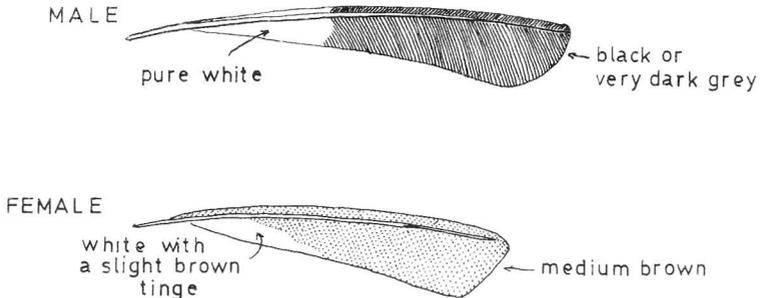


THICKBILLED WEAVER
Amblyospiza albifrons

SEX

Extreme sexual dimorphism involves plumage pattern and mass and makes sexing easy. A typical remix is shown in illustration.



RIGHT FOURTH PRIMARIES FROM MALE AND FEMALE BIRDS TO SHOW THE CONTRASTING PATTERNS AND SIZES. MALE FEATHER MEASUREMENTS EXCEED FEMALE BY 12 TO 15%.

In the field: males have dark plumage, white wing bars, which are easily seen at rest and in flight, and white forehead patches (which are lost during moult). Second year males, as they assume adult plumage, are obviously darker than the females with which they associate.

Nestlings (usual brood is 3): if all have the same mass they are probably of the same sex; if one is heavier than the others it is a male, if lighter, a female (tested by rearing nestlings in captivity).

Fledglings: the big one in a brood is a male. Isolated fledglings cannot be sexed.

First-year immatures: there is no moult during the first year (contrast other weavers) and immatures resemble adult females. They can be sexed by mass (male above 48 g, female below 45 g).

From the second year on there are no problems. As a curiosity occasional females have one or more feathers of male pattern which persist after every moult.

AGE

PLUMAGE:

Fledglings have very short tails, quite unmistakable. Males that have been identified by size and mass but are still in plumage similar to adult females are, in fact, first-year immatures. Birds with mixed plumage resembling that of male and female adults are second-year males. In adult birds, plumage, because it is entirely renewed annually, does not help with ageing.

GAPE:

A bright yellow gape that is definitely swollen means that the bird is in its first year. The gape shrinks but remains yellow in the female until she is about 5 years old (one female in captivity, aged 8 years, still showed some yellow in the gape). Gape colour is usually quite lost, i.e. replaced by black, by the time the male is two years old, but a trace of yellow may recur during moult (e.g. bird no. 4-48238 retrapped during its sixth year showed a trace of yellow in the gape).

BILL COLOUR:

Nestlings and young first-year birds have the bill entirely yellow. A dark patch develops at the tip of the upper mandible and the pigment spreads up the middle line and later along the edges of the mandible (see diagram). Old females have darker bills than young ones but the character is variable, and one female has been retrapped with more yellow in the bill than at initial capture two years previously. In some older females the yellow colour is replaced by orange



DEVELOPMENT WITH AGE OF COLOUR PATTERN IN THE UPPER MANDIBLE OF FEMALE THICKBILLED WEAVERS

In males the bill is usually entirely black by the second year. Occasionally a trace of yellow remains, e.g. bird 4-50906 retrapped after more than 5 years still had a little yellow in both mandibles.

H.T. Layock, 39 Armstrong Drive, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3201