

THE MOUSEBIRDS

by Jo Gregson

There are six species of mousebirds, all of which are found in Africa. The name is apt for these long-tailed birds, some with mainly brownish plumage and others with mainly greyish plumage, do indeed resemble mice, as they scurry about in trees and scrubby bushes. Captive mousebirds are most often kept in large tropical houses in which they tend to be seen at a distance or are often overlooked. Unless seen at close proximity they can appear rather drab and uninteresting. At close range, however, the plumage of the most commonly kept species, the Speckled Mousebird *Colius striatus*, is seen to be delicately marked with many shades of brown, and the Blue-naped *Urocolius macroura* and the Red-faced Mousebird *U. indicus* show flashes of bright colouring.

It is certainly worth spending time taking a closer look at these attractive and extremely engaging birds. They are very sociable and live in family groups, that huddle together when roosting and spend a lot of time preening each other. In fact, mousebirds preen their group mates more than do any other group of birds. Mousebirds differ from other birds in a number of ways. The four toes on each foot can, for example, all be used in the forward position and this enables mousebirds to hang from branches, often in small tightly formed groups, thereby saving body heat and protecting each other during rainstorms. Mousebirds have no down feathers and would soon be soaked to the skin and become chilled if they were to roost alone. Their wings are short and rounded, enabling them to fly quickly in short bursts. Long flights are avoided, with mousebirds instead preferring to scramble amongst the branches in search of food. Whereas most birds, when drinking, need to raise their head in order to let the water trickle down their throat, pigeons (and a few other birds) are able to suck up the water without raising their head, and mousebirds drink in a similar manner. They often hang from a branch overhanging water and drink in this way, thereby keeping safe from predators.

Two to three eggs are laid and both the male and female take turns to incubate them. They changeover frequently, with one bird sitting for only an hour or so at a time, before the other takes its place. The eggs hatch after 12 days and the young are fed by both parents, as well as by other members of the group. It is not unusual to find several members of the group roosting together on the nest, sitting on the eggs or brooding the chicks. By the time they are 10 days old, the young are able to climb out of the nest and move about on the branches. At this stage, however, they remain vulnerable and,



Paignton Zoo

Speckled Mousebird. Clements (2007) listed 17 subspecies.

The eye colour is variable.

if they fall to the ground, are unable to get back up onto the branches.

When hand-rearing is necessary, at Paignton Zoo we have found that a parrot-rearing diet fed to the chicks through a syringe works very well.

As soon as the chicks are big enough, they are encouraged to hang from a perch, both to strengthen their legs and feet and to ensure that their moist droppings fall clear and do not foul their plumage. Young mousebirds soon learn to pick up chopped, soft fruit, out of a hanging dish.

Hand-reared mousebirds become very tame and crave attention, and are often quite at home clinging to the keeper's shirt as the keeper attends to other duties. As endearing as this may seem, a few plops of digested fruit down the front of your shirt, will soon make you think again. Mousebirds need to eat often and, being fruit-eaters, digest their food very quickly in a matter six to 20 minutes. New birds are readily accepted into a group and will push their way into the middle of the cluster to get warm or to shelter from the rain.

Mousebirds can be pests in fruit-growing areas, consuming fruit, blossom, buds and even soft leaves (as well as large numbers of insects). If large groups are kept in tropical houses, they can do considerable damage to the plant life. Even so they are worthwhile and lively additions to any tropical house.

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FIELD STUDIES

The Field Studies Council (FSC) is an environmental education charity with a network of centres located in many of the most spectacular parts of the UK. It has a wide range of natural history courses, which range from identifying birds by sight and sound to discovering wild flowers. Courses vary in length from a weekend to a week and are available at a choice of different levels. The course fee includes full board accommodation, transport during the course and the expert guidance of its tutors. To view the list of courses available you can go to: <http://www.field-studies-council.org/2010/index.aspx> or alternatively you can view its ebrochure at: <http://view.digipage.net/?id=natural%20history%20courses%202010&page=18>

A NOTE ON THE COURTSHIP BEHAVIOUR OF THE COLLARED GROSBEAK *Mycerobas affinis*

by Simon Matthews

During December 2009, here at Waddesdon Manor, a pair of our Collared Grosbeaks which had been first introduced earlier that year and was housed in one of our off-show aviaries, was shut inside the shelter due to the cold weather and in order to treat the pair for suspected aspergillosis. Whilst the pair was shut inside the shelter, very few interactions between the two birds were observed. At the end of the treatment for suspected aspergillosis, on a day when the temperature had risen just above freezing, the pair was allowed access to the outside flight. I was fortunate to be the keeper to release the pair back out into the flight and, after letting the pair out, spent a few minutes cleaning the adjacent flights. The pair was very vocal, with both birds doing a lot of calling and flying back and forth, up and down the flight. At that point, I began to watch the pair more closely in case there was any aggression. The female was chasing the male and calling both whilst in flight and whilst perched; the male called only when perched and just before taking off. The female then began to carry a piece of vegetation (nesting material!). The male then remained on the perch at the opposite end of the aviary from where I was observing them and the female joined him and both birds stopped calling. The female lowered and flattened her body in the customary position ready for copulation and was gently twitching her wings. The behaviour of the male, who was perched a few inches (centimetres) away from the female, was less normal. He lowered his head, so that his back was horizontal and moved his wings fluidly from there, so that his wing tips pointed vertically towards the sky. He held this posture for three to five seconds (not enough time to get a camera unfortunately) before he mounted the female and attempted copulation, which appeared to be unsuccessful.

If anyone has observed similar behaviour by this or related species, I would be interested to hear from them.

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BOOK REVIEW

WHILE FLOCKS LAST

Books on our native British birds have been rolling off the presses at an amazing pace in recent years, keeping abreast with the growing number of birdwatchers. When I saw *While Flocks Last* I hesitated. Should I buy it I wondered, or was it just another book that would have little to distinguish it from several other similar books. I did buy it, and from the first page I realised that not only is Charlie Elder, the author, a very accomplished writer but he has a great sense of humour and an imagination that makes one keep turning the pages.

He also hit on a unique idea. An armchair birdwatcher by inclination, he decided to go in search of all of Britain's threatened bird species and relate the adventures he had along the way. A journalist by profession, he decided to somehow fit this venture in between his regular working schedule. As he lives on Dartmoor in south-west England, and many of the species he wanted to see live way up in the north, it involved spending a lot of time alone driving up and back down motorways, much to the despair of his long-suffering family, who thought he was experiencing a mid-life crisis!

In 2009 the BoCC list - *Birds of Conservation Concern* - was revised and a further four species were added to the list. This meant he had to search for 40 rare and elusive birds. I defy anyone to read his account and not laugh out loud. His self-deprecating style and his wonderful descriptions make this book hugely enjoyable. Just let me quote what he wrote about his first sighting of a Hen Harrier, in its stronghold, on the Isle of Man:

"Looking west I noticed that where the weak rays of the pale sun passed through cold air above the distant moors, a tiny dot had appeared. It grew like a swirl of dark gasses and spread until it took the form of a living organism. Wings appeared and with them the power to fly free, and tearing itself from the bonds of light, ripping its feathers into ragged fingers in the process, it emerged into the world of living creatures. Behold! A hen harrier, heading straight towards me!"

This book will make many people stop and think about our native birds, threatened by human activities - the birds most had no idea were threatened. Did Charlie Elder see them all? To find out for yourself you will have read the book.

While Flocks Last (ISBN 978059 3061046) is published by Bantam Press. Price £14.99 hardback.

Rosemary Low

NEWS & VIEWS

FOUR SO FAR

Four Andean Cock-of-the-Rock chicks *Rupicola peruvianus* have been hatched so far this year at Dallas World Aquarium in Texas. It brings the total hatched there since 2007 to 23, of which 16 are still living. Again, both females which have laid each year have produced chicks.

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EUROPE'S LAST JABIRU

Chris Brack has drawn my attention to the fact that the last Jabiru *Jabiru mycteria* in captivity in Europe has died at the bird park at Timmendorfer Strand on the Baltic coast of Germany. The bird, a female named Jabi, died in November 2008. She is said to have lived there for 26 years having, Chris believes, come originally from Vogelpark Walsrode. This Central and South American stork can, he says, still be seen at San Diego Wild Animal Park, which has one, and at Dallas Zoo, which has two unsexed birds, as well as at São Paulo Zoo in Brazil, where there is a female, and at Cali Zoo in Colombia, which has a pair.

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A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Towards the end of my precis-cum-review of the latest *FBF Breeding Register* (Vol.115, No.4, pp.198-199 (2009)), I expressed surprise at the breeding of seven "Scarlet Tanagers *Piranga olivacea*" here in the UK in 2008 and said I would like to know more about the breeding. Nigel Hewston has confirmed that, as I suspected, the birds were not *Piranga olivacea* but *Ramphocelus bresilius*, the Brazilian Tanager, a species that used to be well-known in UK aviculture and was, invariably (and perhaps understandably), known here as the Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea* being more-or-less unknown in UK aviculture). Nigel said, that the tanagers in question were bred by Terry Sayers, whose report and photos of his birds, appeared in *Foreign Birds* Summer 2009 issue, in which the mistake appeared originally. Reuben Girling has confirmed to Nigel that the record refers to the same birds. Six of these tanagers were bred at Wuppertal Zoo in Germany in 2008. The English summary in the 2008 *Annual Report* listed them as "Silver-beaked Tanagers," but the splendid colour photo on p.13 is of the Brazilian Tanager, which does indeed have a silvery-white base to the lower mandible, not unlike that of the darker coloured Silver-beaked (or Maroon) Tanager *R. carbo*.

THE SECRET OF THE WHISTLE

When describing the management of the Crested Pigeon *Ocyphaps lophotes* at Exmoor Zoo in the previous issue of the magazine (Vol. 115, No.4, pp.185-191 (2009)), Derek Gibson listed four alternative names for this familiar Australian pigeon, one of which is Whistle-winged Pigeon. This is because, as it takes to the air, its rapid wing-beats produce a distinctive whistling sound, which is made by air passing over a modified primary feather in each wing. A report in *Bird Keeping in Australia* Vol. 53, No.4, April 2010, p.65, reveals that in an experiment using a model of an *Accipiter* hawk and then in another in which they did not use a model of a hawk, Robert Magrath and Mae Hingee of the Australian National University in Canberra, discovered that the Crested Pigeon produces two different whistling sounds. One acts as an alarm and causes the birds to take to the sky in panic and the other fails to produce any response at all. To the human ear, the two whistles may sound identical, but acoustic analysis revealed that the two sounds are quite complex and distinctive. The whistling sound that acts as an alarm and causes flocks to flee in panic is louder and has a more rapid tempo, and the birds can obviously instantly pick out the difference between the two.

* * *

SUCCESS WITH SOFTBILLS

When the North American population of the Red-faced Liocichla *Liocichla phoenicea* dropped recently to just 11 birds, North Carolina Zoo stepped in and acquired nine of them and is making a concerted effort to breed this species. So far, three pairs have hatched a total of four chicks. Last year the zoo also bred two Golden-headed Manakins *Pipra erythrocephala*. It is only the second known successful captive breeding of this species in North America. It also succeeded in fledging a Golden White-eye *Cleptornis marchei*. It is believed to be the first ever captive breeding of this species. Other species of softbill bred in 2009, included Turquoise Tanager *Tangara mexicana*, Pekin Robin *Leiothrix lutea* and Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*.

* * *

NEW TO AVICULTURE

In a 1925 issue of the magazine (p.191), in what was I suppose the equivalent of the present day News & Views section, the writer noted that Dr Emilius Hopkinson had just arrived in England from the Gambia with several interesting birds, amongst which were two beautiful Chestnut-bellied Starlings *Lamprotornis pulcher*, an African Golden Oriole *Oriolus auratus* and a Blue-bellied Roller *Coracias cyanogaster*. All three of these were believed to be new to aviculture.

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON GALLIFORMES

The World Pheasant Association (WPA), King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thornburi (KMUTT) and the IUCN-SSC/WPA Galliformes Specialist Group, have jointly organised the Fifth International Symposium on Galliformes, which will take place from November 7th-November 14th 2010 at Chiang Mai, Thailand. The subject of the symposium will be the conservation and sustainable management of all species of pheasant, partridge, quail, francolin and guineafowl, with special emphasis on Asia, threatened species and their habitats. In addition, there will be a number of pre- and post-symposium tours and workshops. Further information is available on the WPA website: www.pheasant.org.uk and from Barbara Ingman, Administrator, World Pheasant Association, Newcastle University Biology Field Station, Close House Estate, Heddon on the Wall, Newcastle upon Tyne NE15 0HT.

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AN UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCE

A report in *Cyanopsitta* No.94, pp.25-26, December 2009, on the trade in African Grey Parrots *Psittacus erithacus*, particularly in Cameroon, but also in other African countries, notes that the EU (European Union) ban on the import of wild-caught birds (which became permanent on July 1st 2007), along with a clampdown since 2007 by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), had a dramatic and perhaps unforeseen affect on the trade in Grey Parrots in Cameroon, which according to official figures exported 367,166 Grey Parrots between 1981- 2005. The most horrifying aspect is that, deprived of their main European market, some trappers have turned to killing the parrots and selling their body parts for use in traditional African rites. An accompanying photo shows a pile of perhaps 200-300 or more Grey Parrot heads and another shows their red tail packed in plastic bags. These are said to fetch prices comparable to those paid for the live birds.

Other traders are selling their birds locally or smuggling them into neighbouring countries, where they are said to fetch better prices than in Cameroon. Many Grey Parrots are exported to South Africa, from where a high proportion are later re-exported. Some traders have, apparently, found ways to export their birds to Middle Eastern and Asian countries. In 2007-2008 substantial numbers of Grey Parrots were imported into Lebanon, Bahrain, Pakistan and Singapore. Birds also came into Europe by way of Serbia, which is not directly affected by the EU ban.

In *PsittaScene* Vol.22, No.1, p.2, February 2010, reference is made to

“another massive confiscation” of 1,000 Grey Parrots, the largest single seizure ever recorded in Cameroon. They joined, it is said, several hundred others that were confiscated a few months earlier. The World Parrot Trust (WPT) has dispatched emergency funds to assist with their care.

* * *

PBFD THREAT TO THE CAPE PARROT

Dr Steve Boyes of the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute in South Africa has, thanks to an individual's generous sponsorship, been awarded £820 (approx. US\$1,230) by the African Bird Club Conservation Fund, for a study of psittacine beak and feather disease (PBFD) in the largest remaining population of Cape Parrots *Poicephalus robustus*. With an estimated population of 1,000-15,000 birds, the Cape Parrot is threatened by habitat loss, illegal capture for the bird trade and avian diseases. The primary objective of the study is to capture as many of these parrots as possible to discover the incidence of PBFD and other diseases, check their body condition and take blood samples for DNA-archiving, to be used in the forensic investigation into illegal trade. He will also conduct feeding trials, with birds temporarily held in field aviaries, in an attempt to better understand the Cape Parrot's feeding ecology and preference for cultivated (introduced) pecan nuts over its traditional indigenous food sources. Steve Boyes, who previously studied Meyer's or the Brown Parrot *P. meyeri* in the Okavango Delta (see News & Views, pp.94-95, Vol.114, No.2 (2008)) and experimented with the use of nest boxes, to determine if they can be an effective conservation tool, plans to use data from that study to come up with a nest box suitable for the Cape Parrot.

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THE MAGNIFICENT HARPY EAGLE

Miami Metrozoo in Florida last year became only the second zoo in North America to breed the magnificent Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja*. The chick's parents were both hatched at San Diego Zoo. A male Harpy Eagle hatched in 1991 at Nuremberg Zoo in Germany arrived recently at Weltvogelpark Walsrode as a potential mate for the park's current female, which originated from South America and arrived in Berlin as a juvenile in 1972. She laid her first eggs in 1979. An earlier attempt was made to pair the male with another female at Walsrode, but proved unsuccessful as did an attempt to pair him with a female at Tierpark Berlin.

MRS E. M. (BETTY) ROBERTS

Those who in the 1960s-1980s bought birds from David Roberts Wildlife Limited, PO Box 1051, Nakuru, Kenya, or have visited Lake Baringo, will be saddened to learn of the death of Betty Roberts, who ran the business for many years following the untimely death of her husband David.

When, as a result of a prolonged drought in, I think the late 1950s and/or the early 1960s, there were not enough tilapia to sustain the fish factory he had established on the shore of Lake Baringo, David Roberts turned instead to the rich variety of birds which, because of the drought, were concentrated on and around the rapidly shrinking lake in even greater numbers than usual.

He became for many zoos, bird gardens and approved private aviculturists, a primary source of African waterbirds such as egrets, herons, pelicans, Blacksmith, Spur-winged and Kittlitz's Plovers, Black-winged Stilts, Avocets, African Jacanas, Yellow-billed Storks and African Fish Eagles, as well as birds such as Bristle-crowned and Magpie Starlings, d'Arnaud's and Red-and-yellow Barbets, Spotted Morning Warblers and Red-billed Oxpeckers; and from Lake Hannington, later renamed Lake Bogoria, just to the south, Lesser Flamingos.

Following his death at a tragically early age from a "mystery illness," leaving her with six young children (five boys and a girl), Betty remained at Lake Baringo and continued to export birds around the world, right up until the time that the Kenya Government banned the export of birds. Some of the birds, such as several different species of sunbirds, including the Golden-winged, Tacazze and Northern Double-collared, as well as birds such as the Yellow-billed Barbet, robin-chats, Black-headed Gonoleks, Grey-headed Negrofinches, Red-headed Bluebills and Oriole Finches, came from Tim and Jane Barnley on the Cherengani Hills of western Kenya. Most of the Ross's and White-crested Turacos from Kenya at that time, along with the Splendid Starling's, had been hand-reared by Jane.

Earlier this year I received a letter from Betty Roberts, dated January 24th, asking if I had heard the sad news that Julia, the youngest daughter of Jane and the late Tim Barnley, had died the previous evening. Her death was not totally unexpected, but nonetheless came as a terrible shock. Then, only a matter of weeks later, in the course of a telephone conversation with Jane Barnley, I learned that, unbeknown to me, Betty had died "peacefully" a few weeks earlier.

Malcolm Ellis



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