



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

Weavers and Whydahs (Part I)

(Avicultural Review October 1980 Vol. 2 No. 9)

By David Holmes

My talk as the program sets out is on Weavers and Whydahs and I have split it into five sections.

But first, with the possible exception of WA members, most Australian aviculturists see a member of the weaver family flying around our homes regularly. This member is the House Sparrow, a sombre coloured member, but still a member. Introduced into the eastern states from England, it has become firmly entrenched to the detriment of our local birds.

I shall run through the family [Ploceinae](#).

The First Section covers the [Ploceus](#) Weaver. This section itself is split into three parts, those being:

1. GOLDEN WEAVERS: [Spotted Backed Weaver](#), [Baya Weaver](#), [Asian Golden Weaver](#) and the [Half Masked Weaver](#).
2. BROWN WEAVERS: [Quelea Quelea \(Red Billed\) Weaver](#) and Russ's Weaver (* two races are available - the first is the masked, this has a black face and red bill. The second is known as the "Russ weaver". This race has no colour on the face. Hens are alike for both of the races, and in eclipsed plumage the cock birds are alike in colour); and the [Madagascar Weaver](#).
3. And the final sub section - [Euplectes](#) - being the BISHOPS AND NON-PARASITIC WHYDAHs: [Napolean Weaver](#), [Orange Bishop Weaver](#), [Grenadier Weaver](#) and [Red-Shouldered Whydah](#).

The Second Section: [Vidvinea](#): PARASITIC WHYDAHs: [Queen Whydah](#), [Paradise Whydah](#) and [Pintail Whydah](#).

The Third Section: [Passaring](#): SPARROWS: [Golden Song Sparrow](#) and the [House Sparrow](#).

The Fourth Section: [Bubalornithinae](#): BUFFALO WEAVERS: [Red Billed Buffalo Weaver](#) and [White Billed Buffalo Weaver](#).

The Weavers can be found in parts of [Europe](#) and [Asia](#) but by far the majority come from the [African continent](#). They most likely received their common name by the way several types built their nests by literally weaving fine grasses or vegetation into a compact but very strong work of art.

Because of the vast area these birds inhabit, various climates are covered. Therefore their nest design has evolved to counter climatic conditions, terrain and predator control. To give you an idea I have some examples.

The Baya Weaver which can be found in [Malaya](#) has to live and breed where the annual rainfall reaches 120 inches per annum. To counter the high rainfall they build a very tightly woven nest, therefore the rain runs off the nests lessening the chances of the nest contents being damaged. Their other problem is predators, apart from man; monkeys and snakes fill this area. To counter the monkeys, the Baya Weaver builds on the outer edges of [Bamboo](#) or [Palm fronds](#). The fine twigs bend deterring the monkey, and even if the branch is bent over the nest is counter balanced and hangs vertically. To counter snakes which may be small enough to reach the nest, the Baya Weaver builds a long spout entrance pointing to the ground up to 10 inches long. Even the light weight snake finds the tube a formidable obstacle for the predator to negotiate.

Weavers of the African Swamps:

The nests are either located in [Reed](#) or [Papyrus](#) beds or suspended from branches of trees growing in or near water. Once again the main predator is the monkey. These weavers rely on the water to help protect them by using reed vegetation as camouflage and also by breeding in large colonies, working on the theory that if enough nest at least some chicks will be reared. The nest shape differs from the Bayas being ball shape without an entrance tube. Having no entrance tube the hen is able to have a very quick exit and lives to breed another day.

Communal Nesting:

The social weaver lives on the [African Plains](#) where trees are scarce. The thorny trees are where these birds nest. A colony of sociable weavers pick a likely spot, first building a massive mushroom-shaped roof, under this canopy a hundred plus nests are constructed, providing protection by number and utilising the scarce nesting sites to the fullest.

The Buffalo Weaver lives on the plains following the herds of [Wildebeest](#) and plains herds. Unlike the sociable weaver, they form a large colony but have evolved in another directions; a pair select a stout horizontal branch and build a bulky structure towards the finer branches. Then from the nest to the trunk they place thorn-laden twigs creating a thorny and painful path to the nest for the predators; a successful ploy as they are still with us.

Weavers and the Very Dry Thorn Bush Country:

These weavers rely on the thorny extremes of temperature, very cold nights but extremely hot by day. They have solved their problem by building large thick-walled nests which help insulate the nest contents but still retain the beautifully made nest chamber.

The Whydahs are the last section:

The main protection for the Whydahs is camouflage and well hidden nests in the long grass. Most times the nest is located on the ground or just off it.

The weavers vary from being the little Atlas Weaver to the Buffalo Weaver. They also differ from the small seed eaters as the majority of cock birds change their colour in the breeding season from the browns and grey to the most spectacular colour combinations of Red/Black, Orange/Black, Yellow/Black and Scarlet (nuptial or eclipse plumage). Once the breeding season finishes they revert to the sombre colour again of the hen birds.

The whydahs as with the weavers change colour during breeding season, but differ in as much as many grow very long tails and in some cases three times the body length. The [Red-Collared Whydah](#) has a 10cm body and 23cm tail, to the [Giant Whydah](#) with a 20cm body and 25cm tail. Half the whydahs are parasitic. This group would have to be the most spectacular; beautifully coloured using beige, browns and white with contrasting black. Their size varies from 9-12cm with tails 23-30cm. Some in this group are [Queen](#), [Fischers](#), [Pintail](#) and [Paradise](#). Unlike the cuckoo the young whydah does not eject the host's brood, but instead is reared along with them. Some of the hosts are Paradise/Melba, Pintail/St Helena, Queen/Violet Eared.

The odd bird out in this group is the [Combassour](#) short-tailed and very finch-like. Similar in colour to the [Jacarini Finch](#) and is parasitic to the [Fire Finch](#), but there are records of this bird rearing their own young. Unfortunately I have never kept them, so I cannot give you first hand details.

The wearers and whydahs differ with some pairing up like normal seed eaters, but a large number run on the harem system. One fully coloured cock bird will have up to six hens. He builds the nest, displays to the hen, mates then moves on to the next hen repeating the process. Once his harem is sitting, he then guards the nests. The hen does all the rearing of the brood.

In the next section I will cover the types I know that are left in Australian aviaries. There are odd pairs of the rarer types that I will not cover, but the five I will mention are in enough numbers to grace our aviaries for a while at least.

"WEAVERS AND WHYDAHS" by David Holmes continued in the next edition ([Part II](#)).

*Reference: http://www.bestofbreeds.net/nca/factsheets/Fact_Sheet_23.pdf.

The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW): <http://www.aviculturalsocietynsw.org>

Contact Us: <http://www.aviculturalsocietynsw.org/contactUs.php>

Join us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AviculturalSocietyNSW>

Follow us on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/#!/AvicultureNSW>

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in the Avicultural Review and/or on this website do not necessarily represent those of the Avicultural Society of NSW. No responsibility is accepted by the Society, the Editor, the author/s, Webmaster and/or Administrator/s for the statements, opinions and advice contained herein. Readers should rely upon their own inquiries in making any decisions relating to their own interests.