

From a Bird Fancier's Notebook...

by Arthur Douglas
Dallas, Texas

The Grosbeak Weaver (*Amblyospiza albifrons*).

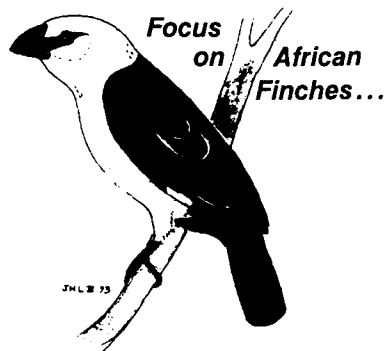
Also known as the Thick-billed Weaver. Large, gregarious. Low, Swampy country or damp forest. Common. Immatures have the beak yellow. Flight dipping, woodpecker-like. Nests beautifully woven, of fine materials. Polygamous. Food: grass and sedge seeds. Young fed on regurgitated seed.

The Grosbeak Weaver in captivity.

Shore-Baily (1923) says harmless to small birds, though they bite "twice as hard as a small parrot." Fond of saffron and Sunflower Seed. Nervous. "A harmless bird which I have kept in a Waxbill aviary" (Tanner, *Cagebirds* 427, 3 Nov. '60). "A pair at London Zoo kept with small birds (Grassfinches mostly) seems harmless, and totally inconspicuous" Robin Restall.

References.

Cage Birds 29th August 1963, P. 197
(B. E. Reed, Illustration by Robin Restall)
Butler, A. G. *Foreign Birds for Cage and Aviary*, Vol. I, P. 198.



Avicultural Notes On The Grosbeak Weaver

Josef Lindholm, Fort Worth
Zoological Park

The Ploceid genus *Amblyospiza* contains a single species, *A. albifrons*, divided into 10 subspecies (Moreau & Greenway, 1962) distributed over a vast portion of Sub-Saharan Africa, from Sierra Leone south to Angola on the Atlantic coast, across central Africa, the southern Sudan to Ethiopia, and along the Indian Ocean coast, from Kenya to the Cape. Because this range includes the West African republic of Ghana, which listed all of its seed-eating birds on CITES Appendix III in 1976, this species has been prohibited from import to the United States since October 22, 1993, under the provision of the 1992 Wild Bird Conservation Act. There are

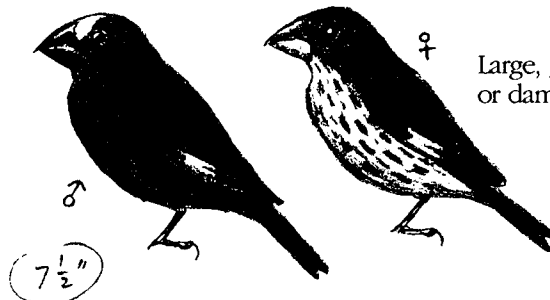
currently none in American zoos, the last being a male at the Pittsburgh Conservatory Aviary that arrived in 1987 and died in 1990, and a pair at San Antonio that died in 1988, having been there at least since 1982 (International Species Information System, 1983-1990). Perhaps some remain in private hands. It is largely in this hope that I present the following. However, the Wild Bird Conservation Act includes provisions for issuing permits "for importation of specimens of otherwise prohibited species for... Zoological breeding or display programs" (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1992), though, so far as I know, none have yet been granted. With such a permit, an American Zoo might be able to obtain *Amblyospiza* through an exchange with a South African Zoo. Then perhaps a success achieved more than 60 years ago might be repeated.

The only hatching of *Amblyospiza* listed by the International Zoo Yearbook occurred at the World of Birds in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1985, when two were reared (Zoological Society of London, 1987). Aside from this I am aware of only one other place where captive breedings took place—The remarkable collection of William Shore-Baily, in England.

Writing on the occasion of Mr. Shore-Baily's death on August 24, 1932, David Seth-Smith, Curator of Mammals and Birds at the London Zoo (and the much-beloved "Zoo Man" of the B.B.C.) wrote: "In 1910 he commenced keeping birds in captivity and he joined the Avicultural Society in 1920. His large garden at

Grosbeak Weaver

Amblyospiza albifrons



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Westbury was well-suited for the construction of aviaries of the kind he specially liked—very large wired-in enclosures through which streams flowed and vegetation grew luxuriantly and where his birds would be in practically a state of nature. Several such aviaries were built and their success is proved by the fact that he was awarded no less than thirty-six medals for breeding foreign birds for the first time in the United Kingdom. At one time he had nearly a thousand birds in outdoor aviaries..." (Seth-Smith, 1932).

What Mr. Seth-Smith did not mention was that the entire place stank—or so Jean Delacour told Arthur Douglas. Mr. Shore-Baily made his money as a tanner—and the tannery was next door.

Mr. Shore-Baily wrote three consecutive accounts of his experiences with *Amblyospiza*, which are the only firsthand accounts of this species' aviculture I am aware of.

"When I first saw this extraordinary bird I took it to be some kind of a Grosbeak, and a Weaver is the very last species to which I should have attributed it... It is a large bird, and its immense Parrot-like beak makes it look still larger... Adult male: general colour above, chocolate brown...fore-head white, underparts dark ashy grey...Hen, above rufous brown, mottled with dark brown centres to the feathers; throat and underparts...white, streaked with dusky brown...A small consignment of these birds came over last Autumn—a first importation—from which I secured a cock and two hens. On turning them into my birdroom for the winter, I became acquainted with the strength of their beaks. They can bite twice as hard as any of the smaller Parrots, and once they have got a hold, hang on like bull-dogs. However, they seem harmless with other birds, as they have made no attempt to hurt the Waxbills and Whydahs flying with them. They seem particularly fond of the larger seeds like saffron and sunflower. They are consequently easy to cater for. I have every hope of breeding them in my aviaries next season..." (Shore-Baily, 1923).

Considering the size of his collection, it is not surprising that he was shakey with some data by the time

he next discussed this species: "I secured my first pair late in 1926, and previous to that time have never met with them at any of the dealers... The cock of this pair did not live long, but the hen wintered out during the severe winters of 1927 and 1928, so that we can assume them to be fairly hardy birds. Early this year I was able to get a male from a private importation from East Africa, and later on in the same year I got four young birds from Gamages. The East African cock mated up with my old hen about the end of June, and he soon built her a nest in a clump of

bullrushes about four feet above the water. The nest in shape closely resembled that of the common Red-billed Weaver (*Quelea quelea*), but was of course much bigger. It was attached to two or three of the stouter rushes and was about eight inches in depth, the entrance hole being on the top side. The hen laid three eggs, white with reddish brown spots, but as far as I could see she took no part in the nest-building. The eggs proved to be infertile, and were removed. Later in July another was laid in the same nest, but these also proved to be useless. As compared with the



NEST OF *Amblyospiza albifrons*.

The nest in which two clutches were laid at William Shore-Baily's aviaries in 1929. According to Newman (1983, p. 415) the large entrance indicates that at the time this picture was taken, the nest was used for roosting. A much smaller tunnel-shaped entrance would be present during breeding.

Courtesy of the Avicultural Society AVIC. MAG. 1929.

nests of the Hyphanbornine [*Ploceus*] and Baya Weavers the nests these birds built were not so closely woven, and would not stand up so well against the weather, showing a tendency to collapse after rain. This is quite understandable when you consider the birds beaks, which are shaped more like those of Parrots than Weavers. How they can weave at all is a mystery to me. These beaks, by the way, can inflict a very nasty bite..." (Shore-Baily, 1929).

His concluding notes the following year ended an article that also detailed the breeding of Black-headed Grosbeaks *Pheucticus melanocephalus* and Japanese Hawfinches *Coccothraustes personata*: "My Thick-billed Weavers went to nest very early in the year [1930], their first nest being in a hazel bush. After they had been sitting a week I removed their eggs as they were infertile. A week or two later they nested again in a dying laurel. I removed the eggs after a day or two, taking it for granted that these eggs were also clear, but on blowing one of them seven or eight hours later I found that it was fertile, so I carried the remaining egg back to the nest. The next day I saw the hen leave the nest so concluded that she had resumed her duties. In due course a young one was hatched. I cannot give the incubation period, as the nest was too deep to see into and I was disinclined to disturb the birds by inserting a finger. Apparently everything went well as about three weeks later the cock pulled the bottom out of the nest and a young one emerged and disappeared into the thick cover. This was the last I saw of it, and it either fell a victim to our atrocious climate or was killed by another bird. Undaunted, they again went to nest in early September. Two eggs were laid, which hatched in thirteen days. They appeared to be doing well when we had the most violent storm of the year, accompanied by floods of rain, which probably prevented the birds from catering properly for the young ones, as the nest itself withstood the downpour and remained dry within. This, I am afraid, will be my last attempt at breeding, as I am giving up my birds, much to my regret." (Shore-Baily, 1930).

One can imagine that the outbreak of the Great Depression interfered with the demand for leather goods. At the same time, perhaps he was aware he would not be alive much longer. At any rate, I am glad to report that he spoke a little prematurely. In November of 1930 Mr. Shore-Baily received three pairs of Harris' Sparrows *Zonotrichia querula* from the University of Alberta. At that time the eggs of this large sparrow of the American grasslands, which breeds only in Northern Canada, remained unknown to science. By June, 1931, this was no longer the case. Of course, those first eggs were collected. But in July, two chicks fledged (Shore-Baily, 1931), so that Harris' Sparrow became the 36th and final species for which he was awarded a first breeding medal by the Avicultural Society, joining the ranks of such birds as the Chilean and Brushland Tinamous, the White-breasted Waterhen, the nominate and Azara's subspecies of the Red-bellied Conure, the Cherry-headed Conure, the Greater Coucal, the Jackson's Whydah—and the Grosbeak Weaver.

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