

# A Non-surgical Method for Sexing Starlings

by Josef Lindholm, III  
Fort Worth Zoological Park

been generally achieved surgically or, time and circumstance permitting, through behavioral observation.

In a subsequent conversation, Dr. Short suggested that this observation may possibly apply to a major proportion of the more than 100 Sturnid species or, at least, as Dr. Short has qualified, "to those more or less 'typical starlings.'"

Dr. Short defines the "gape" as "the open mouth, i.e. the fleshy parts inside the mouth seen only when it is opened." He goes on to reveal the biological significance of the differences in gape color; "The point is that 'gaping' displays, even simple 'showing' of the mouth ('gape') when opening it to call at a nearby bird, *expose the color*, depending upon the behavioral situation. If there is a sexual difference, then the displays are added to, or subtracted from, aggressively or in courtship, by the color."

Aviculturists are in the fortuitous position of being able to contribute towards a more clear and concise understanding of this situation, one that will certainly facilitate our husbandry of these birds and their con-

## A Letter from Dr. Lester Short

Mr. Lindholm,

Per your Watchbird articles on starlings [Vol. XX, No. 5, 56-57], NB.,

1. As Prof. Dr. Fritz Merkel long ago found in the European Starling, males have a fully black gape. The female gape is pale, yellowy, pink, dusky, grey, but not black. This holds for all starlings known to me in East Africa, including the Superb *Spreo superbus*, and Hildebrandt's *S. hildebrandti*, which we handle often. From the time the eyes begin paling from juvenile dark, the sex is apparent. Glossy Starlings *Lamprotornis* (for example, *Blue-eared L. chalybeus* and *Ruepell's Long-tailed L. pupureopterus*) and the *Red-winged Starling Onychognathus morio* also show this.

2. The Superb is the abundant Nairobi Starling and is closely associated

with humans. It's in no more risk than are the people among whom it lives. (The *Red-winged Starling* also breeds in Nairobi.)

Watchbird has been a happy surprise to me, lots of information on incubation periods, habits, etc.

Cheers,

Lester Short

(Lamont Curator, American Museum of Natural History)

The information on visually determining sex in starlings, presented in the accompanying communication from Dr. Lester Short, has not, to my knowledge, been previously published in any avicultural journal. Until now, with the exception of the several species with pronounced differences in male and female plumage, identifying the sex of captive starlings has

## Grasslands Exotic Finches



### Parrot Finches:

- Blue-faced
- Blue-faced Lutino
- Red-headed
- Red-headed Pied
- Red-headed Sea Green
- Red-headed Sea Green Pied
- Pin-tailed
- Peale's
- Tricolor (Blue-breasted/ Forbes)

### Gouldian Finches:

- Normal
- White-breasted
- Yellow
- Blue, Dilute Blue, Silver

### Waxbills:

- Lavender
- Gold-breasted
- Violet-eared
- Sweet (Yellow-bellied)
- Blue-capped Cordon Blue
- Senegal Fire Finch

### Also:

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servation.

It would be most appreciated if any individual or institution possessing adult specimens of known sex of any species of starling would make note of the color of the gape and forward this information to the author care of Bird Department, Fort Worth Zoological Park, 1989 Colonial Parkway, Fort Worth, TX 76110.

Photographs of identified birds would also be most welcome as well as information as to the age the adult gape coloration is attained.

Dr. Lester L. Short gained international attention in 1986 for his confirmation of the continued existence of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Cuba. Dr. Short is the acknowledged authority on woodpeckers, honeyguides, barbets and toucans, the families that comprise the higher Piciformes. His monograph of the World's Woodpeckers, published over a decade ago, remains the definitive work on these birds and he is presently co-authoring, with his wife (Bioacoustician and Senior Research Fellow in Ornithology at the National Museum of Kenya) Jennifer Horne, another, covering the latter three families, the first to do so in the twentieth century. He and Horne are thus frequently in the field, especially in East Africa, conducting behavioral and ecological research. They are also involved in avian conservation there and elsewhere (including Peru). They have not ignored captive resources. In 1992, they spent several days observing and recording the vocalizations of the world's largest collection of captive toucans at Jerry Jennings's Emerald Forest Bird Gardens in California.

Somehow, Dr. Short has also found time to write his delightful *The Lives of Birds*, published by Henry Holt in 1993, the first of a series of books on animal behavior, prepared in conjunction with the American Museum of Natural History.

Dr. Short has a long association with the American Museum, joining the Department of Ornithology in 1966. His responsibilities have included chairing the Department before assuming the Lamont Curatorship, an endowed research position. The AMNH Ornithology Department is, of course, one of the leading centers for avian research and houses the most extensive collection of preserved bird specimens in the world. ●

## The Size of Softbills by Weight

by Les Gibson  
Portland, Oregon

Sizes of birds are invariably given by length because this has been the only practical way. While it gives some idea of size it runs up against the problem of bulky feathers and, in particular, tail length. Also, the length can be measured in several different ways (from top of head, tip of beak, etc.). For example, the size of the same small bird (a Solitaire) varied from 6.5"/16.5 cm to 8.75"/22 cm in several different field guides.

A more accurate and useful method is weight. It should not be an overwhelming task to eventually compile a weight list of the relatively few kinds of birds kept in captivity. Of course, there is variation to be found. Some factors to be considered are:

Breeding

Indoors or out: cage or aviary

Migrating

Molting

Sex

Subspecies/geographic origin

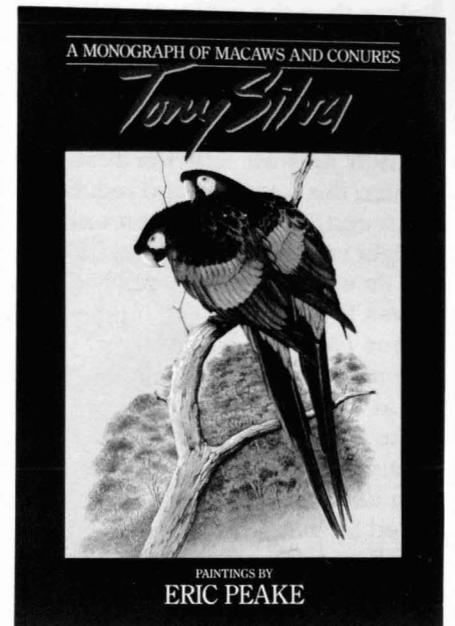
Season/climate

Well fed/starving: established/newly imported (these categories often coincide).

Birds are almost always heavier when kept out of doors, especially in winter (in northern climes, anyway), as they are in the breeding season or at migrating time, even if they are not going anywhere. A small bird can easily increase in weight by five percent after eating, and a hungry, newly imported Minivet ate 32 percent of its weight in mealworms per day, for several weeks.

Birds of prey, with their feast-or-famine eating pattern, normally experience a much wider fluctuation than small passerines. A Screech Owl (*Otus asia*) that was found in midwinter, frozen and starving, promptly gained 44 percent or, if you like, started at 69.5 percent of its usual weight. This was 30.5 percent down and almost at the fatal limit for Shammas (see below). The anomaly lies in whether you use the higher or lower weight to calculate the percentage.

Even larger gains are common in fish-eaters. An immature Bald Eagle regularly increased by 10 percent each



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