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The Subspecies Question

Part II

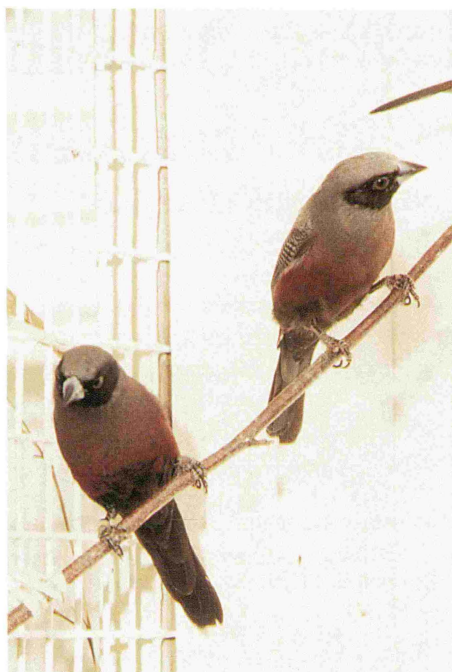
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Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu *Uraeginthus bengalus*

While East African Red-billed Firefinches have been recognized as something special, I don't believe the Red-cheeked Cordon Bleus that arrived in some numbers from Tanzania as recently as mid-1994 have been correspondingly distinguished. Goodwin (1982) lists two subspecies whose range includes Tanzania, and neither differs markedly from the western *U. b. bengalus*: "*U. b. ugogoensis*, from northern and western Tanzania, is a slightly duller brown above and the female has the brown at the sides of the neck extending more forwards, under the blue ear coverts. The form from coastal Kenya and Tanzania, *U. b. littoralis*, is said... to be slightly smaller and the male to have a smaller red facial patch." There is, at present, a deal of effort being invested towards establishing this bird in America, and I suppose many people who already had western birds have supplemented their stock with Tanzanian ones, and crossed them well to avoid inbreeding. The nominate *U. b. bengalus* has an uninterrupted range from the Atlantic coast east to the Red Sea, and South to western Kenya and Uganda (Goodwin, 1982), and I would be surprised if there were not many areas where it and the Tanzanian subspecies intergrade.

St. Helena Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*

In contrast to its close relative, the Black-rumped or Red-eared Waxbill *E. troglodytes* (once the commonest African finch in the U.S. and now likewise CITES Appendix III), which has no subspecies at all over its vast range from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, the St. Helena Waxbill has many. Goodwin (1982) describes nine particularly distinct ones. It appears two subspecies arrived in the recent imports from Tanzania, and at least



Dark gray and deep plum shades are typical of the southern, nominate subspecies of the Black-cheeked Waxbill. Northern birds are decidedly paler and pinker.



The fact that these St. Helena Waxbills came from Tanzania, coupled with the small discrete rose belly-patch, otherwise gray underparts, and white throat identifies their subspecies as *Estrilda astrild* minor.



The combination of a bright red face, yellow chest and gray lores indicate this male Melba is the nominate, southern subspecies.

some were differentiated as "Greater" and "Lesser" St. Helena Waxbills. I believe the birds Fort Worth Zoo purchased in January, 1992 are *E. a. minor*, from Kenya and north-eastern Kenya. Their "small, rose-red belly patch" (Goodwin, 1982), basically grayish underparts without a pervasive pinkish suffusion, "clear barring", and white cheeks and throat, are diagnostic. The fact that a Fire-fronted Bishop, which in Tanzania is found only in the North-east, was discovered in the same consignment (Lindholm, 1993b), appears to confirm this. Derek Goodwin considers this subspecies, true to its name "minor", to be one of the smallest ones.

The "Greater" St. Helena from Tanzania would appear to be *E. a. cavendeshi*, found from central and south-eastern Tanzania south into South Africa (Goodwin, 1982), which does have some pinkish suffusion and is browner. The fawn mutation, imported to this country from Australia, was described to me by Carol Ann Calvin and Stash Buckley as being definitely "real big" in comparison to other St. Helenas, and conspicuously barred. This leads me to believe the ancestors of this strain were the nominate subspecies, from southern South Africa. While most of the St. Helenas now in this country came from Tanzania, Ed Hamilton informs me some arrived from Guinea. Unfortunately, Goodwin (1982) does not provide a description or give a name to the isolated population found in Guinea, Sierra Leone, The Ivory Coast, and Liberia. It would be most helpful if anyone possessing birds known to come from this area would publish photos and description.

Lisa Weeden, Fort Worth Zoological Park

John Wise, Fort Worth Zoological Park

Lisa Weeden, Fort Worth Zoological Park

Orange-cheeked Waxbill
Estrilda melpoda

This species continues to arrive in large numbers from Puerto Rico. One can be certain that these, and those that formerly were exported in huge numbers from West Africa are all the nominate subspecies. One sees birds with bright red cheeks but these appear to be a color phase, rather than a geographical subspecies.

Golden-breasted Waxbill
Amandava subflava

This is another clear-cut case. The northern, nominate subspecies, which arrived from the traditional West African export centers has the male's chest and underparts suffused with rich orange-red, in patterns "as variable as a desert sunset" (Bates & Busenbark, 1963). The Southern *A. s. clarkei*, which recently arrived in numbers from Tanzania, either has the male's chest and underparts a clear bright yellow, or with an orange or orange-red patch confined to "the centre of the upper breast" (Goodwin, 1982). The five male *clarkei* received by the Fort Worth Zoo in late 1993 all have clear yellow chests. Females of both subspecies appear identical except for a slight differ-

ence in size, which may be rather subjective when judging living birds. Persons viewing Fort Worth's *clarkei*, the larger subspecies, always remark on what tiny birds they are.

This is another species almost certain to be soon established in the U.S. Already one sees advertisements of captive-bred specimens. It is again likely that breeders seeking to avoid inbreeding have purchased Tanzanian birds to add to their existing stock, likely West African. I hope that by publishing this information, such cross-breeding may be avoided. Of course, many people will prefer the more brilliantly colored West African subspecies, and there may be a problem of not enough breeders perpetuating *clarkei*. I was appalled to hear that at least one set of show standards called for clear or uniformly colored breasts in this species. Standards must be rewritten to reflect both the fact that two subspecies are present, and that the West African one is highly variable. *A. subflava clarkei* is certainly an attractive bird in its own right. At any rate, Fort Worth Zoo has set up its 11 birds in off-exhibit planted outdoor aviaries, where they are showing promising behaviors.

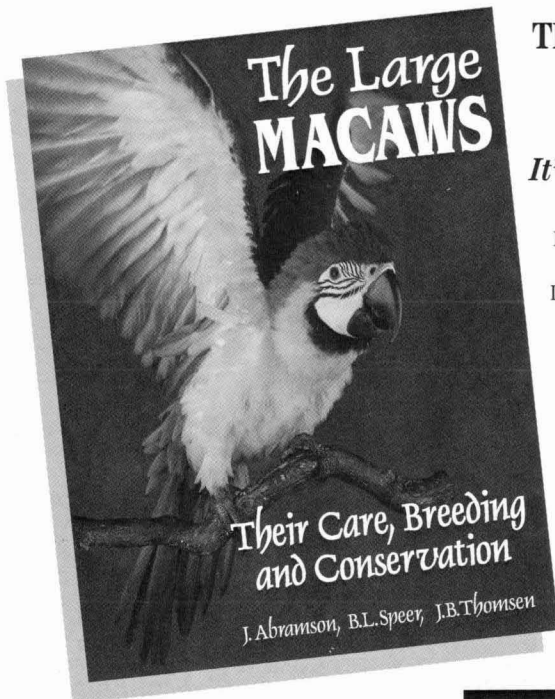
Quail Finch
Ortygospiza atricollis

It is possible some specimens of the nominate West African subspecies arrived in the '80's, but I believe almost all the Quail Finches coming to America in the last decade came out of Botswana. Two subspecies occur in that country on the north-central boundary of South Africa. The northern *O. a. pallida* is described by Goodwin (1982) as being "markedly paler" than the southern *O. a. muelleri*. This might be something worthy of consideration for persons working with Quail Finches.

African Silverbill
Lonchura cantans

Both the western nominate subspecies and the eastern *L. c. orientalis* are present in American aviculture. While some people (Mosier, 1993) recognize them, I'd imagine most persons working with Silverbills are not aware of this. I think the major problem with this species at present is the poor demand for birds that lack bright colors. It is certainly the easiest African finch to breed, if one has both sexes present. At any rate, Goodwin (1982) describes *orientalis* as "a little darker brown and more promi-

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nently barred on the upper parts and less buffish on face, breast and flanks." He notes natural intergradation occurs.

**Bronze-winged Mannikin,
*Lonchura cucullata***

This is another species that continues to arrive in large shipments from Puerto Rico, and is thus quite cheap. This fact, coupled with a reputation for aggressiveness (Warmbrod, 1989) has thus far limited any widespread attempt to propagate it. The Puerto Rican birds are, or so I can only imagine, the western nominate subspecies. Ed Hamilton informs me that some arrived in the Tanzanian shipments. These would be the rather distinct *L. c. scutata*. Derek Goodwin (1982) states it "usually lacks the glossy green patch at the side of breast, having this area barred black and white, and its rump is usually less clearly barred." He goes on to observe that "the two races intergrade in many areas."

**Blue-billed Mannikin
*Lonchura bicolor***

This is another very clear-cut case. As the two available subspecies are *always* recognized I don't think anyone would hybridize them. While the Black-and-White Mannikin, *L. b. bicolor*, from the West Coast has not proved very popular, the Red-backed Mannikin, *L. b. nigriceps*, exported from Tanzania has usually been considered a collector's item. From Roddy Gabel's (1991) article in this magazine, one gathers it would be an enjoyable bird to work with.

**AFRICAN ESTRILDIDS
NOT LISTED BY CITES**

**Melba Finch
*Pytilia melba***

Currently, there appear to be two subspecies of Melbas in America. Quite a few have arrived from Botswana in the last several years, and are all the nominate subspecies, with gray lores, bright red face and throat, and golden chest. Birds have also come from Tanzania, where at least four subspecies occur (Goodwin, 1982). It would happen that the Tanzanian birds arriving here appear to be the subspecies most similar in appearance to these from Botswana. While there are Tanzanian Melbas with red lores (very similar to the West African birds that apparently have not been seen here in years) and others with predominantly red chests, the most noticeable difference between a male I saw and the birds from Botswana was that the face of the male Tanzanians was orange instead

of red. This corresponds to Goodwin's (1982) description of the northern Tanzanian *P. m. citerior*, which is further distinguished from *P. m. melba* by its barred, instead of partially spotted, underparts. The ranges of these two subspecies are widely separated by other ones. Therefore, though these two are superficially similar, I hope efforts will be made to maintain separate lines. This species has a deserved reputation (Lindholm, 1993a) for the difficulty of rearing the young, though it readily nests and lays eggs in captivity. The Australians appear to have created their decades-old self-sustaining population only because of a ready supply of live termites. From personal experience I can attest that working with this beautiful species can be immensely frustrating, and I know accomplished finch breeders who have avoided Melbas completely. I think that it is still far from certain that we will establish free-breeding strains of Melbas in this country.

**Blue-backed Cordon Bleu
*Uraeginthus angolensis***

Of the four subspecies discussed by Goodwin (1982), only *U. a. niassensis* is found in Botswana, from where some have recently arrived.

**Purple Grenadier
*Uraeginthus ianthinogaster***

This is a situation where, for once, there may be too much concern over subspecies. All specimens in the U.S. are, or descend from Tanzanian exports (or at least they *should*). Of the three subspecies recognized by Goodwin (1982) only the nominate one appears in Tanzania. This is one of the most naturally variable birds in nature. (It parallels the Western Golden-breasted Waxbill in this respect.) Goodwin (1982) states that "The races all intergrade". I believe all efforts should be concentrated towards simply producing reliable breeders. Richard Schmidt told me, in 1993, that none of the people advertising captive-bred Grenadiers (or Violet-ears, for that matter) actually had any to sell when he called them.


**Red-rumped Waxbill
*Estrilda rhodopyga***

Now that further importations of Red-eared and St. Helena Waxbills are prohibited, this formerly unpopular bird may receive more attention — if more consignments arrive from Tanzania. At any rate, only one subspecies occurs there, *E. r. centralis* (Goodwin, 1982).

**Black-cheeked Waxbill
*Estrilda erythronotos***

If one were to see side-by-side Botswanan, *E. e. erythronotos*, and Tanzanian, *E. e. delamerei* Black-cheeks, they would be at once recognized as distinct forms. I think I'd best refer the reader to Derek Goodwin's (1982) detailed and complicated descriptions of these birds, but summing-up, Botswanans are brownish-gray with rich plum-colored flanks, while Tanzanians are charcoal gray, with pink flanks. Both are beautiful birds. There is a substantial geographical separation between the ranges of these two subspecies. I am unaware of any sustained breeding success with Black-cheeks yet. It will be a challenge to establish this species here, but I think it would be worthwhile to aim towards producing separate pure lines of each subspecies. An interesting complication is that the East African Black-cheeks very closely resemble *E. charmosyna*, the Pink-bellied Black-cheeked Waxbill, which occurs in Northern Tanzania. Again, I recommend Goodwin's detailed comparisons and contrasts between the two species. The pale, instead of black throat, is an immediate identifying factor for *E. charmosyna*. It is quite possible this species may be showing up in what Tanzanian shipments may yet arrive, and there may be individuals in American collections now.

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