

# NOTES, NOTICES & LETTERS

## CALL FOR INFORMATION ON AGEING AND SEXING WHYDAHs

In beginning a study of some long-tailed viduines of southern Africa (Pintailed Whydah *Vidua macroura*, Shafttailed Whydah *V. regia* and Paradise Whydah *V. paradisaea* in particular), I have found it exasperating to age, and less so to sex, immatures. If any Safring News reader in southern Africa has first-hand ringing experience with these birds, and can help me out with the following questions, I would be extremely grateful.

- o At what age do immatures of each species (excluding Paradise Whydahs) begin to show red in the bill? Does this seem to vary much among individuals, or by sex?
- o At what age do bills become completely red in the Pintailed and male Shafttailed Whydahs? How are female Shafttaileds distinguished from immature males and Paradise Whydah females?

I would be interested to hear from anyone locally who keeps (or has kept) whydahs under aviary conditions, and from anyone who has repeatedly resighted known-age whydahs ringed as nestlings or fledglings.

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Dear Mr. Oatley

My main reason for writing is age and sexing in Afrotropical passerines. Whilst I do not expect to see an 'Afro Svensson' for a few years, surely someone is collecting information towards that goal. I am keen to keep up-to-date in this field and wish therefore to be placed on the mailing list for Safring News. If you know of anyone working on the genera Phyllastrephus, Andropadus, Cossypha and Sheppardia, I would be pleased to correspond with them.

N.E. Baker, P.O. Box 1599, DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania

## MY ESCAPE STORY

H.T. Laycock

When I was in the Far East during World War II, I met a lot of people who had escaped from Japanese prison camps. Their stories attracted so much attention that I thought how nice it would be to have an escape story of my own. I had to wait 40 years for this to happen!

I catch Thickbilled Weavers for ringing purposes in the entrance compartment of my garden aviary, which has a dish of seeds fixed near its roof and a trapdoor in the roof operated by pulling a string from my bedroom window 15 metres away. Today three birds managed to get caught all at once. It is tricky to get inside the trap compartment and close the door behind one without letting any of the victims escape, especially when several get caught simultaneously. This time my wife came down to the aviary to help, and as I was catching my birds in a little net and putting them into weighing bags, she absent-mindedly bolted the door on the outside and went back to the house. When I had done what had to be done and tried to open the door I found I was well and truly caught. The bolt was inaccessible from inside and I had no tools with which to cut the wire netting. Armed only with 20.cm of stiff wire and a pin, it took me half an hour to break the twelve or so wire knots that held the netting in place. This made it possible to squeeze first an arm and then, with difficulty, my head past the edge of the wire netting and reach the bolt on the outside of the door and so get out into the world of free men once more. Perhaps in future it would be as well to keep some wire cutting pliers inside the aviary.

I must say that I once accidentally bolted my wife inside, but on that occasion her agonised cries reached me after a much shorter time than half an hour!

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

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