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VILLAGE WEAVER-BIRDS OF AFRICA ARE SHOWN IN NEW HABITAT GROUP

BY RUDYERD BOULTON
Curator of Birds

Three habitat groups of African birds have been completed and installed in an alcove of the new foreign section of the Hall of Birds (Hall 20). They include village weaver-birds, birds of Mount Cameroon, and Kalahari Desert birds. Specimens for the first two are the gift of Mrs. Oscar Straus, of New York, sponsor of the Straus West African Expedition of Field Museum (1934); the third is composed of specimens collected and presented by Mr. Arthur S. Vernay, of New York and London. Mrs. Straus, who accompanied the expedition at the time the weaver-birds were collected, visited the Museum last month for an informal preview of the groups.

Due to construction work currently under way in Hall 20, it is necessary temporarily to restrict public view of the groups to Saturdays and Sundays.

Weavers, which constitute the largest and most varied bird family of Africa, rank among the best architects of the feathered world, and the village weaver-birds (*Ploceus cucullatus*) are among the most skillful nest builders of their family. Their globe-shaped nests are woven from strips of grass or palm leaves. "Woven" is not a loosely used term, but an accurate description of the method employed by the birds. Detailed studies of the nests of another weaver species have revealed that certain definite knots are used to tie the ends of the strips of material—they are not merely tucked in. A firmly woven vertical ring about six inches in diameter is first made by the birds to serve as a foundation. The hemispherical chamber for the eggs and young is then added on one side, and the down-turned spout or entrance is added on the other. Nests in various stages of construction are shown in the Museum group.

The village weaver-birds exemplify a highly gregarious mode of living coupled with a peculiar preference for association with conditions imposed by the existence

of socially organized human life. Rather than remain exposed to purely natural conditions involving greater dangers from predatory animals, they have chosen to build their colonies or "villages" of as many as a hundred nests in trees near the villages of human natives. This habit accounts for

of fluttering half upside down while it reaches through the "door" of the nest for its prey.

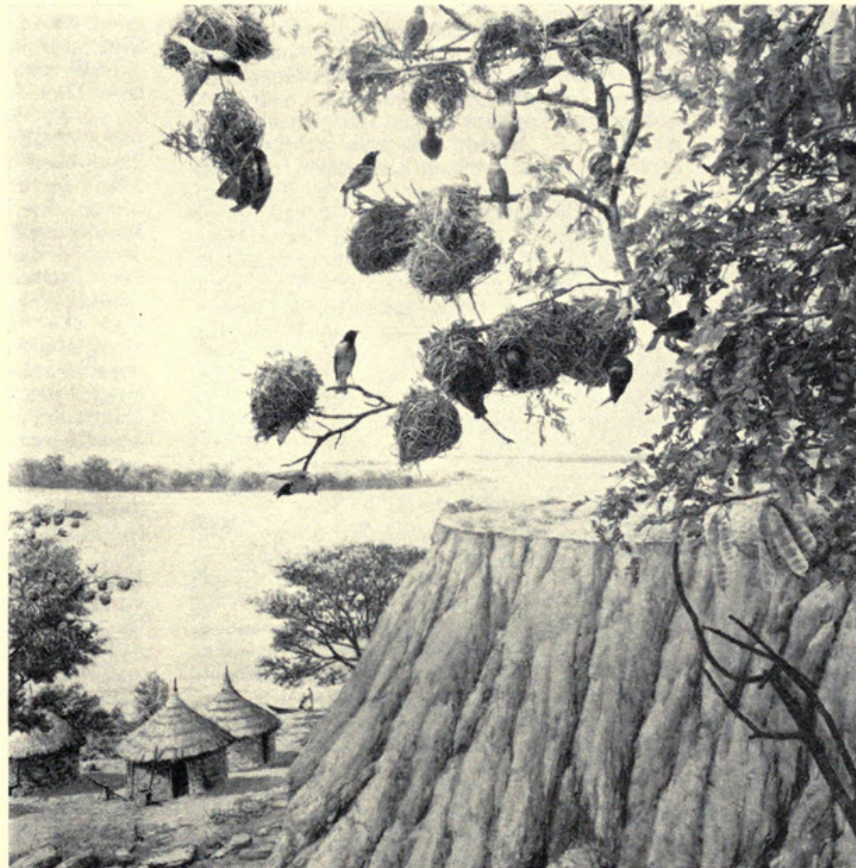
An economic problem to agriculture is presented by the weavers in Africa. During the dry or winter season, when they are in their dull plumage, weavers of certain species congregate in huge flocks and devastate rice and millet fields. Consequently, among some native tribes, small boys have been assigned, from time immemorial, to sit all day long, as living scarecrows, on scaffolds and platforms in the fields. Their efforts to frighten the weavers away from the crops are not highly effectual, however.

Weavers comprise about twelve per cent of all birds of Africa. Thus they compare in dominance over that continent with the sparrows and finches which in America form the largest family, with approximately seventeen per cent of the total bird population here. Although they superficially resemble each other, these two important families of birds have definite and constant characteristics that serve to distinguish them. Sparrows belong to the group of birds known as "nine-primaried"—that is, with nine flight feathers on the outer part of the wing. Weavers, on the other hand, are "ten-primaried," possessing an additional small feather. Reduction and simplification of this sort are generally considered to be evidence of evolutionary progression. Consequently, sparrows are placed at the top of the scale of birds for

this and other reasons.

The village weaver-bird group was prepared by Staff Taxidermist John W. Moyer. The plant accessories, which include a reproduction of a "woman's-tongue tree," so-called because the wind rattles its seeds noisily in their dry pods all day long, were made under the supervision of Preparator Frank H. Letl. The painted background is the work of Staff Artist Charles A. Corwin.

The other new bird groups will be dealt with in future issues of FIELD MUSEUM NEWS.



Birds That Prefer Human Neighbors

Habitat group showing how village weaver-birds of Africa build their colonies of uniquely woven nests in proximity to native huts. Specimens for the group were collected by the Straus West African Expedition.

the name that has been applied to them. These birds occur over a wide area of western and central Africa. The Museum exhibit represents part of a colony near the village of Niamey, on the Niger, French West Africa.

Some other species of weavers that do not nest in colonies make long slender hanging entrances like rain spouts, as much as two feet long, and are thus better protected from predacious animals than the village birds. Prominent among their enemies is a species of West African hawk which has long slender legs, and has developed the habit

Paleontological Expedition

Plans have been completed for the field party that will spend the summer collecting fossil vertebrates in Colorado to leave the Museum May 15. Work that yielded important results in 1932 and 1933 will be resumed. The party, consisting of Assistant

Curator Bryan Patterson and Assistant James H. Quinn, will be joined by Curator Elmer S. Riggs for part of the summer.

Radiographs made by a number of different species of radio-active minerals are exhibited in Hall 34 (Case 34).

Tusks Fourteen Feet Long

Prehistoric elephants had tusks as much as fourteen feet in length. The fossil bison of one species had a spread of horns reaching six feet. Modern animals of the better breeds are prized for their short horns and short tusks.



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