

## BREEDING LAYARD'S BLACK-HEADED WEAVER

### *Ploceus cucullatus nigriceps*<sup>1</sup>

by Graham Thurlow

In the spring of 2004 I transferred a pair of Layard's Black-headed Weavers into a new outdoor flight measuring 14ft x 8ft x 7ft high (approx. 4.2m x 2.4m x 2.1m high). The birds also had access to an indoor flight measuring 8ft x 3ft x 6ft high (approx. 2.4m x 0.9m x 1.8m high), that forms part of my birdroom which is heated to a minimum of 60°F (15.6°C). During the previous three years the birds had been housed in a large indoor flight of similar dimensions to the new aviary and, although the male had diligently built nests throughout this period, the female had taken little interest in them.

During their first year the weavers shared the new aviary with two pairs of Java Sparrows *Padda oryzivora* and, once they were given access to the outside quarters, the male weaver immediately started nest building. Much to my surprise his preferred site was in the inside aviary, in which he suspended his nest from branches placed in the flight. The birds were offered raffia as nesting material and within three days the male weaver built a very solid globular structure with a short, downward pointing tunnel. Once it was complete, and whenever the female approached the nest, the male would suspend himself from the nest entrance, flapping his wings and swaying from side to side, "fuzzing and buzzing" in what with Layard's Black-headed Weaver passes for a song.

At that point I went on holiday assuming that, as previously, nothing would come of the attempt. When I returned a week later, however, the female weaver was nowhere to be seen. It was not until I opened the door to the indoor flight, that she flew out of the nest and into the outside aviary. A careful examination of the nest revealed two eggs. I therefore retreated quickly to allow the female to return to the nest. During the incubation period I did my best to see to all the birds in the birdroom without disturbing the female, which usually sat tight, until I came to renew the food and water in her flight. She would then beat a retreat, but always returned once I had left the birdroom. The male took no part in the incubation process or in the rearing of the chicks.

Approximately 10 days later an eggshell was found on the floor of the

<sup>1</sup> Recent field guides follow Clancy (1970) and use the name *P. c. paroptus* rather than *P. c. nigriceps* which he regarded as being restricted to areas south of Tanzania. - Ed.



*Photo Graham Thurlow***Male and female Layard's Black-headed Weaver.**

flight and an examination of the nest revealed a chick and an unhatched egg, which subsequently proved to be clear. The eggs of Layard's Black-headed Weaver are rather elongated in shape and pale blue in colour, with the broad end slightly darker and decorated with dark spots and squiggles; the extent of these markings is variable, however.

The chick thrived initially on a diet of black field crickets, then as it grew bigger, it graduated onto waxworms and mealworms. It fledged after approximately 21 days, but continued to be fed by the female for some weeks, even during periods when she took a break from incubating her second clutch of eggs. Within 24 hours of the chick leaving the nest the



male dismantled it and started to build a new nest in the same position; this has proved to be the norm.

Within a couple of weeks the female was again incubating two eggs and this time hatched and reared two chicks to fledging. There was an obvious age difference between the fledglings, the younger of which was ignored by its parent. This again has proved to be the norm with this species, with only the eldest chick being fed once the youngsters have left the nest. This even happened on the single occasion when three eggs were laid and three young fledged; attempts at hand-rearing at this stage have, to date, been unsuccessful. Others breeding Village Weavers suggest this is normal, with only one chick per clutch reaching independence.

In the first season two chicks were reared to independence, which subsequently proved to be a male and female. The pattern was similar the following year, with two chicks being reared, which again proved to be a male and female.

Although considered to be seedeaters, I have found that these weavers are really omnivores with a marked preference for livefood. They also take a significant amount of fruit in the form of soft pear, melon and pawpaw (papaya). Seed is taken only in relatively small quantities and then only plain canary seed, millet sprays and small striped sunflower seed; the various forms of loose millet are ignored.

This year (2007) has been disappointing in that the old pair have produced three clutches of eggs to date (the end of June) and all have proved to be infertile, despite mating having been observed. I therefore assume that the old male is no longer fertile. The birds appear to reach sexual maturity and full colour in their second year and the young birds from the first successful season have now formed a pair and have two chicks - a less than ideal situation - and I fear that unless I can find new stock this small colony is doomed. I would be pleased, therefore, to hear of anyone keeping this species of weaver.

*The author, an Avicultural Society Council Member, lives in Yorkshire. He can be contacted through the Hon. Editor.*



## NOTES ON A TRIP TO SRI LANKA

by Colin Scott

Until I was asked if I fancied joining an organised trip to Sri Lanka, I had never given any thought to visiting this tropical island just off the south-east coast of India. A quick look on the internet revealed that it has just over 400 species of birds - including 26 endemic species and just over 70 endemic subspecies - a large range of mammals including the Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus* and the Leopard *Panthera pardus*, and is described as a "global hotspot" for reptiles. In addition, it has a rich culture and a long history and many World Heritage Sites.

Departure day, February 3rd, earlier this year, finally arrived and after a nine hour delay at Heathrow, we were on our way. Eleven hours later we landed at Colombo Airport, where we were met by Prasanjith Caldera, our guide. There followed a five hour drive to Sigiriya Village Hotel, the first of nine different hotels we stayed at. On the way we saw: Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Intermediate Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia*, Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*, Asian Open-billed Stork *Anastomus oscitans*, White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*, Stork-billed Kingfisher *H. capensis*, Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*, Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Ashy Wood-Swallow *Artamus fuscus*, White-bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens leucopygialis*, Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis ceylonensis*, Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis*, Tri-coloured Munia *Lonchura malacca* and Common Mynah *Acridotheres tristis melanosturnus*. Another species we saw was the Indian Ring-necked Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, one of five species of parrot found on Sri Lanka. We were quite tired by the time we arrived at the hotel, so took a short rest and had something to eat, before we took a walk around the garden and in the surrounding woodland beside a large lake, to which the famous Sigiriya Rock Fortress provided a stunning backdrop. Among the birds we saw over the next few days were: Lesser Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*, Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*, Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*, Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*, Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*, Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, Crimson-fronted Barbet *Megalaima r. rubricapilla*, Brown-headed Barbet *M. zeylanica*, Coppersmith Barbet *M. haemacephala*, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae jerdoni*, Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*, White-rumped Shama *C. malabarica leggei*, Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica robinsoni*, Pompadour Green Pigeon *Treron p. pompadora*, Indian Nightjar



*Caprimulgus asiaticus eidos*, Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura* and Alexandrine Parakeet *P. eupatria*. We also saw a remarkable bird called the Grey-rumped Treeswift *Hemiproctes longipennis*, which with its upright crest, grey colour, orangish cheek patches (of the male) and size - 9in (22cm) - reminded me of a Cockatiel *Nymphicus hollandicus*.

On the second day, our first full day there, we climbed the Rock Fortress and got stunning views in all directions. On the way up we stopped to visit the world famous frescoes of the Heavenly Maidens of Sigiriya. We got great views of Shikra *Accipiter badius* and Shaheen *Falco peregrinus peregrinator*, the latter a subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus*. We also saw a Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, a species previously unrecorded in the area.

The next day, after visiting Dambulla Cave Temple, another World Heritage Site, this one dating from the first century AD, we moved on to Kinjou Safari Village in Wasgomuwa National Park. During an afternoon jeep safari we saw: Spot-billed Pelican *Pelicanus philippensis*, Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*, Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*, Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*, Asian Open-billed Stork, the beautiful Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, Changeable Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus*, Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela*, Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*, Sri Lanka Junglefowl *Gallus lafayetti*, Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* and Chinese Painted Quail *Coturnix chinensis*. Other birds seen included: European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*, Little Green Bee-eater *M. orientalis ceylonicus*, Blue-tailed Bee-eater *M. philippinus*, Streaked Weaver *Ploceus manyar*, Baya Weaver *P. philippinus*, Cotton Pygmy Goose *Nettapus coromandelianus*, Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*, Blue-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus viridirostris*, Green Imperial Pigeon *Ducula aenea*, Malabar Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros coronatus* and Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus minor*. We also saw a number of mammals including: Sambar *Cervus unicolor*, Axis Deer or Chital *Axis axis*, Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*, Black-naped Hare *Lepus nigricollis*, Water Buffalo *Bubalus bubalis*, Grey Langur *Semnopithecus entellus* and a herd of 60-70 wild Asian Elephants.

On day four we moved to Kandy, travelling there via the Knuckles Mountain Range, with its breathtaking scenery. In the afternoon we visited the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kandy, which was a real treat for the green fingered amongst us. There we saw: Indian Hill Mynah *Gracula religiosa*, White-bellied Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, Black Bittern *I. flavicollis*, Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*, Long-billed *N. l. lotenia*, Purple-rumped Sunbird *N. z. zeylonica*, Golden-fronted Leafbird *Chloropsis aurifrons* and Spicebird *L. punctulata*. We also experienced the noise and commotion of a fruit bat roost with an estimated 10,000 occupants.





Photo © Colin Scott

**Layard's or the Emerald-collared Parakeet is among a number of species found only on Sri Lanka.**

Day five involved an early morning visit to Udawallakelle Forest Reserve in the city. There we saw two more parrot species, both of which are endemic to Sri Lanka. One was the Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot *Loriculus beryllinus* and the other was Layard's Parakeet *P. calthorpeae*. We also saw the Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill *Tockus gingalensis* and Yellow-fronted Barbet *M. flavifrons*, both endemic to the island. Other birds we saw included: Greater Flameback (Woodpecker) *Chrysocolaptes lucidus stricklandi*, Red-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense psarodes*, Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*, Black-headed Yellow Bulbul *Pycnonotus m. melanicterus* and Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus humii*. In the afternoon we visited Pinnawala





*Photo © Colin Scott*

**Another species found only on the island of Sri Lanka is the Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot.**



*Photo © Colin Scott*

**Coppersmith Barbet.**



Elephant Orphanage, one of Sri Lanka's biggest tourist attractions, which has a herd of over 80 elephants that take part in a daily parade, travelling from their grazing pasture through the streets to the river to cool off. It is quite a spectacle. Just up the road is the Millennium Elephant Foundation which rescues elderly, sick and mistreated elephants. There it is possible to get 'hands on' experience and it is well worth a visit.

After spending two nights in Kandy, it was time to move again but before we left we visited the Temple of the Sacred Tooth. Then we set-off for Nuwara-eliya situated in the highlands at about 2,000m-(6,500ft). On the way we stopped to visit a tea plantation and a tea factory. In the afternoon we visited Hakgala Gardens which were established in 1860. The following endemic species were seen there: Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon *Columba torringtoni*, Sri Lanka White-eye *Zosterops ceylonensis*, Dull Blue Flycatcher *Muscicapa sordida*, Yellow-eared Bulbul *P. penicillatus*, Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush *Myophonus blighi* and the Purple-faced Leaf Monkey *Semnopithecus vetulus*. Other birds seen were: Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis*, Brown Shrike *Lanius c. cristatus*, Scaly-breasted Rail *Rallus striatus* and Hill Swallow *Hirundo tahitica domicola*.

The next day we made an early start, returning at first light to Hakgala Gardens, before travelling onto Horton Plains National Park situated at 2,500m (approx. 8,200ft). On day eight we made another early start, this time travelling to Yala National Park, Sri Lanka's most famous park, which is situated on the south-east coast, which bore the brunt of the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami. Yala is a very large park situated in the dry zone, with a diversity of habitats ranging from scrub forest to reservoirs, a brackish lagoon and an estuary. We saw more elephants and had good views of the elusive Leopard in this park, which is well-known for its species of mammal. Birds not previously seen included: Barred Buttonquail *Turnix suscitator*, Eurasian Thick-Knee *Burnhinus oedienemus*, Rosy Starling *Sturnus roseus*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* and Orange-breasted Fruit Pigeon *T. bicincta leggei*. On the morning of day nine we visited the Bundala Ramsar Wetland National Park, which comprises scrub jungle and coast, with large salt pans which are flooded and then sealed to allow the water to evaporate and leave behind the salt which is collected by hand. It is very labour intensive work carried out in extremely hot temperatures. Large numbers of waders and other coastal birds were present. After lunch some of us went on a jeep safari to Udawalawa National Park, an area of scrub jungle and tall grass, where we saw: Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis merulinus*, Yellow-crested Woodpecker *Picoides mahrattensis* and the fifth and final parrot species found on Sri Lanka, the Plum-headed



Parakeet *P. cyanocephala*.

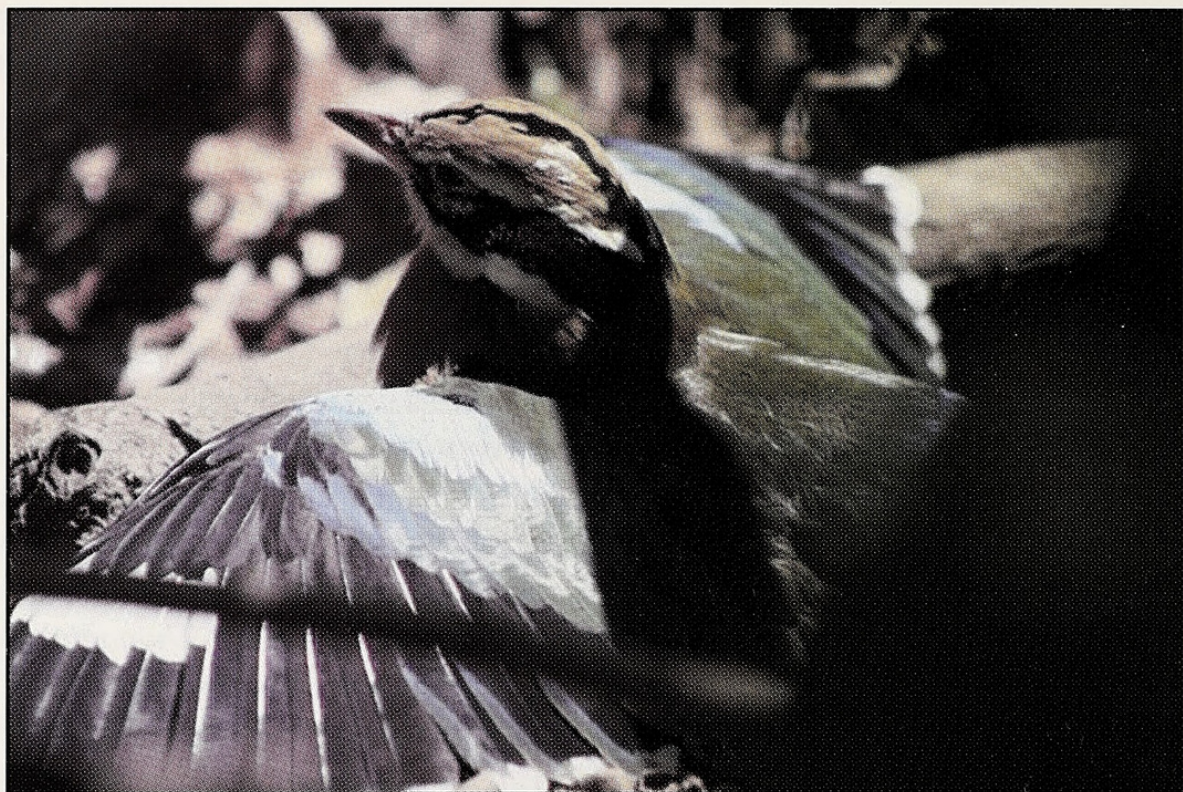
On day 10 we set off to spend two days at one of our most eagerly anticipated destinations - the rainforest. Sinharaja Man and Biosphere Reserve is a World Heritage Site and has been an area of intensive study. The following birds are all endemic to Sri Lanka and were new to us: Sri Lanka Blue Magpie *Urocissa ornata*, White-faced Starling *S. senex*, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush *Garrulax cinereifrons*, Orange-billed Babbler *Turdoides rufescens*, Sri Lanka Mynah *G. ptilogenys*, Sri Lanka Spurfowl *Galloperdix bicalcarata*, Sri Lanka Frogmouth *Batrachostomus moniliger*, Red-faced Malkoha *P. pyrrhocephalus*, Spot-winged Thrush *Zoothera spiloptera* and White-throated Flowerpecker *Dicaeum vincens*. Altogether we saw 15 endemic bird species at Sinharaja, as well as: Malabar Trogon *Harpactes fasciatus*, Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus*, Golden-fronted Leafbird, Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Dark-fronted Babbler *Rhopocichla atriceps*, Asian Brown Flycatcher *M. daurica*, Black-naped Monarch Flycatcher *Hypothymis azurea ceylonensis*, Crested Drongo *D. paradiseus lophorhinus*, Yellow-billed Babbler *T. affinus taprobanus*, Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius assimilis* and Spot-billed Eagle Owl *Bubo nipalensis blighi*.

On day 12 we left Martin's Lodge in Sinharaja Forest and headed for the coast. The beach at Bentoto is a breeding area of several species of turtle and there was a turtle hatchery less than 100yds (90m) from our hotel. Hundreds of young Green Turtles *Chelonia mydas* were awaiting their release and injured turtles, including Ridley's Green Turtles *Lepidochelys olivacea* and Hawksbill Turtles *Eretmochelys imbricata*, were being nursed back to health. We were invited to return after dark to assist in the release of about 150 young turtles. On the way back to the hotel we learned that two adult females were hauling themselves out of the sea and would shortly commence egg laying. These immense creatures estimated to weigh 300kg (approx. 665lbs) are so vulnerable at this time. Local fishermen eager to supplement their income collect the eggs as they are laid. Some are sold to hatcheries and others are sold as food.

We spent days 13 and 14 at Ranweli Holiday Village, which is situated on a small island. We took a boat trip around the mangrove lagoons, where we had good views of Yellow Bittern and various kingfishers and saw lots of other waterbirds. Otherwise we spent the time relaxing before the long journey home.

It was the best trip I have ever been on. We managed to pack in so much over the 15 days, thanks to the meticulous planning of Prasanjith Caldera, our guide. The food, accommodation, the mix of culture, wildlife, scenery and attractions, were all excellent. I would have no hesitation in recommending





*Photo © Colin Scott*

**Indian Pitta.**



*Photo © Colin Scott*

**Painted Stork.**





*Photo © Colin Scott*

**Yellow-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus malabaricus*.**

Jith, as he is known, as a guide to anyone planning a visit to this beautiful island. You can visit his website:[www.walkwithjith.com](http://www.walkwithjith.com)

*Colin Scott is a UK member who lives in north Devon.*



## THE MISTLE THRUSH'S FEET, AN OVERLOOKED ADAPTATION

by Derek Goodwin

Nearly everyone who has written about the habit of the Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* of guarding berried trees and shrubs, especially berry-bearing Holly trees *Ilex aquifolium* and clumps of Mistletoe *Viscum album*, driving from them other berry-eating birds, especially other species of thrush *Turdus* spp., have emphasised how like a Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* it is in the way it flies to attack them, singling out one individual and trying to come on it suddenly round the side of the guarded Holly tree or Mistletoe clump. The fear felt by these birds being often so great that they make no attempt to feed from them afterwards unless they see the Mistle Thrush is being kept away by the presence of humans. Although in hard weather, with snow cover and all unguarded fruit already eaten, other thrushes and Waxwings *Bombycilla garrulus*, when starving, form flocks and overwhelm the guarding Mistle Thrush which can only attack one individual at a time.

See especially two excellent and well-written books, *Birds and Berries* by Barbara and David Snow (1988) and the monograph *The Sparrowhawk* by Ian Newton (1986). In a recent issue of *Bird Watching*, Cousens (2007) also made no mention of leg and feet colour, although the colour plate p.45 clearly showed the yellow legs and feet and black claws of the Mistle Thrush.

I phoned David Snow, a long-time friend and nearly as long an ex-colleague of mine and he said that, unlike me he had never seen an attacking Mistle Thrush from in front and only a little above him unobscured by branches. I had and it was a very memorable experience, though it occurred, I think, in the 1970s. It was a fine and relatively mild day in late winter and I had been walking along a track near a wood where a pair of Sparrowhawks usually bred, when I saw what I at first thought was some *Accipiter* spp. unknown to me, its bright yellow legs and black-clawed feet were stretched down but then upwards and forwards. It was terrifying as I thought it was going to strike my face and only when it swerved past me and round the berry-laden Holly bush did I realise it was, in fact, a Mistle Thrush.

Consulting photographs in books later I realised that the odd-looking breast pattern, which had made me think it was an unknown hawk, is in fact very like that of an immature Sparrowhawk.

The only other kind of thrush I have been able to find described as having similar coloured legs and feet is the Yellow-legged Thrush *Platycichla flavipes*. As its generic name suggests, this species has a stouter bill and wider gape than typical thrushes. The male of a pair I saw close when in Brazil in 1972 had a bright orange bill and orange-yellow legs, I did not





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