BIRD-IN-THE-HAND

IDENTIFYING AND SEXING THE CAPE WEAVER (Ploceus capensis)

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The weavers (Ploceinae)are one of the most notoriously difficult groups of birds to identify, let along to age and sex. Except for some Forest species, most species are strongly sexually dimorphic. The plumage of the adult male in the breeding season is sufficiently different between the species to allow easy identification. The females of the savannah species can all be described as non-descript if that is not a contradiction in terms. The only species that one is regularly likely to come across in the Cape Weaver habitat is the Masked Weaver Ploceus velatus. I have found that the easiest way to separate the two species is by culmen length, the measurement for the Cape being 20-24 mm. and for the Masked (according to Roberts) 15.5-17 mm. One should however, be particularly careful with young Cape Weavers just out of the nest, the beaks of which may still be short. Within about a month of hatching, the culmen grows to within the size range given above.

The ageing and sexing of the Cape Weaver is thoroughly complicated by three factors, (a) the adult male having a non-breeding eclipse plumage, (b) the males not adopting the full adult plumage until about 22 months old or in time for their second breeding season after hatching and (c) the immature male plumage being very similar to that of the female.

I was able to work out 3 methods of ageing and sexing the Cape Weaver, namely (i) by keeping hand-reared birds captive for two years, (ii) by dissection of samples of the species and (iii) by retrapping birds of known age.

The chief characteristic of the male Cape Weaver is the aggressively glaring bright yellow iris. The female's is characteristically a deep, warm, homely brown. The chicks on fledging all have brown eyes. In my aviary birds, I found that the male's iris paled into an insipid white colour at about five months after fledging. By about seven or eight months, the paleness is sufficiently clear to be a certain sex-identity guide in the field even by the weakest hand-held ringing torch. From this age on the male is identifiable as such regardless of the stage of its plumage, i.e. the yellow of the iris is not lost in non-breeding dress.

However, the first eight months after hatching remain problematic. As far as I have been able to determine by lying specimens of males and females alongside each other there is no 100% certain plumage characteristic which will separate the young male from the female. The only guide I have been able to work out, is size in the form of wing-length. If I take the male wing-length as being 88 mm. and above (wing length as maximum chord taken in natural position, not opened out), I have found that my error rate is about 5% on about 500 dissections. It is remarkable how quickly fledgings grow and they probably achieve a full winglength within three months of leaving the nest. If a bird has obviously just fledged with the edges of the gape still swollen and yellow, and its wing length is already 86 mm. then it is very likely to be a male (I have not worked the statistics on this measurement yet). But there are a number of males which, when fully grown, have wing-lengths of 87 or less (10% in a sample of about 150 males).

Conclusion

The best way to check the identity of the Cape Weaver in areas where it overlaps with the Masked Weaver is to measure the culmen

To sex the Cape Weaver, first look at the iris colour. If it is bright yellow or clearly palish white, it is a male. If the bird is fully grown, a measurement of 88mm. or more will give a 95% chance of being correct (a male). A measurement of 87 or less will give a 90% chance of being correct (a female). If the bird is recently fledged and has a wing-length of 86 mm. or more, it is very likely to be a female.

One word of warning, the above measurements were all taken in the south-west Cape. It is possible that they may not apply to the species at the northern limits of its range, i.e. Durban and Johannesburg. Comparative measurements would be interesting.

RETRAP SCHEDULES

One point that may not have been clear in the instructions for the completion of the new schedules concerns retraps. When a bird is retrapped by a ringer other than the original ringer, the data must be passed on to the latter and it is his responsibility, i.e. the original ringer, to enter the details on the retrap form.