

BREEDING THE WHITE-HEADED MOUSEBIRD

Colius leucocephalus

by Bryan Andrews

In February 2005, Phil Cleeton of C&J Bird Brokers imported, amongst a number of other birds, some White-headed Mousebirds, six of which were obtained by me. They arrived in fine condition, with full tails; these being twice the length of the body are not always so complete.



Sarah Lewis & Bryan Andrews

Two females sitting on the same nest.

I housed them indoors, keeping them at a temperature of 73°F (22.8°C), in an all-wire suspended cage. In the spring of that year they were moved to a 9ft x 3ft x 6ft (approx. 2.7m x 1m x 1.8m) planted aviary with a sleeping box, with heating and lighting in it. The box was rarely used, the birds preferring instead to spend the nights hanging in a cluster from the roof netting, until the morning sun brought them out of their torpid state.

Housed on their own, they were offered and ate the same softbill diet as my other birds. This consisted of diced fruit, Bogena Universal and chopped greens, with sliced papaya (pawpaw). I should add here that since January 2006, following constant nagging by Phil Cleeton, I now feed all fruits and vegetables halved not diced.

At the beginning of June, all six mousebirds were seen feeding each other and showing great interest in the canary wicker nest pans placed amongst fir cuttings and bamboos. They would add to and take away fresh



Sarah Lewis & Bryan Andrews

Chicks and eggs in nest built in fine-leaved bamboo.



Sarah Lewis & Bryan Andrews

The length of the young mousebird's tail is still only approximately two-thirds the length of the adult birds' tails.

greenery they had placed in the pans daily. With no visual way of sexing the six birds, I just let them get on with it. They would feed and groom each other and I would find them sitting in different nests each time I looked.

On making a closer inspection in mid-July, I found that two of the nests each contained two eggs. Prior to leaving for a month-long stay in Indonesia with my partner, young were being fed by the adults. However, while in Singapore, we received a phone call to say that the birds in the aviaries back home in Wales were being bothered by a Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* and that the commotion it had caused had resulted in the loss of the young mousebirds.

No further nesting attempt was made and on our return I moved the mousebirds into an unheated indoor flight for the winter.

At the start of April 2006 the mousebirds were moved to an outdoor aviary that was densely planted with bamboo and a number of large shrubs. They shared the aviary with Elegant Crested Tinamou *Eudromia elegans* and Gambel's Quail *Lophortyx gambellii*. The planting of the aviary made viewing of the nests extremely difficult. However, on June 5th, I was able to see two mousebirds sitting tightly on separate nests, one was in a canary-type nest pan and the other was on a beautifully woven nest that the birds had made themselves. It was approximately 5ft (1.5m) above the ground in the centre of a fine-leaved bamboo. This is the nest shown in the photo on p.117. The photos were taken after I finally plucked up enough courage, and against all the rules, ventured into the undergrowth and photographed the two nests, which between them contained a total of three eggs and four chicks. I had no way of knowing which bird had laid which eggs in which nest. Plus, I understand that females will share nests and both birds will sit on the eggs, as can be seen in the photo on p.116, taken during the 2005 breeding season.

I can vouch for the fact that all the adult group take part in the feeding and preening of the young, as the four fully-fledged young could be viewed in food-passing sessions. With their body size now, at the time of writing (July 2006), not so different from that of the parent birds, it is only by looking at the length of their tails that I can tell them apart, the length of the young birds' tails being approximately two-thirds of the length of the tails of the adults.

I realise that this is a poorly documented study of these birds, given that it may well be the first breeding of this species in the UK. However, at least two of the adults have gone down again and next year, following my retirement, I will have time to make a more detailed study.

As described above, the White-headed Mousebird *Colius leucocephalus*, has been bred by Bryan Andrews. This is believed to be the first breeding of this species in Great Britain or Ireland. Anyone who knows of a previous breeding is asked to inform the Hon. Secretary.

BREEDING THE BLACK-CAPPED SOCIAL WEAVER

Pseudonigrita cabanisi

by Martin Davies

I acquired eight Black-capped Social Weavers in April 2006, with the aim of trying to establish a breeding colony, given that we are unlikely to see this species imported again. Within days I had sadly lost two of them. The remaining six seemed robust and soon settled into a planted flight measuring 11ft x 10ft x 8ft (approx. 3.5m x 3m x 2.4m). I noticed the birds beginning to establish a pecking order with the alpha pair soon heading up my potential breeding colony. As I had never seen this species before I found the behaviour of the birds fascinating. They communicated with each other using a wide variety of calls, consisting mostly of loud squawks and chattering. They would greet each other en masse with head bobbing, tail quivering and a great deal of excitement. Much of their time was spent together, perching and following each other in flight, and only separating when they foraged on the aviary floor. Although they are coloured black, white and brown, they are quite striking looking birds and for weavers, became very steady once settled into their surroundings. Plumage-wise the sexes look alike but males and females do differ slightly in size and when observed for some time, behaviourally the differences are more apparent, with the males being much more confident and 'pushy', especially where livefood is concerned.

Feeding

I fed the birds a good quality seed mixture for finches, with a high millet content, together with mealworms, waxworms and various fruits (all of the latter were ignored, except for the apple) and a commercially available softbill mixture. Grated cheese, carrot and the usual softbill fare were steadfastly ignored.

Breeding

In early May, with the colony well settled in, I started to provide various types of nesting material such as hemp teasings, dry hay, small twigs and coconut fibre, but to my great disappointment, the birds made only half-hearted attempts at nest building. I remembered that when I had been in South Africa most of the weavers that I saw had started building individual nests using green material and not the dry material that I had provided up until then. So, I supplied them with some long stems of grass. These got them going with a little more enthusiasm, but again they soon gave up. In despair, I phoned Mike Curzon, to ask if he could offer me any advice? He

*Martin Davies*

Nest built by Black-capped Social Weavers.

consulted a reliable field guide and confirmed that they make individual nests rather than a single colonial nest. Despite the advice, however, it occurred to me that they might build colonial nests just for roosting purposes when not breeding and that this might bond the colony together and make it feel more settled. So, I placed in the flight, two hanging baskets stuffed with hay. These produced an almost immediate result. The birds became very excited and chattered away to each other, using calls I had not heard them use before. They began to fashion tunnels into the mass of hay and over time, they built individual compartments in it. I provided more hay and they just kept adding to the structure until it became quite substantial. I kept disturbance to a minimum and only entered the flight to feed the birds. Therefore, I had no real idea whether or not they were breeding. Furthermore, my work commitments at the time meant that I had little leisure time to observe them. I had though noticed copulation occurring.

In early June we had some very inclement weather and on visiting the flight one morning to feed the birds, I found one of them dead. This reduced the number of birds to five. As the weather improved and time moved on the remaining birds became more interested in each other and began to increase their consumption of any livefood in their flight - waxworms and fruit flies being favourites. About this time I noticed one pair in particular becoming very territorial over their area of the communal nest and my hopes



Martin Davies

Pair of adult Black-capped Social Weavers. The sexes differ slightly in size and the male is much more confident than the female.

began to rise. The only concern I had was that I was due to go away on holiday for two weeks and was worried that any extra care that might be needed would not be fully catered for in my absence. I need not have worried, as on my return I was greeted by the sound of a nestful of young social weavers. I was sorely tempted to look into the nest, but resisted the temptation. The youngsters' "chirping" was faint, so I thought they must have hatched very recently. As the days passed, the "chirping" remained faint and I started to worry that the chicks were not getting enough sustenance. So I tried to reintroduce more variety into the diet, by providing grated cheese, carrot and hard-boiled egg, but all were ignored again. My worries proved to be unfounded, as on July 24th when visiting the flight, I found two young fledglings getting used to their new home. They were smaller, very pale versions of the adults and were very flighty, and were flying at the

wire. The parents and the unpaired adult bird fed the youngsters and at night they all returned to the nest to roost. Shortly after their first outing, they returned to the nest and remained there for several days before venturing out again into the flight. The fledglings then began to investigate the feeding pots and settled down over several days, becoming steadier as they familiarised themselves with their surroundings.

At this time there was a change in the behaviour of the non-breeding members of the colony. They left the colonial nest and started to make their own nest, which is identical in shape and size to the image of the nest I found on the internet and is like the nest described to me by Mike Curzon. It is now, at the time of writing (August 2006), occupied by the other pair and I assume there are eggs in it.

I will endeavour to establish links with other keepers of this fascinating species - at present, I know of only one other. As we are unlikely to see the import ban lifted, I feel that as bird keepers, we now have a responsibility to specialise in such species, to ensure as wide a variety of species as possible remain available for the future.

Martin later confirmed that there were a further three young, but they were lost during a heavy rainstorm, after which the weather turned cooler and the birds contented themselves by making nest repairs, but did little else.

As described above, the Black-capped Social Weaver *Pseudonigrita cabanisi*, has been bred by Martin Davies. This is thought to be the first breeding of this species in Great Britain or Ireland. Anyone who knows of a previous breeding is asked to inform the Hon. Secretary.

Martin Davies is a UK member living in Wiltshire.

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BREEDERS' REGISTER

Andrew Owen of Waddesdon Manor aviaries is setting up a *Breeders' Register* of keepers (breeders) of the Chestnut-backed Thrush *Zoothera dohertyi*, with the aim of trying to establish a self-sustaining population of this Indonesian species found from Lombok to Timor. He would also like to hear from anyone who keeps the distinctive Sumatran subspecies of the White-crested Laughingthrush *Garrulax leucolophus bicolor*, which was bred earlier this year at Waddesdon Manor. If you keep either of these birds, or would like to know more, you are invited to contact Head Keeper Ian Hadgkiss or Andrew by telephone at: 01296 653286 or by e-mail: Andrew.Owen@nationaltrust.org.uk

TOO RARE TO COLLECT THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW SPECIES OF LIOCICHLA

A professional astronomer Ramana Athreya has found a new species of liocichla in a remote part of north-eastern India. He first saw it at Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh, in 1995. Ramana and his colleagues on the Eaglenest Biodiversity Project returned to the site in late January 2005 and again in May 2005 armed with mist nets, but failed to find the bird again. It was not until May this year that two were eventually trapped. Because of their great rarity, no scientific specimen was collected, instead they were photographed, feather samples were taken and voice recordings made, then the two birds were released.

The description of this new species, which has been named the Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum* (see photo on following page), and the story of its discovery, were published in the journal *Indian Birds*. Its Editor, Aasheesh Pittie, described the discovery of this new species in a part of the world that has been visited by bird collectors for more than a century, as “nothing short of miraculous.”

Dr Nigel Collar of BirdLife International warmly congratulated Ramana Athreya on his outstanding discovery and fully supports his decision not to collect a specimen at this stage. Dr Collar said: “This species appears to be very rare indeed, and from what we know at present the taking of even one individual could jeopardise the Bugun Liocichla’s future survival prospects.”

The known population consists of only 14 individuals including three breeding pairs. Apparently it is not particularly shy and because of this and its very distinctive appearance, it must be very rare otherwise it would certainly have been found earlier. “It is good news that it has been found in a wildlife sanctuary where it is already protected”, said Dr Collar, who added: “A priority now is to find out if other populations of this remarkable species exist elsewhere and what its habitat requirements are, so that appropriate conservation measures can be put in place.”

It is probably most closely related to the Omei Shan Liocichla *L. omeiensis*, which is known from only a few mountains in central China, more than 1,000km (600 miles or so) away, where it is found in the undergrowth of primary and secondary forest between 1,000m-2,400m (approx. 3,280ft-5,870ft). It was first bred in the UK by Richard Cockerill in 1993 and subsequently by Andrew Blyth in 1995 and by Nigel Hewston in 1996. A census of known keepers conducted in March 1998 recorded 21 males and 20 females in 10 collections (see *Avicultural Magazine* Vol.107, No.3, pp.109-114 (2001)).

Detailed examination of the Eaglenest birds and comparison with specimens and tape recordings of the Omei Shan Liocichla revealed many



Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum*.

plumage and vocal differences. Comparisons were made possible by reference to skins in The Natural History Museum collection at Tring, which were donated by Avicultural Society members who participate in the EAZA ESB (European Association of Zoos and Aquaria European Studbook) programme for the Omei Shan Liocichla.

There are two other species of liocichla, the Red-faced *L. phoenicea* and Steere's Liocichla *L. steerii*. The Red-faced was first bred in the UK at the Tropical Bird Gardens, Rode (see *Avicultural Magazine* Vol.102, No.1, pp.23-24 (1996)) and by B. Massey in 1991. Steere's Liocichla was first recorded as having been bred in the UK in 1990.

The paper describing the Bugun Liocichla and more photographs of the specimens trapped can be downloaded from: www.indianbirds.in

AL WABRA WILDLIFE PRESERVATION, QATAR: WORKING WITH TURACOS *Musophagidae* spp.

by Simon Bruslund Jensen

The turacos are a primitive, almost primeval-looking family of medium to large-sized birds, most closely related to the cuckoos. The 23 species are distributed exclusively in tropical African forests and savannahs. Most species are beautifully coloured in shades of green, blue and red, and are well known for their unique feather pigments, the so-called turacin and turacoverin, found only in this family.



Sven Hammer/AWWP

A Prince Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii* approaching a waterhole close to Arero, Ethiopia.

Due to their appealing appearance, many of the species have for many years been popular in zoos and private collections. However, just a few years back, captive breeding would never have been considered as an option for the conservation management of turacos, as they had long been considered as delicate and rather difficult to breed in captivity.

In recent years the methods used for keeping and breeding turacos have improved a great deal, due largely to the systematic approach by dedicated individuals and public collections such as the zoos in Cologne, Germany and Houston, Texas, USA. Now for the first time, it seems possible to establish self-sustainable captive populations, in particular within the

framework of regional and international cooperation, with studbooks being maintained to ensure the necessary exchange of bloodlines.

This is in line with the identification of more and more threats to several turaco species in the wild, especially to some of the unique subspecies with limited distribution. Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation (AWWP), owned by Sheikh Saoud Bin Mohammad Bin Ali Al-Thani, has had a long standing interest in improving our knowledge of some of the lesser known species and subspecies, and has decided to invest resources into the turacos as a group, with initial emphasis on two species, one *in situ* and the other *ex situ*.

The goals of AWWP were to investigate the current status of the little known Prince Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii* in Ethiopia and simultaneously develop captive management strategies for turacos using a common species, the Violet Turaco *Musophaga violacea* of West Africa, as a model.

Prince Ruspoli's Turaco (*in situ*)

AWWP has coordinated and funded research on Prince Ruspoli's in Ethiopia, which has resulted in major publications on the ecology of its habitat, the juniper forests, and some of the problems this species faces in the wild.

Prince Ruspoli's Turaco, which has a very limited distribution in south-central Ethiopia, remains one of the least known of the turacos. It appears that it is strongly connected with the endemic juniper forest found in this region. For a long time the limits of its distribution remained undefined, as did its ability to adapt to other types of habitat. It was believed that the juniper forests were subject to a number of threats, including from large numbers of feral goats, along with humans cutting down trees for much needed firewood. Furthermore, there had been sightings of possible hybrids between Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and the more common White-cheeked species *T. leucotis*, that normally occurs further north in Ethiopia, isolated from the juniper forests.

In 2003 AWWP employed Italian biologist Luca Borghesio to answer some of these questions and if possible investigate what could be done to secure the future of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and its habitat. He put together a research team in order to undertake an expedition to Ethiopia, in cooperation with the Ethiopian Wildlife Natural History Society and the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation.

One of Borghesio's first tasks was to identify the extent of the juniper forests and the decline that had occurred in the past decades. This was done with the help of satellite images taken by the US military. Images covering the entire region were purchased and after visiting the forest the specific signatory structure of the undisturbed juniper forest was compared to that

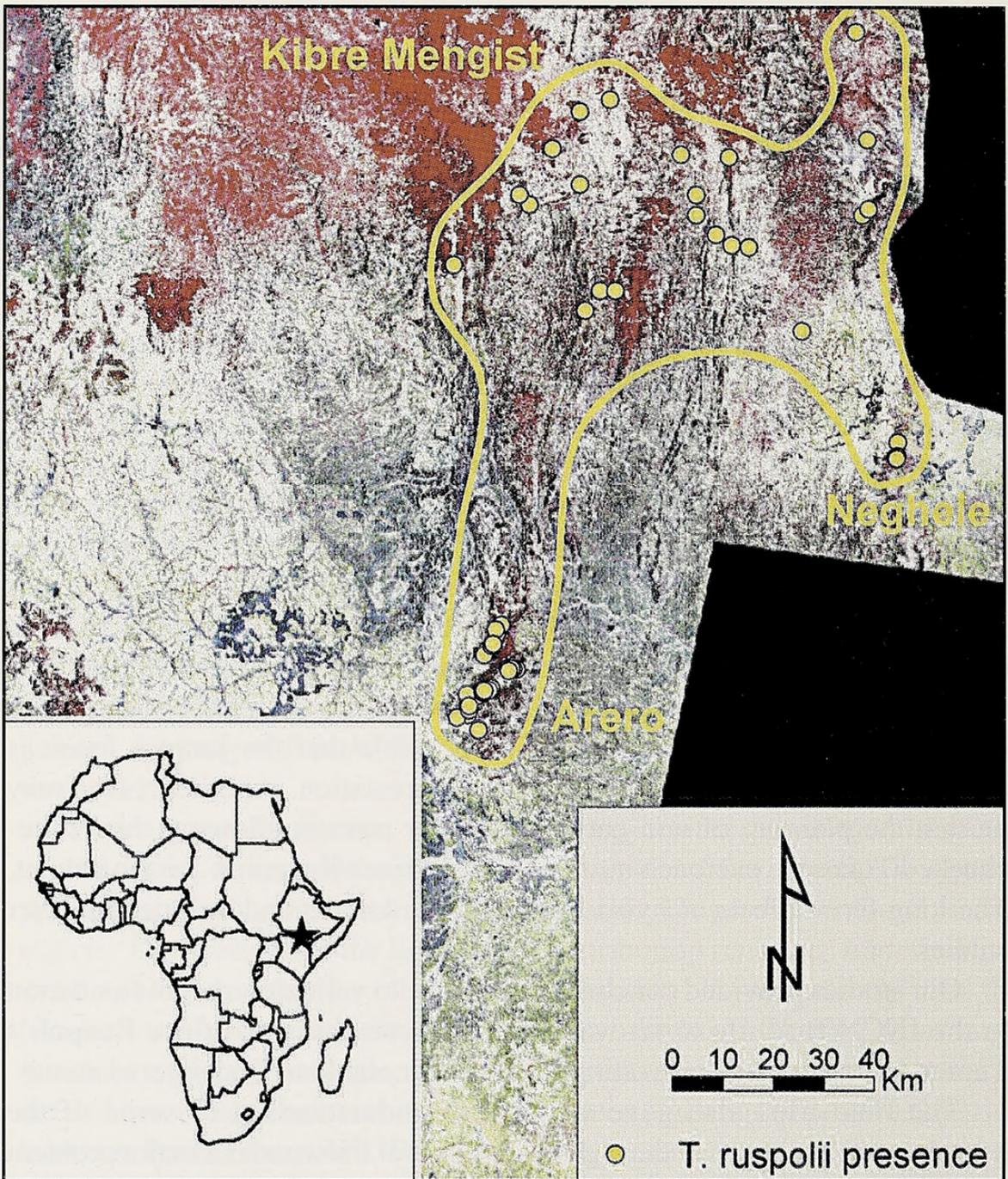
of destroyed forest, as well as that of other types of forest cover. This data was then correlated to their specific coordinates on the satellite maps. The process revealed an exact picture of the juniper forests in the entire region, as well as giving clues to their status. The field expeditions also wanted to determine if the turacos did in fact occur only in specific habitats. Results were a little inconclusive, as the field work was cut short by Ethiopian bureaucracy and our research permit being revoked. However, it was possible to determine that Prince Ruspoli's Turaco was present also on the fringes of its preferred habitat. In addition, it was proved that hybrids between Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and the White-cheeked species exist where the two meet. Based on historical data on the distribution of the White-cheeked Turaco and the fact that so far only a few hybrids have been observed, it is fairly certain that this is a recent development.

Our studies proved that the density of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco was larger than expected, especially in suitable habitat, but also that this habitat is shrinking at an alarming rate. The massive loss of habitat may be what causes Prince Ruspoli's Turaco to move into other habitat, where it comes into contact with the White-cheeked species, with the result that hybrids sometimes occur. Or, it may also be possible that the juniper forest is changing due to human activity causing deforestation. Another reason may be that the planting of non-native and taller trees is allowing the White-cheeked Turaco to encroach into traditional Prince Ruspoli's Turaco habitat. The long-term effects of hybridization are unknown and will need further studies.

Our studies provided conclusive evidence to validate a recommendation to the IUCN/BirdLife to re-evaluate the threat status of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and to consider elevating it from Vulnerable to Endangered status.

The field trips also gave us a better understanding of some of the humanitarian problems in the region. The lack of firewood is a major problem for the local people, as is the lack of surface water, which makes it difficult to cultivate the same areas of cleared land over a number of years. Amongst the local people there is little understanding of the uniqueness of their forests, therefore they cut down the trees indiscriminately and replant with introduced species, leaving little space and food for the endemic fauna. The feral goats remain uncontrolled and destroy forest even in isolated places. In particular, they apparently damage the ground by impacting the soil, making it difficult for juniper trees to grow. Large scale erosion is evident in places where the forest has been cleared.

The only way it will be possible to counter some of these problems, will be to help the local people to develop the region and make better use of available resources and at the same time improve their appreciation of their unique forests. It may be possible to make better use of the farmland by



LANDSAT satellite image of survey area January 2002. Yellow spots indicate the known presence of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and the yellow line bounds its estimated range. Forested areas are coloured red and *Acacia-Combretum-Terminalia* woodland blue-green. Transitional habitats between forest and woodland are selected by this turaco.

pumping up underground water and by controlling the goats. More effective ways of burning wood can also be introduced. There is, for example, a simple metal stove that compared to the traditional open fireplace, reduces by half the amount of wood needed to boil water.

North-eastern Africa, including large parts of Ethiopia, seem to be inescapably affected by global climate change, that is directly influenced by humans. In few regions of the world are the direct effects as visible as here,



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