

## The Scaly-crowned Weaver *Sporopipes squamifrons*

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There is a peculiar asymmetry in the Weaver Family, Ploceidae. The 140-odd species are divided among 18 genera. Several of these genera dominate the family. *Passer*, the Old World Sparrows, include 19 species. *Ploceus*, the Village Weavers and their relatives, is composed of roughly 60 species, while the marvelously diverse genus *Euplectes*, Bishops and non-parasitic Whydahs, includes at least 17 species (the uncertainty in numbers is due to the question of subspecies). On the other hand, there are several species which are the sole members of their genus. This situation may be indicative of both strong natural selection and, at the same time, a rather long geologic history for this family.

The genus *Sporopipes*, composed of only two species, is particularly isolated, to the point where it has recently been accorded its own subfamily, Sporopipinae, by some authorities (Perrins, 1990), though others (Howard & Moore, 1991) continue to include it within the subfamily Passerinae, with the Old World Sparrows and related genera.

Of the two species of *Sporopipes*, one, the Speckle-fronted Weaver *S. frontalis*, is not likely to be of future concern to American aviculturists. Its vast range, from the Atlantic coast of Senegal to the Red Sea Coast of Eritrea, and South to Tanzania, includes the Republic of Ghana. On February 26, 1976, Ghana listed all of its seed-eating birds on Appendix III of the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species. While a listing on CITES Appendix I recognizes that the organism in question is in danger of extinction, and prohibits its commercial trade, and an Appendix II listing implies that trade may potentially threaten populations, and requires permits and documentation for any transaction, Appendix III Status means only that the country that requested it requires that any specimens

of the listed species exported from there do so with official documentation, and often implies nothing about actual conservation status. However, the U.S. Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 prohibited the importation of birds on all three Appendices after October 22, 1993, thus ending the arrival from Africa of all the most traditionally common wild-caught finches (since they occur in Ghana, ironically a country from where little if any finch export has occurred in recent decades).

Despite being an abundant bird in the areas of traditional mass finch export in Senegal and other West African countries, the Speckle-fronted Weaver was hardly ever included in the huge shipments dominated by Waxbills, Bishops, Cut-throats, Silverbills, etc. I do remember inquiring about some small gray birds (which I had hoped were Gray Singing Finches), in a shop in California in the early '80's and being told they were Speckle-fronted Weavers. They must have been very young, as adult Speckle-fronts of either sex (which I've never seen alive) are certainly not nondescript. They remind me of those little plastic birds, covered with chicken and Coturnix Quail feathers sold in five-and-dime stores as decorations. There is an excellent photo of three wild specimens in Harper's (1986) *The Practical Encyclopedia of Pet Birds for Home and Garden*, beautifully displaying the rufous nape and side of the neck, the black cap covered with tiny white spots, and an overall attractive pattern of gray and black. A few have shown up in shipments from Tanzania, where exporters are more discriminating in assembling their consignments. I am not aware if there are any presently in this country and I don't believe it has ever been bred here. It does not appear to have been bred in Britain either (Coles, 1987). Nagel, a German collector, bred it in

1907, the only record of which the great avicultural historian Emilius Hopkinson (1926) was aware. The Moscow Zoo bred Speckle-fronts every year from 1974 through 1976, but failed to rear any of the eight hatched over this period (Zoological Society of London, 1976-78). This is the only public zoo record I know of.

On the other hand, from 1964 to 1989, six zoos hatched the Scaly-crowned Weaver *Sporopipes squamifrons* (Zoological Society of London, 1966-1991). It must be qualified, however, that four of these were in the Republic of South Africa, which includes the greater portion of species' range, it otherwise occurring in contiguous portions of Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe, and thus, being nowhere near Ghana, is not prohibited entry to the U.S.

Of the four South African Collections that the *International Zoo Yearbook* lists as hatching *S. squamifrons* (Zoological Society of London, 1966-1991), three accomplished this only once: An unspecified number were hatched at the Port Elizabeth Oceanarium and Snake Park in 1964, five were hatched and reared at the Natal Bird Park in Amanzimtoti in 1966, and three were hatched and reared at the World of Birds at Cape Town in 1984. Different results were achieved at the Tygerberg Zoo in Kraaifontein, near Cape Town. Two were hatched and reared in 1986; an achievement repeated the following year. It is indicated that at least some of the four hatched and reared in 1988 represent second generation breeding, as do the

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six hatched in 1989.

Of the two non-South African Zoos that the *IZY* documents bred Scaly-crowns, the more successful was in Abu Dhabi, on the Arabian Peninsula. In 1986, 1987, and 1989, one was hatched and raised. The 1987 bird is indicated as being of at least partially captive-bred parentage (Zoological Society of London, 1988-91). The other collection is American, the San Antonio Zoo. Despite its excellent record in propagating difficult passerines, San Antonio did not raise the two hatched there in 1980 (Zoological Society of London, 1982).

The loss of Scaly-crowned chicks is an old problem. In 1909 the prolific German avicultural writer Neunzig was unaware of any fully successful captive breedings but mentions "a pair in a flight-cage . . . at Munich [which] had eight broods one after the other, but all the young died" (Hopkinson, 1926). In 1913, however, the Devon aviculturist Teschemaker achieved the first British breeding when he successfully reared four (Ibid., 1926). This achievement was discussed on page 362 of the 1913 volume of the *Avicultural Magazine*, but I have not had the opportunity of reading

this report. By 1916, another British breeder, Wesley Page, had also been successful (Hopkinson, 1926). The English Ploceid specialist William Shore-Baily (1923) stated that the Scaly-crowned Weaver "frequently breeds in captivity."

The only detailed account of the captive breeding of *Sporopipes squamifrons* I have read first-hand is quite brief and I will quote it in its entirety. H.S. Sewell was a remarkable South Australian aviculturist, who, from 1933 through 1940 achieved 17 Australian first breeding records of seed-eating birds at his aviaries in Toorak (Lenden, 1947). He writes:

"The next species I concentrated on was the Scaly Crowned Weaver *Sporopipes squamifrons*, habitat Africa, sometimes called Moustache Finch. Today this bird is more of a rarity, as are most of the South African Finches. The markings on the head are black and grey, resembling scales. It also has a black throat marking, not unlike a drooping moustache, hence this bird's two names. I do not know if this bird has been bred in England; I should imagine so, as I have found them most prolific. In each case they nested in logs, their eggs

are pale green, heavily speckled with brown. The most remarkable nest I had from this species was of six eggs and six youngsters raised. Altogether I reared fourteen young and eventually disposed of the entire family as I wanted room for new species. They have very little to recommend them as to colour, although uncommonly marked. They are very active birds, extremely noisy - incidentally quarrelsome." (Sewell, 1935).

Mr. Sewell's successes began in 1934 (Lendon, 1947) and appear to have continued in to 1935. He does not mention what he fed his birds. I strongly suspect, however, that he had access to live termites, a convenience that has enabled Australian aviculturists to domesticate several species of African finches, including the otherwise maddeningly difficult Melba (Lindholm, 1993, 158-59).

Fruit-flies, Mealworms, and Housefly maggots, plus whatever arthropod life may find its way into a California aviary proved quite satisfactory for Eduard J. Hamilton, in San Diego County, the only American currently breeding this bird, so far as I know. Hamilton maintains five pairs, imported from Botswana, together in an outdoor aviary. They laid in "one big communal nest". Hamilton finds them "really atypical weavers...in a lot of ways, like Estrildids". Aside from the live insects, which he considers essential for chick-rearing, they are fed a "basic finch mix".

Small numbers of Scaly-crowned Weavers continue to arrive in the U.S. from Botswana, along with Queen Whydahs, Red-headed Violet-eared Waxbills, Melbas, and other species that don't occur in Ghana.

For weavers, these birds are tiny, four inches long, the same size as a Red-billed Fire Finch. They further differ from more familiar weavers in not undergoing a season eclipse plumage (Bates & Busenbark, 1963), and in both sexes possessing an almost identical plumage (Ibid, 1963, Boosey, n.d.). Writing in the 1950's, the great English commercial bird-breeder, Edward J. Boosey (n.d.) describes it thusly:

"In a chaste way the Scaly-crowned Weaver is pretty and its plumage is very attractively marked... They are perfectly amiable in mixed company so long as they are not nesting, and out of the breeding season I have kept them with Waxbills in quite a small avary. When breeding, however, it is advisable to keep them with birds of their own size

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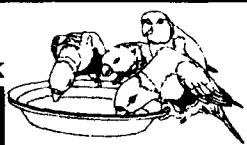
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and strength, and even these will be vigorously chivied away from the vicinity of the Scaly-crowned's nest... They are quite willing to go to nest... A spherical nest is built with the entrance at the side, and their eggs are like those of a House Sparrow, only smaller."

Photo by Ed Hamilton



Scaly-crowned Weaver, male

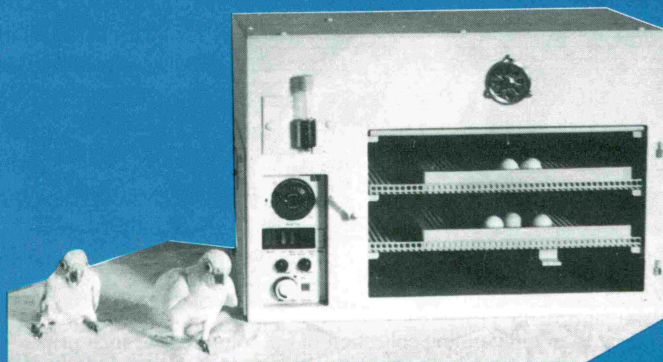
Henry Bates and Robert Busenbark (1963), whose careers remarkably parallel in many ways those of Edward Boosey and Alec Brooksbank, had the following to say about their Southern California experiences with this species:

"The Writers have always been exceptionally fond of this benign but somber little bird which can safely be kept even with the smallest waxbills. During the breeding season, however, it is wiser to keep them with slightly larger birds... The main charm is in the contrasting blacks and delicate white edges on a basically gray bird... A broad black walrus-type moustache begins just under the beak and contrasts nicely with the otherwise white throat... Because the feathers on the forehead and crown are very small, the effect on one of minutely executed detail work..."

Despite such endorsements, the Scaly-crowned Weaver has never been particularly popular. This is one species that is *not* established in Australia. It has always been uncommon in zoos. As of June, 1994, the only specimen listed by the International Species Information System (1994) was a female at the Cincinnati Zoo. The only Zoo specimen I've seen was one of the Hogle Park Zoo in Salt Lake City in 1978.

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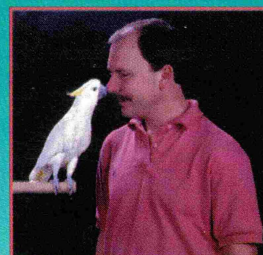
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