



The Subspecies Question

Part I

Josef H. Lindholm, III
Fort Worth Zoological Park

Until now, this column has been very focused indeed. All four traditionally recognized finch families have representatives in sub-Saharan Africa (Lindholm, 1994). So far I have only discussed Ploceids; the family of Old World sparrows, weavers, and whydahs. That is a work in progress, and is intended to cover the entire family. However, at this point I digress to the family Estrildidae, by far the most popular of the four in aviculture, in order to address a situation for which, most likely, decisions will need to be reached (and acted upon) in the near future.

In the days, so shortly past, when the American aviculture of African waxbills and relatives was largely a matter of "stamp-collecting," with no real goal of sustained propagation, the availability of more than one subspecies of a given bird was generally seen as the opportunity to add yet another "Stamp" to the collection.

Bates' and Busenbark's (1963) *Finches and Soft-billed Birds*, which after thirty years remains, by and large, a very useful guide to finch aviculture, is, at the same time, a fascinating look back to the days before Newcastle's quarantine and domestic and foreign regulations, when birds arrived in this country in far greater variety and from many more places than they have of late. Their treatment of subspecies is illustrative of the times: "Prices on both these subspecies are far higher than for the common Cuthroat, and color variations are slight. Therefore, in most instances, there will be little demand." "There are several very similar subspecies [of Red-billed Fire Finches]... Differences in most are very slight... Most of these differences are so slight that they would pass unnoticed in the eyes of aviculturists. One, however, from South Africa not only has larger

spots but is also much harder in shipping and acclimation." "The Abyssinian Cordon Bleu (subspecies *schoanus*) is infrequently imported and is therefore considerably rarer in aviculture as well as more expensive. It shows more extensive blue on the abdomen and a paler shade of brown above." "There are several races of the St. Helena Waxbill spread over a large area in Africa... but the nominate subspecies, *astrild*, is the most outstanding. This South African species [sic] is called the Greater St. Helena Waxbill... The race known aviculturally as lesser St. Helena Waxbill is the subspecies *angolensis*. It is far more frequently imported than the above but is less distinctive." "The seldom imported, rare South African Gold-breasted Waxbill is slightly larger by one-fourth inch than the Senegal Gold-breasted Waxbill; but it is less colorful... Altogether this is a less attractive bird, but its rarity greatly enhances its demand."

Though warnings against the failure of American aviculture to establish African finches have been published for some time (Warmbrod, 1989), it appears that, for many species, serious attempts to create self sustaining populations really only began in earnest in 1992, with the passing of the Wild Bird Conservation Act (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1992). The effect of this legislation was the prohibition, after October 23, 1993, of the importation of all birds listed in any of the three CITES appendices. In brief, because the Republic of Ghana, in 1976, requested Appendix III listing (which only requires documentation of any specimens leaving that country and implies nothing about conservation status) for all of its seed-eating birds, all of the most commonly imported African finches ended up on the prohibited list. This has so far not absolutely ended the

arrival of African finches in the continental U.S. Despite the rather plain wording of the 1992 act, until the middle of 1994, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service appeared to have allowed at least some Appendix III species into the country if they did not come from the nation(s) which listed them. Since Ghana has not been a major export center for finches, this theoretically meant the West African finch trade could go on as before, but a "civil suit brought about by the Humane Society of the United States and Defenders of Wildlife resulted in a ruling by District Judge Oberdorfer which now requires every imported Appendix III bird to be either accompanied by a permit or included on an approved list" (Vehrs, 1994). As the format for granting exemption permits has not yet, to my knowledge, been formulated, and no African finch has so far been placed on the Approved List (which is still very small), this means they are, after all, prohibited.

A few shipments from Tanzania continue to arrive, with species that do not occur in Ghana, but, as I've detailed previously (Lindholm, 1993a), due, this time, to airline policies following certain disastrous shipments, these are few and far between since 1991, and it is supposed that any future consignment may prove to be the last.

Several of the traditionally common West African finches still arrive from Puerto Rico, apparently not subject to restrictions of the Wild Bird Conservation Act, but are, instead, treated as if they were interstate shipments. I have been told, however, that despite the abundance of these birds on that island, at the present state of exploitation, these introduced populations may be soon reduced to commercial extinction—which would not sadden environmentalists.

West African finches were traditionally exported in enormous numbers from Senegal, as well as Mali, but as the mainstays of this trade are also found in Ghana, shipments from these countries (traditionally arriving here via Europe) cannot be expected in the future. On the other hand, we may perhaps see a few more consignments from Guinea or Sierra Leone, where enough interesting species not found in Ghana occur to make the occasional shipment worthwhile.

From the South African sub-realm, birds have, with few exceptions, reached the U.S. solely from Botswana. I believe we may yet expect a few shipments from that country, although,

again, species found also in Ghana will not be seen.

The result of the rather sudden reduction of African finch imports to America has, I'm glad to say, been a flurry of activity on the part of American aviculturists to finally attempt to establish as many species as possible. These efforts range from individuals setting up pairs in cages in their homes, all the way to major operations involving hundreds or even thousands of birds. As a result, we are beginning to see advertisements offering a variety of captive-bred African finches. At the same time, articles in this magazine and others, on the propagation of African finches, appear with increasing frequency. I believe more articles on African finches have been published in *Watchbird* in the last five years than in the previous 15.

With this abrupt shift in the status of African finches in America, from "stamp collecting" to serious attempts to create self sustaining populations, significance of the availability of multiple subspecies is quite different than it was in the days of Bates and Busenbark (1963). As this availability, at least as far as imported birds are concerned, is likely to be of short duration, the decision as to how we deal with this situation is one we must make now.

Our motives in establishing American self sustaining populations of African finches must be examined. To the larger degree, we will do so for our own entertainment. Of the species we currently have any real potential of working with, the great majority are not really likely to become threatened in the future. The most commercially exploited species have withstood such pressure for many years, and come from habitats long compromised by the presence of humans and their activities. With all the ecological catastrophes that plague sub-Saharan Africa, it would take far worse ones to jeopardize such species as the Red-billed Fire Finch, Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu, or Bronze-winged Mannikin. The International Council for Bird Preservation (Collar & Andrew, 1988) (since renamed Birdlife International) lists only two species of African Estrildids as "Threatened": the Anambra Waxbill, *Estrilda polioptera*, and the Black-lored Waxbill, *E. nigriloris*, both found in very small, little-visited ranges, and neither, to the best of my knowledge, has been collected alive.

While the three species listed by the ICBP (1988) as "Near-threatened" all

have some captive history (Lindholm, 1993a), I don't believe there are any outside of Africa now, and they were never widespread in aviculture: the Shelley's Crimsonwing, *Cryptospiza shelleyi*, Rosey Twinspot, *Hypargos margaritatus*, and the Cinderella Waxbill, *Estrilda thomensis*. There is certainly nothing regarding African Estrildids that parallels the situations of Gouldian Finches, Green Avadavits or Red Siskins, where a well known and long-exploited cage bird is discovered to be in severe trouble in the wild. Of course, the experience we gain with the nonthreatened species we now work with may well be applied in the unlikely event that the above mentioned rarities appear in aviculture.

A better reason for insisting on subspecific purity is the potential for research. There is a long tradition of scientific observation of captive African Estrildids. The work of C.J.O. Harrison, Desmond Morris, Derek Goodwin, Jurgen Nicolai, Klaus Immelmann, Louis Baptista and Robert Payne, among others, comes to mind. There is a great potential for all sorts of future projects. Obviously, the more closely captive populations resemble their wild counterparts the better.

Of course, for the same reasons many aviculturists abhor hybrids and avoid mutations, there will be a strong desire to produce birds as similar to wild specimens as possible. I think this sentiment is becoming steadily more pervasive among American breeders — and none too soon. One frequently hears of the difficulty that British aviculturists (and people in certain areas of the U.S.) have obtaining wild-type Gouldians. And, of course, one need only attempt to procure wild Canaries to see why an active effort to maintain wild-type populations is important. Show standards may well prove potentially detrimental towards efforts to achieve this end. Variability is a feature of wild populations, and to eliminate it in the name of "Show Standards" is, in my mind, as reprehensible as deliberate hybridization where alternatives exist. Judges at shows should take an entirely different approach to wild birds and those intended to resemble them, rather than applying one appropriate for Budgies or Bengalese.

With the ultimate goal of establishing a self sustaining population of a given species, the question arises as to whether or not this is best achieved by recognizing subspecies. I believe this must be an-

swered on a species by species basis. Of course, if one decides to disregard subspecies at the outset, not much can be done in the future if it's later decided that was not a good decision. On the other hand, if a species where subspecies have been maintained as separate populations is found to be facing an uncertain future in captivity, one then has the option of fusing the different lines. Perhaps it is wisest to make the choice that gives the most options for later ones.

It is with the idea of creating an awareness of the current situation, in order that decisions can be made, that I present the following overview. I have divided the species in question according to the CITES status, as it is obviously the prohibited species for which the more urgent situation exists.

AFRICAN ESTRILDIDS LISTED AS CITES APPENDIX III.

Cut-throat Finch *Amadina fasciata*

A number arrived from Tanzania in recent years, so that both the West African, *A. f. fasciata*, and the East African, *A. f. alexanderi*, are currently present in the U.S. Goodwin (1982) describes *A. f. alexanderi* as "darker, duller and grayer" than the nominate subspecies. The details Dr. Goodwin further provides are basically comparative degrees of difference, and he notes that intergradation is natural. At this point, I think the question is more as to whether American aviculturists will muster the interest to work extensively with this species at all, given its long-standing, if perhaps exaggerated, reputation for aggression (Lindholm, 1993a).

Green Twinspot *Mandingoa nitidula*

M. n. schlegeli, the traditionally more available West African subspecies of this rarely imported bird, is at once distinguished from the Tanzanian (and Southeast African) nominate subspecies by the presence of a red or bright orange breast-patch in the male. The breast is solidly green in Tanzanian birds, which have showed up more recently. There is a great deal of interest presently in all Twinspots, but no one has yet attained the point where they can be a reliable source of captive-bred birds. The usual story in contacting potential sources of Peter's or Dybowski's is "I wished you could have called last year!" The situation with Green Twinspots is even worse (I can't think of anyone to call), despite the fact that Greens appear to be

less aggressive to each other than Peter's or Dybowski's are (Warmbrod, 1989), and should therefore be easier to propagate. *M. n. nitidula* and *M. n. schlegeli* are so distinct that I feel this is a situation where hybridization should be only a last resort. Dr. Goodwin (1982) outlines a number of differences between them.

Red-billed Firefinch
Lagonosticta senegalensis

This will, I believe, be the first African Estrildid to be firmly established in this country. The vast majority in the U.S. are West African. Two subspecies occur in Senegal (the former source of the enormous waxbill shipments of the old days), the nominate form, which may also have reached us in consignments from Sierra Leone and Guinea, and the northern *L. s. rhodopsis*, which may likewise have arrived from Mali. As Derek Goodwin (1982) distinguishes the northern subspecies as being "slightly paler and more yellowish on the brown and buff parts of its plumage" than the nominate one, and there is no range separation between them, it would be facetious to recognize differences among West African birds. On the other hand, I'd think it wise to avoid crossing West African Firefinches with the few which arrived from Botswana or Tanzania. This is unlikely, in that those birds are recognized as rarities, and identified by the subspecific names. Male *L. s. rendalli* have the most brown, dorsally, of the subspecies (see the illustration in Newman (1983)), and both sexes have more prominent spots than West African birds (Goodwin, 1982). The handful of East African birds in the U.S. appear to be identified as *L. b. brunneiceps*. As that subspecies is confined to the highlands of Ethiopia and Eritrea, from where very few if any birds have been exported in the last decade, I believe these specimens are *L. s. somaliensis*, which occurs in Tanzania (Goodwin, 1982). People who have seen these birds tell me they are immediately distinguished from West African specimens by the fact that the white spots are absent in both sexes, the male's red is brighter, and the female is definitely grayer. More significantly, from a biological viewpoint, the contact call sounds remarkably like "Baby Societies begging." Louis Baptista believes this may indicate that these birds should be differentiated at the species level. ➔

Part II continues in the next issue.

"Wing Quips"

"Why, I ask myself, should certain birds have been allotted to certain gods and goddesses in the Greek and Roman mythology? Why should the eagle go with Zeus, the peacock with Hera, the dove with Venus, the swan with Apollo, the woodpecker with the Ares, the owl with Pallas Athene? It could not be mere chance that so many gods and goddesses had each their attendant bird..."

Charles deKay, 1898



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