leisure time to collecting ants' eggs, wasp grubs, and other live food in the surrounding countryside..." (Douglas, 1981).

During World War II, Arthur was involved in agricultural



Queleas, Bishop, and Fodies



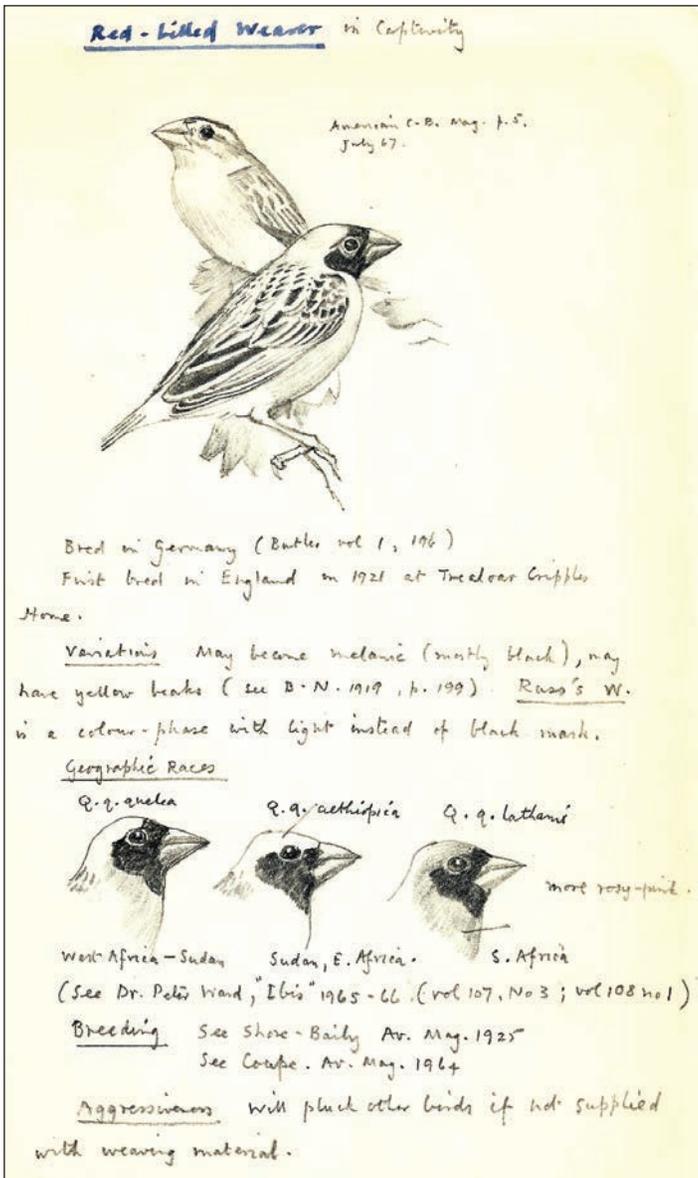
An oriole-catching cage from Mexico

projects vital to besieged Britain's food production. In those difficult times he found ways to continue his softbill aviculture. In 1942 he published an article on collecting Caddisfly larvae. This appeared in *Cagebirds*, the first of what was to be an enormous number of contributions to the British magazine now known as *Cage and Aviary Birds*.

For more than a decade, commencing in 1965, he wrote and illustrated a regular column for *Cage and Aviary Birds*, called "Jottings from Texas." By that time he had made himself thoroughly at home there. In 1963, he met Alice Taliaferro, a substitute teacher at St. Mark's. They were married in 1965. Until her death in 2000, Alice enthusiastically involved herself in Arthur's aviculture and horticulture, and they traveled around the world. Alice was especially fond of a Mexican hummingbird that lived eight years in Dallas. Arthur's stepchildren, Alan and Anne also helped with the birds. Arthur was particularly proud of Anne hand-raising a barn swallow.

Arthur made many trips to Mexico. These included regularly scheduled long field trips for St. Mark's students to several locations in that country. He was elegantly fluent in Spanish. However, as his students fondly remember, when confronted by the ubiquitous crowds of small boys eager to sell chewing gum to the tall gringo, his standard response was "Por favor, yo no fumar!" (Excuse me, I don't smoke!)

In the days before the 1972 Newcastle's Disease quarantine, when it was also rather simple to export birds from Mexico, Arthur brought several collections of them to Dallas, some of which he subsequently shared with the San Diego and London zoos. He was fascinated by the cottage industry of Mexican bird trapping. I have a trap-cage he brought back from Guadalajara. The wires came from the inside of bicycle tires. The man who made it explained he had put a great deal of work into it, so he would have to ask a high price—\$3, if I remember correctly. It is an intricate thing, designed for catching orioles. One evening



**Ploceus Weavers**

at his house in Dallas, Arthur demonstrated it for me, setting up the perches in the compartments on either side of where the decoy bird was placed. Then he tossed his glasses into it and the whole thing snapped shut. I was reminded of "Q" from the James Bond movies. Then he insisted on giving it to me. It was put to good use at the Fort Worth Zoo.

In an article for *The Honeycreeper*, the bulletin of the short-lived International Softbill Society, he described how the trappers fed their birds, "When I first visited Mexico, I was surprised to find such a variety of softbilled birds not only surviving, but looking reasonably well on an almost exclusive diet of cooking banana, called there *platano macho*. It is often kneaded to a paste with a little cornmeal. This, I was told, is to prevent the bird's droppings from being too sticky. "Dried flies"—really dried water-bugs—are sometimes incorporated with the banana and

mashed hard-boiled egg is often given as a separate item. Cactus fruit or other cheap and easily available fruit is often given, either in place of the banana or in addition to it. I have seen Calandrias—native Mexican Orioles—kept on dry sugar and dried flies and surviving on it. A more usual diet for them is dampened chicken-mash sweetened with sugar. Although I have worked quite a bit with Mexican birdcatchers and having talked to many birdsellers and birdkeepers, I cannot recall any who ever used mealworms. Many had never heard of such insects" (Douglas, 1987c).

This research in Mexico was a small part of his efforts to document traditional methods of feeding softbills, a project of many years. His *Honeycreeper* article appears in four issues (Douglas, 1986b, 1987a,b,c). His *Watchbird* article on maintaining insectivorous birds (originally presented at the fifth annual AFA Convention in 1979) is richly detailed, and contains a wealth of practical information including a recipe of his own devising, of which he could say, "I recommend it with confidence" (Douglas, 1981b).

He had already presented a scholarly review of the history of softbill diets, commencing with the Romans, who fed their thrushes *ficus et farre* (figs and meal), through the Renaissance and the Victorian eras, into modern times, at the First International Birds in Captivity Conference (now often remembered as the first Delacour Conference), at Seattle in 1978 (Douglas, 1981a). It included 39 references, among them 16th and 17th century Italian and French books (Douglas, 1981a, 1986a&b) that Arthur had not only translated himself, but copied out their illustrations in ball point pen! It was in recognition of this scholarship that he was elected a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London in 1969.

Arthur was just as interested in seed-eating passerines, and wrote much about them in *Cage and Aviary Birds*, as well as an article on "charming, but useless, nonsense" passed on by generations of canary breeders, for *AFA Watchbird* (Douglas, 1980). He eventually gathered a great deal of data on "finches." He was found of relating the conversation in Dallas that inspired him to this undertaking.

"I was in Woolworth's, and they had some common imported finches. There was one that I couldn't recognize. It was mousy-grey all over, and had a black beak. I could see it was a munia of some kind. I had read about the Dusky Munia and other rare species, and I thought that this might be one of them, so I asked the girl in charge of the pet section, "What kind of bird is that in the corner?"

'Them's finches', she said.

I said, 'Yes, I know they're finches, but this particular one, this little grey one...?'

'Well,' she informed me, 'there's canaries, and there's parakeets

and there's finches. Them's finches.” (Arthur eventually determined this was an immature spice finch (*Lonchura punctulata*).

Things progressed from this unpromising discussion, “I thought, ‘Well, we’re a fine pair. She doesn’t know the common finches and I don’t know them either. It’s time that I knew a bit more about them.’ I thought, ‘I’ll go through the back issues of *Cagebirds* and any other publications that I may have, and I’ll list all the finches that are mentioned there. I’ll see if I can get them clear in my mind. To make sure, I’ll draw a picture of each kind.”

“I started by making rather careful colored drawings of weaverbirds. I expected to finish the whole enterprise by the time my summer vacation was over (I still had four or five weeks to go). In fact, I worked on-and-off for about three years. The finished notebook eventually ran to four notebooks. It is still not complete, and I don’t think it ever will be...”

It is a matter of regret to the many friends who admired them that these beautifully crafted notebooks were never published. A few excerpts did appear in *Watchbird* (Douglas, 1995, 1996). However, they certainly contributed to the avicultural literature. Arthur soon found out he could not always depend on the exiting literature. On one occasion he startled Alice when he hurled his copy of Bates’ and Busenbark’s *Finches and Soft-billed birds* across the room. (Among other things, he found the photo of a “Crimson-crowned Weaver” (*Euplectes hordeaceus*) on page 532, was actually of a South African Red Bishop or Grenadier Weaver (*Euplectes oryx oryx*).

He decided to send his notebooks to his friend Robin Restall, who was then still living in England. They were returned with copious notes. These included Mr. Restall’s own extensive avicultural observations, as well as data gleaned from the encyclopedic collection of study skins at the British Museum. Information flowed both ways across the Atlantic. Robin Restall was at work on his book, *Finches and Other Seed-eating Birds*. In the acknowledgements he included Arthur Douglas among the persons who “helped to fill a gap in my experience and the literature” (Restall, 1975). He cited Arthur in his species accounts of the Blue Chaffinch (*Fringilla teydea*) (for pre-WWI avicultural data) and the Rose-bellied Bunting (*Passerina rositae*), of which Arthur kept a female in his back yard in Dallas. I suspect the several highly detailed accounts of 1950s activities at the San Diego Zoo, which I have not seen published anywhere else, may have come from his correspondence with K.C. Lint, San Diego’s long-time curator of birds.

Arthur’s generosity with his time, knowledge, data, birds, plants, and library were an integral element of his character. My own library is much the richer because of his startling presents of Emilius Hopkinson’s 1926 book, *Records of Birds Bred in Captivity*, the 1930 edition of Arthur Prestwich’s *Who’s Who in*

*Aviculture*, and all three volumes of *Aviculture*, published by the Avicultural Society from 1925 to 1931. The first hummingbirds at The Dallas World Aquarium were collected with Arthur’s personal mist nets, which he presented in 2001. His years of service to the Dallas Bird Club are remembered with gratitude. He spoke before local avicultural groups at least as late as 2002. And above all, there were the conversations in the Tolkien-esque study of his Dallas house, or in the backyard, full of aviaries, tortoise pens, and plants. One always came away with new wisdom: The main effort in growing millet in Dallas was getting out of its way as it grew. The little pots on the wall near the doors of houses in Pieter Bruegel paintings were for sparrows to nest in. The resulting fat fledglings were a welcome addition to the monotonous medieval diet. An electronic bug zapper was just the thing for catching moths which were then frozen in plastic bags. Then Arthur used a little device to crush nuts to decorate cakes. Birds would sift through the resulting fragments and find all the edible bits.

Arthur lived in his North Dallas house until 2006. That year, he bred some spice finches and Blue-headed Cordon Bleus in his backyard. His health then made it necessary for him to live in a delightfully decorated room at the Presbyterian Village, where he enjoyed a daily stream of St. Mark’s colleagues, former students and avicultural friends. Though his ’90s made seeing and hearing difficult, and he was often very tired, he never lost the ability to delight and startle his visitors with wit and insights, and his courtliness remained to the end.

As an old friend, Dave Schlessler, director emeritus of the Dallas Children’s Aquarium in Fair Park, observed long ago, “The sun never set on Arthur Douglas.”

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