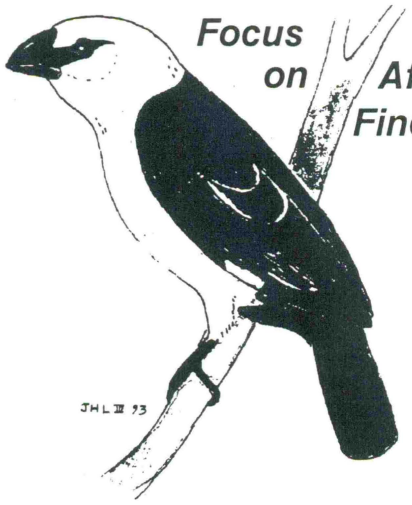

Buffalo Weavers

by Josef Lindholm, III
Keeper II / Birds • Fort Worth Zoological Park

All four of the families whose members we traditionally call "Finches" have representatives in Africa south of the Sahara. Of the 321 mostly Western Hemisphere Emberizids, nine, all belonging to the genus *Emberiza* (Lindholm, 1994a) occur there. Twenty-six Fringillids, limited to two genera (Ibid. 1994a) are Sub-Saharan, the other 100 species living in Eurasia and the New World. Seventy of the 130 species of the Old World family Estrildidae are African (Ibid, 1994a).

It is the final "Finch" family, the Ploceidae; Weavers, Old World Sparrows, and Whydahs, generally considered the most evolved of the four, that is most proportionately African. Only 30 of the 141 species do not occur on the Sub-Saharan African Continent. The European and North Asian Mountain Sparrows *(Montifringilla* sp.) and the Indian Ocean island Fodies *Foudia* sp.) are the only genera (out of 18) not represented there.

Ploceids, like the Birds of Paradise, Bowerbirds, and New World Blackbirds (Icteridae), compose a family in which sexual selection has had a profound effect, resulting in a marvelous diversity of breeding plumages, courtship displays, and nesting behavior, often carried to bizarre extremes. Many of the startling birds that have evolved as a result have long captured the imaginations of aviculturists, and some have been enormously popular and wide-spread cagebirds, with captive histories exceeding two centuries.

All of the traditionally popular species of Ploceids in aviculture ceased to be commercially imported to the United States after October 22, 1993, as a result of the Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992. Because the range of these species includes the Republic of Ghana, which in 1976 received CITES Appendix III status for all the "Finches" which occur there, they are barred entry under the provision of the Act prohibiting the commercial import of birds listed on any of the CITES appendices. (Appendix III does not usually imply an "endangered" status in the wild, but, rather, the desire of a particular country to keep records of export of that species.) Though most of the African Ploceids are not covered by the Wild Bird Conservation Act, two other factors make their future import in any numbers unlikely. The African finch trade, deprived of all the traditional species, is not likely to survive based on the more obscure species. East Africa, which might otherwise seem a potential source of finches, since many species there do not occur in Ghana, was already largely out of the picture before the passage of the Wild Bird Conservation Act. Only one East African country, Tanzania, allows export, and because of highly negative publicity resulting from several misman-

Photos by John Wise

The bulky nest of Fort Worth Zoo's White-headed Buffalo Weavers, built from mesquite twigs. In contrast to weavers of the genus Ploceus, *White-headed Buffalo Weavers will use the same nest from one season to the other.*

Fort Worth Zoological Park's White-headed Buffalo Weavers are kept out-of-doors in the recently opened Raptor Canyon exhibit for Birds of Prey.

aged shipments of birds, with heavy fatalities, the major airlines on which export from Tanzania depended largely suspended avian transports in 1991. As far as I'm aware, only one Tanzanian shipment, in August 1993, has entered the U.S. since January 1992.

No African Ploceid can, at this point, be said to be certainly established as a self-sustaining captive population in North America or Europe. Over the years, quite a number of species have been bred, and some have demonstrated a clear potential for establishment, but, until recently, there has not been a coordinated effort between institutions and/or individuals towards long-term propagation of any given species.

Now that the continued importation of any species is in doubt, attempts are being made to establish at least a few African Ploceids in this country. One difficulty is the relative scarcity of published accounts of captive husbandry of these birds. In the first 15 volumes of *A.F.A. Watchbird* (1974-1988), there are only four articles that deal at length with African Ploceids (A.F.A., 1989); Louis Baptista's (1978) discussion of cross-fostering Parasitic Whydahs under Bengalese, and accounts of breeding Gray-headed Social Weavers (Schulenburg, 1982), Social Weavers (Collias & Collias, 1977) and the Red Bishop (Haynie, 1984). Only a few more have appeared subsequently. In the hope of furthering avicultural knowledge of African Ploceids, I intend to present an overview of these species in captivity.

The two most primitive genera in the family Ploceidae each consist of a single species; The Black Buffalo Weaver *(Bubalornis albirostris)* and the White-headed Buffalo Weaver *(Dinemellia dinemelli)*. At ten and nine inches in length, respectively, they are the two largest species in their family, stretching many people's perception of the term "Finch".

The Black Buffalo Weaver is often also called the White-billed Buffalo Weaver, and sometimes the Red-billed Buffalo Weaver. This confusing state of affairs is due to the fact that there are three well-defined sub-species of Black Buffalo Weaver *Bubalornis albirostris. B.a. albirostris,* with a vast range across Northern Sub-Saharan Africa, from the Atlantic to western Ethiopia and Kenya, has a white beak during the rainy season when it breeds. In the dry season, the beak turns black. More remarkable than the color change is the seasonal alteration of the actual structure of the beak (Rutgers et al, 1977). A ridge forms along the culmen, lending these black birds the appearance of miniature hornbills or anis. This temporal variation in beak shape is unique to *B.a. albirostris,* not occurring in either of the red-billed subspecies.

The South African *Bubalornis albirostris niger* does resemble the nominate subspecies regarding sexual dichromatism; in *B.a. albirostris* both the male and female are black (Williams, 1980). This is in marked contrast to the East African *B.a. intermedius* where the female is very different from the black male, being "greyish-brown above, whitish below, streaked dusky" (Williams, 1980). From the illustration in Newman (1984), while not black like the male, the female *B.a. niger* is basically a uniformly dark bird, brown with indistinct white edging to the feathers of the throat and breast. From the measurements given for *B.a. intermedius* and *B.a. albirostris* by Williams (1980), and *B.a. niger* by Newman (1984), it appears that the latter is slightly smaller than its two northern relatives. In addition, the red beak of *B.a. niger* is tipped in black.

Such distinctions are academic at this point, as this species' West African range includes Ghana, therefore placing it on appendix III of CITES, and including it among species prohibited for commercial import to the U.S.

As of June 30, 1993, the International Species Inventory System (1993) lists a total of six specimens in American Public Zoos — all males. Having seen these birds myself, I can add that two subspecies are represented. The five males at the San Diego Wild Animal Park have red beaks. I believe they are the East African *B.a. intermedius*. The bird at Salt Lake City's Hogle Park Zoo is a white-beaked *B.a. albirostris*. There may well be specimens in American private collections, but I doubt that these rather formidable large birds have ever had much popularity, so the total number is likely minescule. The Wild Bird Conservation Act does allow for

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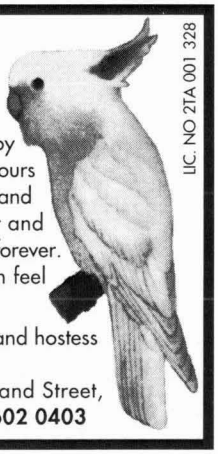

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future non-commercial importation of prohibited species on a case-by-case basis. But as such shipments will be very difficult to arrange, I think it unlikely that further Black Buffalo Weavers will arrive in this country.

This species could quite likely have been established here if anyone had been interested in a coordinated program. While there appear to be no British breeding records, Rutgers et al. (1977) briefly discuss a success at Zoologischer Garten Berlin which, though no date is given, I believe took place before World War II. A "number of pairs" of *B.a. albirostris* were kept together. A nest was worked on continuously until it was a meter high. Two females raised chicks, a total of four being fully-reared.

Two American zoos have hatched this bird. While the *International Zoo Yearbook* lists all of these breedings under "White-billed Buffalo Weaver *Bubalornis albirostris*", again, having seen the breeding birds myself, I can say two subspecies were bred. A single chick was hatched, but not reared, at the International Wildlife Conservation Park (Bronx Zoo), in 1984 (Zoological Society of London, 1986). I saw the breeding birds in the fall of 1983. They occupied a grassy outside aviary, part of the Zoo's old pheasantry. It was the first time I had seen *B.a. albirostris,* and I will always retain a vivid impression of these sleek black birds with long tails carrying surprisingly large and stout grass stems in their Hornbill-like white beaks. Equally memorable was the flock of Red-billed Buffalo Weavers, probably East African, in a large indoor exhibit at the San Antonio Zoo's Hixon Bird House. Of special interest is the fact that 146 chicks hatched there over a seven year period (Zoological Society of London, 1983-1989). Breeding began in 1981, when 47 hatched. Only nine reached maturity. In 1982, again only nine survived, this time out of 43. Of the 35 hatched in 1983, 10 survived, but none hatched in 1984. In 1985, only 10 hatched of which two survived. All three of the chicks hatched in 1986 died. The final year that breeding took place, 1987, eight hatched and two survived. Thus, one can see that, given coordinated effort (which, in this case would have involved investigation into neonatal mortality), it is probable this species could have been established in American aviculture.

If the Black Buffalo Weaver *(Bubalornis albirostris)* most likely will be only an avicultual memory in this country several years from now, there is reason to predict an entirely different future for *Dinemellia dinemelli,* the White-headed Buffalo Weaver. From Robert Webster's (1993) compilation of Passerine Birds with populations of 10 or greater in North American ISIS-listed collections, as of June 30, 1992, one sees that *Dinemellia,* with 80 specimens, is not only the tenth most populous species, but the most well-represented African finch as well. Subtracting the holdings of the two foreign zoos in the June 30, 1993 ISIS (1993) abstract, one finds the population has grown to 88 specimens, an increase apparently due entirely to breedings, as ISIS (1993) indicates that 27 hatched (from six U.S. zoos) over the previous year, and only five failed to reach a month of age.

In contrast, the remarkable five year increase Robert Webster (1993) documents in his comparison of the 1987 and 1992 June 30 ISIS abstracts, where the population leapt from 13 to 80, is due to importations of wild birds. From my own compilation of the International Zoo Yearbook breeding records, I found that from 1981 (the first year the *IZY,* lists breedings of this species) through 1987, out of the 46 hatched between five American zoos in this period, only 10 survived to maturity (Zoological Society of London, 1983-1989). On the other hand, before the airline ban on Tanzanian shipments, a number of White-headed Buffalo Weavers were imported to this country. I particularly remember the price-lists of the now defunct importer *Bellbird,* where, in 1989 and 1990, they were listed as "our favorite finch". I believe some ended up in private hands. Hopefully, when John Seltz, Chairman of the AAZPA Taxon Advisory Group for Passerines, distributes, in this journal, a captive Ploceid census, an accurate picture of this species in American private aviculture will emerge.

In contrast to the Black Buffalo Weaver, where the only discussion of a captive breeding is the second-hand one, there is a highly detailed account of the first captive breeding of the White-headed Buffalo Weaver at the Pittsburgh Conservatory Aviary, in August 1957 by Roland Hawkins (1958), the first Director of the Aviary. A single pair was purchased in 1954, and placed August of that year in the Aviary's large "Bridge Room". By January 1955, they began accumulating "twigs, small branches, and plant fibers" at various locations, only to have their efforts shortly interfered with by Scarlet Ibises and Javan Hill Mynahs which took "apparent delight in scattering whatever accumulation they had made". This continued through 1955, and in April 1956, the Weavers flew into the adjoining "Fountain Room". Within a month there were three "bulky nests...each (with)...three separate interior chambers all with their own entrance". It did not appear any eggs were laid, and by December, the birds ceased showing interest in the nests (they had been quite ably driving curious Blue-cheeked Barbets *Megalaima asiatica* out of them earlier). In March 1957, the pair built several new nests, all smaller than the previous year's three. In April, they began rebuilding the 1956 nests with sticks. On 15 August, Mr. Hawkins noted the Weavers were suddenly unusually agressive towards other birds when mealworms were distributed, and subsequently saw them carrying mealworms to the central nest of the three. "Through the next two weeks the Weavers would not tolerate other birds in the vicinity of the nest. Regardless of size, they were all driven away from the nesting area".

On August 29, the single chick was found on the ground unable to fly (Hawkins, 1958). Much to Mr. Hawkin's surprise, the parents "showed complete indifference to the presence of other birds near the baby". Both birds, however, fed the chick well with mealworms, as well as "a variety of fruits along with some of our insectivorous mixture" whenever it vocalized. When, though, on "the fourth morning the White-crested Jay Thrushes discovered the baby and immediately set out to destroy it", the parents did not react at all and Mr. Hawkins had to pull the chick and handraise it for a week. Though "they displayed no excitement" when the chick was returned, capable of flight, they resumed feeding it, and "in a few days the young bird was following them everywhere". "By 15th September the young weaver was feeding without assistance..." I am not aware

that any further successes took place at Pittsburgh, and, so far as I know, the next captive breeding took place at the San Diego Wild Animal Park in 1981, when three hatched and one survived (Zoological Society of London, 1983).

Rowland Hawkins' (1958) notes on the White-headed Buffalo Weaver contrast interestingly with my own experiences, discussed elsewhere (Lindholm, 1994b) in this magazine, with the more evolutionarily advanced Southern Masked Weaver *Ploceus velatus*. While the Masked Weaver males undergo an eclipse plumage, changing drastically to resemble the female (a feature of other advanced Ploceid genera as well), the White-headed Buffalo Weavers maintained the same plumage year around, and were also so sexually monomorphic that Mr. Hawkins was never certain which parent was the male or female. There were no behavioral cues to assist him. Both birds took an equal share in building the nest and feeding the chick. I only observed the male Southern Masked Weaver building nests (always of grass-like material), and saw only the female feed offspring. As I have elsewhere noted (Lindholm, 1994b), the male Southern Masked always destroys unused nests, while the Buffalos used nests built the previous year. The fact that there was only a single pair of Buffalos does not appear to have resulted in any of the unfortunate abnormal behaviors I witnessed in male Masked Weavers, which I attribute to there not being a large number of females to each male (Lindholm, 1994b). Thus it would appear that White-headed Buffalo Weavers may be easier to establish than any Ploceus.

The first British breeding occurred at the Chester Zoo, in England where, over the years, quite a variety of African finches have been bred. One chick was hatched and raised in 1989 (Zoological Society of London, 1991). Chester's Curator of Birds, Roger Wilkinson (1990), does not note how many White-headed Buffalo Weavers were present inside the walk-through Tropical House. The birds "built a large communal structure in the crown of one of the palm trees". "This appeared to be a single entity with three separate nest holes and was built mainly of dry strips of vegetation. Following the breeding attempt from which one chick successfully fledged, a portion of the nest fell down. On inspection this resembled a hollow ball of hay, of perhaps 20 cm diameter. Clearly the larger nest was constructed from a number of these units. This contrasted with the more substantial structure built of larger twigs by the Red-billed Buffalo Weavers *Bubalornis albirostris niger,"* (Wilkinson, 1990). Further specimens were bred at Chester the following year (Wilkinson, 1991).

The problem of subspecies of *Dinemellia dinemelli* does not concern American aviculture, as all the founding stock of the present U.S. population came from either Kenya or Tanzania, and can thus be assigned to the southern subspecies *D.d. boehmi*. Confusion arises over a discussion of subspecific differences (Rutgers et al, 1977). It is asserted that only the nominate subspecies from the Sudan and Ethiopia bears a white patch on its primaries, while southern birds have a brighter shade of red on the upper tail coverts. All the White-headed Buffalo Weavers I have seen have a wing-patch, though it may not always be very apparent. There is a great deal of variation in the color of zoo birds' upper- and under-tail coverts, from orange, through pink, to red, but I'm sure this may well have to do with diet, as is certainly the case with Bishop Weavers *Euplectes* sp.

Being confined to East Africa, the White-headed Buffalo Weaver is not included on any CITES appendix, so is not covered by the wild Bird Conservation Act. In today's situation, we should not look too optimistically to further imported birds to maintain the U.S. population. It is reassuring to note that several American zoos are involved in a cooperative program which aims to stabilize the captive-bred population (Bohmke, 1989). The St. Louis Zoo, where hatchings commenced in 1986 (Zoological Society of London, 1988), has been involved in this effort at least since 1988 (Bohmke, 1989).

The June 30, 1993 ISIS (1993) abstract report indicates that of the 96 *Dinemellia* (Including four each at Chester and Heidelberg, but otherwise distributed among 20 U.S. zoos) listed, 40 percent were captive-bred, while 47 percent were certainly of wild origin. The American zoo with the largest

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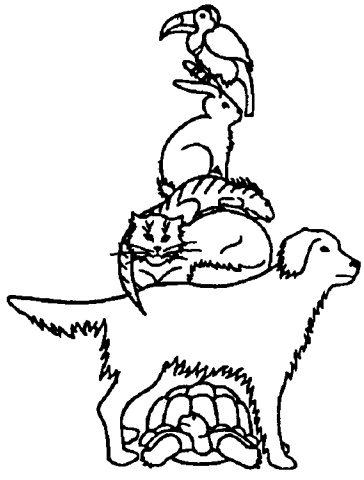

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holdings was the San Diego Wild Animal Park, with 12 (two hatched there over the previous fiscal year). The next largest group was the nine at San Antonio (with eight hatched). Then follow three groups of eight; Dallas (six hatched), Milwaukee (five hatched) and the San Diego Zoo, where none hatched. Other zoos to breed this bird between June 30, 1992 and June 30, 1993 were Houston, with five inventoried and four hatched, and St. Louis, with seven held and two hatched. Out of this total of 27 chicks, only five failed to survive a month.

Such propagation has resulted in a growing number of American institutions obtaining White-headed Buffalo Weavers from other zoos. For one of the exhibits in Raptor Canyon, Fort Worth Zoo's unique facility for birds of prey that opened in 1993, two specimens were obtained that year. San Antonio sent us a male which that zoo had bought from Bellbird in 1990. From Milwaukee we received a bird that remains of uncertain sex, hatched there November 1992. The Milwaukee bird arrived at Fort Worth April 29, the San Antonio bird having preceded it April 14. Both were placed in their Raptor Canyon exhibit May 28, where a male African Pygmy Falcon *Polihierax semitorquatus,* hatched at the San Diego Wild Animal Park the previous year had been introduced the previous day. African Pygmy Falcons appear to have evolved a dependence upon colonies of either species of Buffalo Weaver or Social Weavers *Philetairus socius* (another species that does not destroy its nests). The falcons themselves nest in abandoned weaver nests, and appear not to molest the weavers. Although our Pygmy Falcon has twice snagged through the wire and partially devoured cardinals, no actual agression has been observed between him and the weavers, which being at least an inch longer, are often mistaken for his parents by zoo visitors. Both the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park have also maintained White-headed Buffalo Weavers with Pygmy Falcons.

Chris Davis, Keeper II in charge of Raptor Canyon, tells me that two nests were constructed by the weavers this season from mesquite twigs. Kelley Snyder, of the Fort Worth Zoo Commissary informs me that the daily diet consists of the commercial softbill food *Scenic Red Apple Jungle, Purina Hi Protein Dog Chow,* and a diced fruit mix usually containing apples, papaya, blueberries, grapes, banana, and cooked sweet potato and carrots, supplemented with white millet, safflower seed, sunflower seed, Vianate vitamin/mineral powder, and giant mealworms. Chris Davis notes that the weavers favor the dogfood.

The White-headed Buffalo Weaver has proved a satisfactory inhabitant of community aviaries, and among the various zoos, has been exhibited with quite a variety of species, mixing well with similarly sized softbills. It is certainly to be hoped that the thus-far promising results with this species will continue, so that it will be a firmly established feature of public and private collections.

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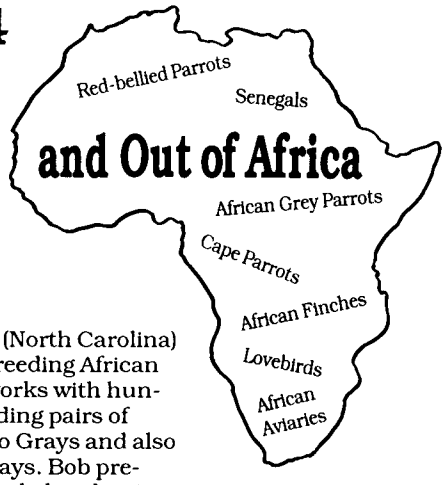

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