



Excerpts
from a
Bird
Fancier's
Notebook

Buffalo, Sparrow,
Social and
Sporopipes Weavers

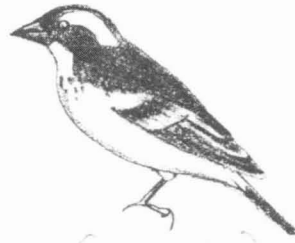
by Arthur Douglas
Dallas, Texas

Introduction by Josef Lindholm

For many Americans, our introduction to Arthur Douglas was either through the now semi-legendary First International Birds in Captivity Symposium in Seattle in 1978, or the eventual publication of the paper he presented in the proceedings of that conference. "Feeding Softbills - An Historical Synopsis" (Douglas, 1981a) is a remarkable and very entertaining survey of softbill diets from the Sixteenth Century to the present. It has a bibliography of 39 references. To those previously unfamiliar with him, the paper introduces its author as an avicultural historian of note. Mr. Douglas's reputation as an authority on softbilled diets was further bolstered by subsequent articles on the subject in *A.F.A. Watchbird* and in the short-lived, but very interesting *Honeycreeper* (Douglas, 1981b, 1986a&b, 1987a-c).

British aviculturists have a far longer

Sparrow-Weavers

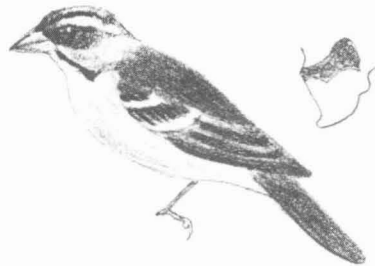


Plocepasser mahali (Mahali Weaver)

= White-browed Sparrow Weaver. Noisy, sparrow-like. Dry bush and semi-desert near tall acacias. Near villages. Flocks, largely insectivorous. Roosts in cock-nests. Sweet song at breeding time, has alarm note. Always nests on west side of trees.

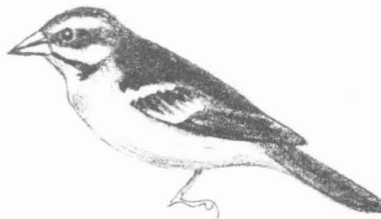
Sparrow-Weavers in captivity

"Few odd birds imported into U.K.. No demand at all and dealers who actually go on trips reject birds like this at source without even identifying them. Behave temperamentally like sparrows - mildly aggressive when breeding, would probably feed on typical canary mix with millets added."



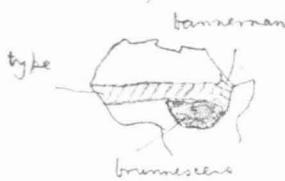
P. rufoscapulatus (Chestnut-backed S.W.)

Uplands, tall *Brachystegia* woodland. Small flocks, tame, lethargic.



P. superciliosus (Chestnut-crowned S.W.)

Parties of 4-5 in high bush or woodland. Inconspicuous, local, not common. Bunting-like trill. "Looks like a red-headed sparrow".



P. donaldsoni (Donaldson's S.W.)

Local in very hot dry desert. Scarce, little known.

Field Notes: White-browed Sparrow Weavers were common in several places, especially at Lake Baringo. They are said to sing melodiously. I did not hear them do so.



***Pseudonigrita arnaudi*
(Grey-headed S.W.)**

Thorn-scrub and grassy plains. Small flocks flying from tree to tree. Sandy Districts. Nest in trees occupied by virulent ants. Roost in nests. Food mostly seeds. Nests closely packed together.



***P. cabanisi* (Black-headed S.W.)**

Dry, open thorn-scrub. Habits as with Grey-headed S.W.. No ant association. 40-60 stiff, bristly nests closely packed together, cone shaped, suspended from roped grass in trees at any height. Food: Seeds. Harsh chattering call.



***Philetairus socius* (Social Weaver)**

Local in dry thorn brush. Feeds on ground in small flocks. Nest a huge thatch tunnelled beneath into vertical shafts with nests in the top. Usually 30-40 nests in each colony.

Field Notes: Grey-headed Social Weavers were common in several places in Kenya. They were nesting in Acacia trees at Keekorok, not in communal nests, but individually, much more widely scattered than Ploceus weavers. Why "Social"?

Avicultural Notes: The Grey-headed Social Weavers were found to be "Somewhat insectivorous and hard to acclimatize." (Tanner, *Cage Birds* 428, 3 Nov. '60).

[African Sparrows are not included in Mr. Douglas's original notes; he provides the following comments on Passer griseus.] Grey-headed Sparrows frequented the buildings and grounds at Amboseli. I had one in Dallas for awhile. It was not trouble in a mixed aviary, but its constant sparrow chirping got on my nerves, so I disposed of it.

acquaintance. Mr. Douglas's first article for *Cagebirds* (now *Cage and Aviary Birds*), on the use of Caddisfly larvae as bird food, having appeared in 1942. From 1965 into the 1970's he was a familiar contributor to that magazine, a regular column being his "Jottings from Texas", illustrated with his own inimitable cartoons.

Mr. Douglas has lived in Dallas, Texas, since 1955, having arrived from the Channel Island of Jersey to start the art department of the recently established St. Mark's School, now widely recognized as a distinguished prep school. Mr. Douglas had been invited partially in consideration of his command of a wide array of subjects, and over the years he taught English literature, Spanish, and, as one would expect, natural history. His courses in the latter field had an early emphasis on ecology, and for three years he served as Science Departmental Chairman. He organized St. Mark's collection of living plants and animals, and continues to be responsible for the school's aviaries, green houses and other facilities, though he retired from teaching some time ago.

The notebooks from which these excerpts are taken were triggered by a visit Mr. Douglas made to Woolworth's in those unrestricted days before the Newcastle's Quarantine of 1972. As he tells the story:

"I was in Woolworth's, and they had some common imported finches. There was one that I couldn't recognize. It was mousy-grey all over, and had a black beak. I could see it was a Munia of some kind. I had read about the Dusky Munia and other rare species, and I thought that this might be one of them, so I asked the girl in charge of the pet section, 'What kind of bird is that in the corner?' 'Them's finches,' she said. I said, 'Yes, I know they're finches, but this particular one, this little grey one...?' 'Well,' she informed me, 'there's Canaries, and there's Parakeets, and there's Finches. Them's Finches.' I thought, 'Well, we're a fine pair. She doesn't know the common finches and I don't know them either. It's time that I knew a bit more about them. I thought, 'I'll go through the back issues of *Cagebirds* and any other publications that I may have, and I'll list all the finches that are mentioned there. I'll see if I can get them clear in my mind. To make sure, I'll draw a picture of each kind.

"I started by making rather careful colored drawings of Weaverbirds. I ex-

pected to finish the whole enterprise by the time my summer vacation was over (I still had four or five weeks to go). In fact, I worked on-and-off for about three years... The finished notebook eventually ran to four notebooks. It is still not complete, and I don't think it ever will be..."

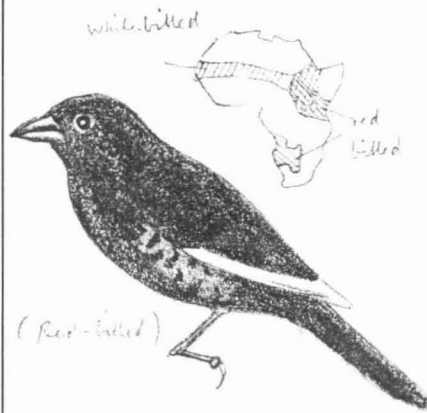
(The Woolworth's Mystery Finch was eventually discovered to be an immature Spicefinch!)

In order to fill a few blanks in information, Mr. Douglas sent his notebooks to his friend Robin Restall, who was then living in England. Mr. Restall was asked for comments and observations, as well as for notes made from the fabulous collection of study-skins at the British Museum. The notebooks returned to Texas with hand-written additions by Mr. Restall. Mr. Restall, in turn, made extensive use of these notebooks as he prepared his own *Finches and Other Seed-Eating Birds* (published by Faber & Faber in 1975). Mr. Douglas's contributions are well acknowledged in the introduction to that book.

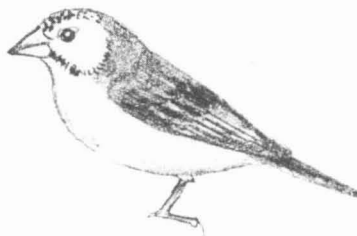
For years, Mr. Douglas's notebooks have remained known only to a few of his friends in Dallas. In November 1993, he brought one or two notebooks to a meeting of the Bird Interest Group of Texas, hosted by the Fort Worth Zoological Park, where they were admired by quite a number of zoo professionals and private aviculturists. It was at this meeting that John Wise, a Fort Worth Zoo Bird Keeper, formerly a professional studio photographer, resolved to reproduce the entire series of colored plates. Mr. Douglas not only agreed to John's project, but also authorized the publication of any of his notes in *Watchbird*. While we have not reproduced the main body of the notes in their original hand-written format, with small colored illustrations interspersed through the text, it is hoped the format adopted here will convey some of the original charm.

- DOUGLAS, A. (1981) Feeding softbills - An historical synopsis. IN RISSER, AC., L.F. BAPTISTA, S.R. WYLIE, & N.B. GALE (1981) *Proceedings - First International Birds in Captivity Symposium* 112-120.
 (1981) Feeding insectivorous birds. A.F.A. *Watchbird* VII (No. 1), 27-28.
 (1986) An ancient book on the Nightingale. *The Honeycreeper* I (No. 1), 11-12.
 (1986) Feeding softbills - A historical perspective (Parts I & II). *Ibid.* I (No. 2), 6-8.
 (1987) Feeding softbills - A historical perspective (Parts III & IV). *Ibid.* II (No. 1), 7-9.
 (1987) Feeding softbills - A historical perspective (Part V) *Ibid.* II (No. 2), 10-11.
 (1987) Feeding softbills - A historical perspective. *Ibid.* II (No. 3), 16. ➔

Buffalo Weavers



Sporopipes Weavers



Bubalornis albirostris

= Oxbird, - Black Buffalo Weaver.
 Female browner, more grizzled.
 Fairly common in dry savannah with tall trees. Roosts in communal nests.
 Food: Seed, berries, insects. Communal nest of thorny twigs, lined with grass heads, and green leaves. Young resemble females but whiter on breast.
 Feeds on ground in pairs or small flocks.
 Noisy "continuous falsetto churring".
 "Going and coming into a common entrance like bees into a hive."
 (A.G. Butler)
 No special connection with buffaloes.

Dinemellia dinemelli

White-headed Buffalo Weaver = Dinemelli's Weaver. Acacia woodland, dry brush, thorny scrub. Parrot-like in flight and movements. Voice loud, parrot-like. Small Flocks. Shy. Nests clustered in thorn trees, often low; Retort-shaped bottom entrance, lined with grass, feathers. Feeds on ground.

Field Notes: White-headed Buffalo Weavers were to be seen in thorn-brush country, odd ones or small flocks. I did not see their nests. I believe the big black birds I saw down in the Tsavo were Red-billed Buffalo Weavers, and that the big untidy nests of thorny twigs were their work.

S. squamifrons (Scaly-crowned Weaver)

Gregarious. Dry Country. Feeds on ground, flying into bushes when disturbed. Tame and familiar, House-Sparrow habits. Nest in thick thorn bushes. Chirrup and chatters while feeding. "Ubiquitous and cheeky". . . "young in evidence at every session" . . . "seems to build 'cock nests' to roost in."
 (Wm. Newlands, S. Rhodesia)

S. frontalis (Speckled-fronted W.)

Gregarious. Large flocks in dry thorn scrub, abounding near water. Roost 5-6 in old nests; breed all year round. Nest single or small colonies. Pleasant, twittering, Goldfinch-like song.

Speckled-fronted W. in captivity

"Unlike Scaly-crowned Weavers, these birds are docile." (Rutgers) "Roost in a nest box... eat all kinds of seeds... aphids, ants' eggs... rarely fly away when approached... like the sun... should be kept [warm] in winter." (Rutgers) "Have only kept in cage with Silverbills, Cutthroats, etc., no trouble."
 R(robin) R(estall)