

# Old World Sparrows and Related Weavers

— Part 1 —

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“Sparrow,” like “Robin,” “Blackbird,” or “Bunting,” is a name that, in England, had narrow application, but with the spread of English-speaking people across the globe, has acquired a much broader one, encompassing birds whose imagined resemblance to previously familiar species does not necessarily imply any close taxonomic relationship between them. Thus, while American and European Robins are both thrushes, if very different ones, the “Robins” of Australia and New Zealand are Old World flycatchers (which, in turn, have nothing to do with New World flycatchers). The British Blackbird is a thrush (in the same genus as the American Robin). New World Blackbirds are Icterids, in the same family as New World orioles (entirely different from Old World ones) and Meadow Larks (which are not larks).

Lazuli, Indigo, Painted, and Varied Buntings, so beloved by U.S. birders, are members of the entirely New World cardinal grosbeak subfamily, while the buntings of Europe, Asia and Africa are close relatives of the many New World sparrows, and belong in a different subfamily of the huge and ill-defined family Emberizidae. On the other hand, Old World sparrows, the most familiar being the generally despised House Sparrow, are members of the entirely Old World weaver family, the Ploceidae.

If we thus find that some sparrows are weavers, and some weavers are sparrows, it need not necessarily follow that there are also sparrow-weavers, but such, in fact, is the case.

The four sparrow-weavers comprise the genus *Plocepasser* (which translates from the Latin as “weaver-sparrow”). Entirely African, this genus, in most classification systems, is the third most primitive in the

weaver family (Ploceidae). The first two are the Buffalo Weavers *Bubalornis* and *Dinemellia*, which I have covered in a previous article (Lindholm, 1994). Two of the sparrow-weavers have restricted ecologies; *P. donaldsoni* found only in the deserts of bordering Ethiopia and Kenya, and *P. rufoscapulatus* confined to the *Brachystegia* highlands of Angola, Zambia, Malawi and Botswana (Clements, 1978). I am not surprised that I found no records of either species in captivity, but had expected to find more than I did for *Plocepasser superciliosus*, the Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver, which has a vast African range, from the Atlantic to western Ethiopia, south to Zaire. All I discovered was that this bird had “been imported from Abyssinia” to England, according to the early Ploceid specialist W. Shore-Baily (1923). The otherwise complete absence of literary references to this species in captivity is certainly partially due to the fact that it is, for all practical purposes, a seven inch long sparrow without any striking features. Furthermore, though not rare, it is a “very silent and unobtrusive bird, found in small parties or pairs in bush and savannah woodland” (Williams & Arlott, 1980). At any rate, these are moot points, since, like all other Ploceids which occur in Ghana, this species is listed in CITES Appendix III, and is thus banned from commercial import to the U.S. under the provisions of the Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992, which became effective in September 1993.

The fourth species in *Plocepasser*, *P. mahali*, the White-browed Sparrow-weaver, though absent from the Northwest, is found almost everywhere else in Sub-Saharan Africa, in dry, open country. As might be

expected, there are several subspecies. From illustrations in, respectively, Williams & Arlott (1980) and Newman (1983), it appears that at least the Northeastern and Southern ones are very distinct. Both are quietly attractive, with highly contrasting light and dark plumage.

Though exported at least as early as 1876, when specimens arrived at the Zoologischer Garten Berlin (Rutgers et al., 1977), this has never been a commonly available bird. Again, it is formidably large for a “finch,” approaching seven inches. Of course, a major drawback is its reputation for antisocial behavior; according to Rutgers et al. (1977), “The males are very aggressive, especially in the spring, and several pairs can be kept together only in a very large aviary.”

It is again W. Shore-Baily (1923), a prolific contributor to the *Avicultural Magazine*, to whom we must turn for any detailed account of the White-browed Sparrow-weaver in captivity. Mr. Shore-Baily, who, from 1914 through 1924, achieved the first British breedings of five species of weavers (Coles, 1987), wrote the following, “The Mahali Weaver (*Plocepasser* [sic] *mahali*) is rarely imported. I have only twice met with it. Once, at a dealer’s shop, I saw a cage of about two dozen, but as he was asking £5 per pair I was not tempted to purchase; and the other occasion was when I secured my present bird. It was in with a mixed crowd of South African Weavers and Whydahs, and was the only one of its kind. . . . This is the only Weaver I know that has a really good singing voice. It sings as loudly as a Thrush. My bird, presumably a cock, has built two nests. These were nearly as large as a football, and much the same shape, with a hole in the side and an exit at the back. Every sort of material it could lay its beak on was used, and the structure was quite waterproof. I have had somewhat similar nests here built by the Cape Sparrow (*P. arcuatus*). Even the Germans have not succeeded in breeding this Weaver; but I feel sure that it would not be a difficult bird to breed provided true pairs could be obtained. . . .”

Mr. Shore-Baily’s (1923) bird was the southern, nominate subspecies. He mentions in the same account that, as of 1923, “a few” *Plocepasser mahali melanorhynchus* had “just arrived”

from "Abyssinia."

The White-browed Sparrow-weaver is not on any CITES Appendix. Though I don't believe any have yet shown up in the shipments that still occasionally arrive from Tanzania and Botswana, the possibility thus remains that specimens may yet be available for the adventuresome aviculturist looking to a possible first captive breeding.

Records for the captive maintenance of *Histurgops ruficauda*, the Rufous-tailed Weaver, appear to be nonexistent. While certainly not "pretty," it cannot be said to be dull. At eight and a half inches, it is only slightly smaller than the Buffalo Weavers. With its icy pale blue eyes and streaky head feathers, it is reminiscent of a bird of prey. The feathers of the mantle, breast and flanks have a scale-like appearance and a bright touch is added by the chestnut brown tail, and chestnut touches to the primaries. The only illustration I have seen is provided by Williams and Arlott (1980). This species is endemic to Tanzania, where it is "relatively common" in some locations (Williams & Arlott, 1980). There is always the possibility that the most recent Tanzanian shipment to the U.S. may prove to be the last, but at least a few more are anticipated. The latest several contained some very fine "esoterica." Should *Histurgops* ever appear, it is to be hoped any specimens will be properly appreciated.

Of the two species of *Pseudonigrita*, the more obviously attractive one, *P. cabanisi*, the Black-capped Social Weaver, appears to have no avicultural history. Williams and Arlott (1980) note it is a "very local bird" restricted to Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. While they mention it is "common" in Kenya's Samburu Game Reserve, they make no indication that there might be similar pockets of abundance in Tanzania, the only East African country from where export is at all likely today.

While Williams and Arlott (1980) state that the Gray-headed Social

Weaver *Pseudonigrita arnaudi* is a "local resident" in its Sudanese and East African range, it is a species that has been imported repeatedly to this country, at least as recently as 1990. It is also one of a handful of Ploceids for which a detailed account of an American breeding has been published (Schulenburg, 1982). Wayne Schulenburg, Animal Care Manager for the San Diego Zoo Bird Department, has kept birds of his own since early childhood, and, for years, has had an unusual collection of seed-eating birds. He purchased three *P. arnaudi* in 1978, placing them in a densely planted outdoor aviary with Gray Peacock Pheasants, Nicobar Pigeons, Melba Finches, Red-collared Whydahs *Euplectes ardens*, and Speckle-fronted Weavers *Sporopipes frontalis*. While they avidly ate the standard finch diet, they were also in continuous search of arthropods, and consumed mealworms greedily.

With most of the African Estrildids, a rule of thumb is that if breeding successes have not been achieved in the first two seasons after acquisition, they are not very likely to happen at all and that two or three years of offspring production should be considered satisfactory. This is not the case with the Plociedae. Wayne's Gray-headed Social Weavers did not lay eggs until 1981, at which time he had only two unsexed birds. "Many" nests had been built prior to this time. Wayne describes them as "multi-chambered."

In June 1981, two eggs were discovered, and both hatched on June 21st, at which point insect consumption increased dramatically. The first chick to leave the nest did so July 27th, the other following on the 29th. An interesting detail was that the breeding pair was assisted by a male Speckle-fronted Weaver, who not only fed the chicks but also brooded them and guarded the nest from other aviary inhabitants (Schulenburg, 1982). At the time Wayne's article was written, the same nest had been relined by the breeding pair and their *Sporopipes* assistant, and two further eggs had been laid. I am not aware of the outcome.

While the first captive breeding of *Pseudonigrita arnaudi* took place in the Swedish aviaries of Ralph Zackrisson, who hatched three and reared one in 1971 (Prestwich, 1971),

Wayne's accomplishment is recognized by the AFA as the first North American record (Thompson, 1989). I have not heard of any subsequent U.S. hatchings. However, as imports have occurred as recently as 1990, and given that weavers have a comparatively long reproductive life, someone may yet achieve further successes.

Perhaps the most famous of the African Weavers is *Philetairus socius*, the Sociable Weaver. It is the same size as the House Sparrow, and possesses a distinctive, if quietly colored, pattern, the black mask and scaly nape and flanks identical in both sexes. It is, however, from its nesting habits that this bird derives its fame. Its individual nests are crude structures compared to the wonderfully intricate ones of the *Ploceus* Weavers. It is their conglomeration into vast, haystack-like structures that commands attention. These may span more than 25 feet across, and contain more than 50 active individual chambers, each entered from beneath (Collias & Collias, 1977).

Eco-tourists in Tanzania and Kenya will look for this species in vain, as it, along with the Red-headed Finch, the Violet-eared Waxbill, the Queen Whydah, and the Alario Finch, is one of the many seed-eating birds restricted to the Southern African Faunal Subrealm. It has a smaller range than some of the other southern endemics, not being found along the East Coast or the Cape, but occurring in a roughly rectangular distribution along the West Coast and the corresponding interior, in Namibia, southwestern Botswana, and central South Africa.

I am not aware of any Sociable Weavers arriving in recent importations from Botswana, the only country in this species' range that allows commercial export. Before the First World War, Namibia was a German colony, and it was from there that "large numbers" arrived in Germany in 1907, apparently the first record for aviculture (Rutgers et al., 1977). Rutgers et al. (1977) mention, without citation or date, an unsuccessful breeding, where the chicks were abandoned because "there was not enough live food available, such as ants' eggs and mealworms."

The first fully successful captive propagation of the Sociable Weaver took place at the University of California, Los Angeles, as part of the long-time research of Ploceids conducted

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Gray-headed Social Weavers — adults with one chick.

by the Drs. Elsie C. and N.E. Collias (1977). They received ten specimens, specially collected in the Kalahari Desert and exported through a permit issued by the South African government in August 1972, arriving, I believe, just before the Newcastle's import ban. After "about two months" in an indoor aviary, these birds were transferred to an outdoor aviary 16 feet wide and high, and 30 feet long. No mention is made of plantings, but this enclosure was "furnished with a framework of 2 x 4 wooden beams, which supported four boughs, on one of which, *Doryalus kaffir* from South Africa, the 10 birds almost immediately began to build a nest with straws, after being released into the aviary" (Collias & Collias, 1977). In contrast to *Ploceus* and *Euplectes* Weavers, which definitely prefer fresh grass, the Sociable Weaver's favored nest material was "dry, brown grasses with feather tops." "Fine twigs" were mainly utilized for the roof that connects the chambers into a single mass.

These birds were fed a standard finch diet, the live food being mealworms, with crickets added subsequently. Despite the spaciousness of their aviary, "intraspecific strife" was a severe problem and, by the winter of 1973, only five remained alive. In the meantime, reproduction had already commenced. As noted above, nest construction had begun almost immediately upon the weavers' release into

their aviary in October 1972. It was not until mid-January 1973, however, that the first eggs were laid. Four individual chambers had been completed at this point. Three true pairs each

took possession of a chamber, all three females producing eggs. A fourth pair had to be relocated because it kept all the other birds out of all the chambers at night. One pair tolerated an odd male, which slept with them and their eggs at night.

It can thus be seen that *Philetarius* differs from the weavers usually classified as more advanced in that the flock broke up into monogamous pairs. (In a similar group of *Ploceus*, *Euplectes* or *Foudia*, one male would attempt to monopolize all the females and fiercely defend them against the other males.) A further difference is that both male and female Sociable Weavers incubate, whereas, I believe, male *Ploceus* do not.

No eggs hatched until July 1973, when one chick died the day it hatched. At the same time, all egg-laying ceased, and did not resume before the five remaining birds were brought indoors for the winter. Collias and Collias (1977) note, though, that the "size of the nest mass doubled" in those months.

Only one pair was placed in the same outdoor aviary in June of 1974.

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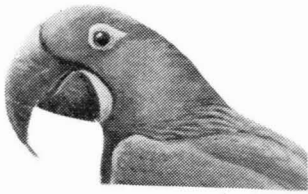
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This pair built five chambers by October, when they finally laid eggs. From then until "early spring of 1975," they produced eight clutches of eggs. Almost all resulted in chicks. Despite the parents' provision with a steady supply of mealworms and crickets, only a single chick survived to fledging, and it died the day it left the nest. As field reports indicated nest-helpers in this species, it was decided to introduce an extra male. This bird, added in May, had previously "dominated the entire outdoor aviary," but was restricted to a subordinate status by the breeding pair, the female, especially, attacking it "very frequently." However, despite this disruption, the pair renested almost at once, and the resulting four chicks fledged in June. Immediately, a tenth clutch for the season was laid, while the breeding male continued to feed the fledged chicks almost single-handedly. At the same time, this male began building the first new chamber to be added since "the preceding autumn," occupied, while still incomplete, by the young birds, now excluded from the chamber where the female incubated her latest clutch. These eggs were subsequently broken, the breeding male was killed by a predator, likely a King-snake, and the odd male began harassing the young birds and was removed. Collias and Collias' (1977) article ends at this point, and I am unaware of what subsequently took place.

For at least nine years, *Philetairus socius* was hatched at the Frankfurt Zoo in Germany. I do not know of any article published in English on this achievement, but the bare facts are presented in the annual appendices of the *International Zoo Yearbook* (Zoological Society of London, 1982-92). Breeding commenced in 1980, when four hatched and died. Success remained unachieved for the next three years, as the eight, one and ten, hatched respectively, also failed to reach maturity. But in 1983, nine of the 19 hatched survived. Four of the nine hatched in 1984 survived. 1985 was the most successful season; only two of the nine hatched that year were reported to have died. In 1986, 10 hatched, but only one survived. All three of the chicks that hatched in 1987 lived, and are furthermore indicated to be at least partially second-generation. No breedings are indi-

cated for 1988, but in 1989, the last year for which I've seen data, 39 hatched, but only four survived. It is not mentioned whether captive-bred specimens were among the breeders that year.

In summary, Frankfurt Zoo fully reared 28 Sociable Weavers, out of 102 hatched over nine seasons (Zoological Society of London, 1982-92). ISIS (1994) does not indicate any specimens currently at Frankfurt, but does note that the three unsexed birds at the Vienna Zoo, the only captive specimens listed for December 31, 1993, are captive-bred.

It can thus be seen that if Sociable Weavers should appear in a future shipment from Botswana (not an impossibility at this time), there is certainly the potential for American aviculturists to enjoy a fantastic sight, and, with proper attention to live food and (admittedly problematic) social structures, establish self-sustaining populations as well. While not a bird for the standard community aviary, it is one whose remarkable nesting habits cannot fail to fascinate.

(Part 2 will conclude with the genera *Passer*, *Petronia*, *Sporopipes*, and *Amblyospiza*.)

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