

THE RED BISHOPS OF AFRICA

THE GRENADIER WEAVER, or Southern Red Bishop, *Euplectes orix*, is a sparrow-sized passerine bird of the bishop and widowbird genus *Euplectes* in the weaver family *Ploceidae*. In its natural habitat it is common in the wetlands and grasslands of Africa south of the Equator, occurring from South Africa north to Angola, the southern and eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, southern Uganda and south-west Kenya. It is largely absent from the desert areas within the range.



FRONT
Photo: "Bries"

It is 10-11cm in length and has a thick conical bill. Breeding males are brightly coloured with red (occasionally orange) and black plumage. The forehead, face and throat are black and the rest of the head is red. The upperparts are red apart from the brown wings and tail. The upper breast and under tail-coverts are red while the lower breast and belly are black. The non-breeding male and female have streaky brown plumage, paler below. Females are smaller than the males.



BACK
Photo: "Bries"

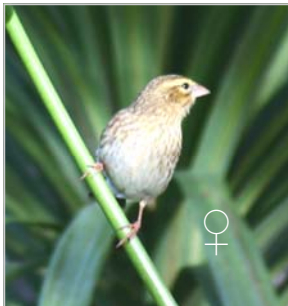


Photo: "Monkey Boy"
Johannesburg,
South Africa

They have various twittering calls and a nasal contact call. The male's courting call is a harsh buzzing sound.

The male weaves several loose "igloo-shaped" nests which appear small in relation to the size of the bird. He then puffs out his feathers and pursues a female relentlessly while uttering his harsh courting song. If the hen accepts one of the nests, she lines it with finer material and lays 2 to 3 blue eggs speckled with brownish-red. Only the hen incubates and cares for the young. The

male plays no further part in parental duties after mating. The incubation period is fourteen days, and the young fledge at twenty days. They are fully weaned three weeks after leaving the nest. The fledged young resemble the female, but have yellowish gapes and stumpy tails.

In the breeding season they are found near water among grass, reeds, sedges and crops such as sugar cane. In the non-breeding season they venture into drier areas such as grasslands and savannah.

It is a fairly gregarious bird, nesting in colonies and foraging in flocks. It feeds on seeds and some insects. It often roosts in mixed flocks with other members of the weaver family.

THE ORANGE BISHOP, or Northern Red Bishop, *Euplectes franciscanus*, is an African weaver species occurring south of the Sahara Desert and north of the Equator. It has been introduced to Puerto Rico, Martinique and Guadeloupe in the West Indies. It was formerly regarded as a subspecies of the similar Grenadier Weaver of the southern half of Africa, but is now usually classified as a separate species.

This weaver is common throughout its range. It mainly occurs in open country, especially tall grassland and often near water. Like the Grenadier Weaver it builds a spherical woven nest in tall grass. The nesting and rearing behaviour is similar to that of the Grenadier.



BREEDING PLUMAGE
Photo: "ChriKo"

The Orange Bishop is a stocky bird 13-15cm in length. The breeding male is scarlet-orange apart from his black head and waistcoat, and brown wings and tail. The thick conical bill is black. When in breeding plumage the male develops long soft filament-type feathers on the lower back which almost completely cover the tail. Males display prominently, giving high-pitched squeaks, squawks and buzzes from tall grass, while puffing out his feathers or performing a slow hovering nuptial flight.

In eclipse plumage the male resembles the female being pale yellowish-brown, streaked above and shading to whitish below. Both sexes have a buff eye-stripe. Females are smaller than the male, and can be mistaken for hen Grenadier Weavers. However, the Grenadier hen is slightly larger and darker, and the eye-stripe is not as prominent. Fledged young have wider pale fringes to their flight feathers.

Both species are still available in Australia, but Orange Bishop numbers are critically low. Ed.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia

IN QUEST OF THE GRENADIER

Between the late 1920s and the late 1950s there was a feral population of the Grenadier Weaver on the lower reaches of the River Murray. Although several small colonies existed, the largest was situated on the western bank at Woods Point, just downstream from Murray Bridge. The birds appeared to cause no environmental problems and would certainly have been a colourful addition to the landscape. The last reliable sighting was by the late Bob McKechnie in 1956, when he observed approximately fifty coloured males perched in the uppermost dead branches of a willow tree adjacent to the railway bridge at Murray Bridge. He therefore assumed there was still a flourishing population as each male usually had two or three hens in his "harem". The most common reason given for their disappearance was the record flood of 1956. This is supposed to have covered their feeding grounds and they starved to death.

It was in conversation with Bob McKechnie in 1960 that I first learnt of their presence on the Murray, and the supposed reason for their disappearance. But, as birds can fly, I was sceptical of the starvation theory, and checked flood levels between 1930 and 1956 with the then Engineering and Water Supply Department. Their

data showed several floods in that period that would have also covered the weavers' feeding grounds.

So, as it was unlikely the starvation theory was the reason for the birds' disappearance, and I decide to find if they still existed unnoticed in some remote swamp or backwater. So for a couple of years thereafter, armed with binoculars and a photo of a male Grenadier, I spent my annual holidays tramping the river bank from Myolonga, upstream from Murray Bridge, to Wellington where the river enters the lakes. In the course of my tramping I spoke to dairy farmers, commercial fishermen and many others with a long connection to that stretch of the river.

My search proved fruitless, for although I found a number of people who recognised the bird in the photo, the majority of whom knew it as "the sparrow that turns red", they all said they hadn't seen them for several years.

In the late 1970s rumours circulated that the Grenadier had been seen on the river again. So Gary Fitzpatrick, Ian Wurst and I undertook another search for the birds. Once again with no success. However, this time no tramping was involved as Gary proved adept at driving along the very narrow levy banks beside the river. In fact he was a little too adept for my liking, as he proved able to traverse them just as fast in reverse gear as he could in forward. I must admit when reversing at that speed I lost all interest in watching for Grenadier Weavers!

If starvation wasn't the primary reason for the birds' disappearance, what was? My theory is based on information also supplied by Bob McKechnie. When the importation of birds was banned in 1949 there were a number of exotic species lost to aviculture over the next few years, and some that became extremely scarce and as a consequence their value increased in proportion to their rarity.

The Grenadier Weaver, although an extremely long-lived species, was one of these. As the numbers dwindled in aviaries the colonies on the Murray were remembered, and interested fanciers, including Bob McKechnie, organised trapping trips to the river. As Bob described it, family picnics would be arranged to the river and while the rest of the family enjoyed the delights of the Murray, the males of the family would trap Grenadier Weavers.

Adult birds were found too wary to trap in the non-breeding season, but when there were young in the nest it proved possible to trap the hens and to take the young for hand-rearing. The method employed was to place a small portion of mist net in front of the nest and to tie a thin cord to the reeds containing the nest. When the hen returned to feed the young, the cord would be used to agitate the reeds and the hen would fly into the net. As no males were caught the proportion of males to females therefore became way out of balance.

Given the above circumstances, my theory for the birds' disappearance is that the excessive trapping of the hens, and the continual taking of the young, caused the population to become unviable, and the fully coloured cocks Bob McKechnie saw in 1956 just didn't have any hens left with which to breed.

As an aside, it may be of interest to record the hand-rearing method used to raise the young. Hand-raising wasn't as sophisticated then as it is today, and the young taken were fed entirely on dehusked pannicum seed. This caused extreme constipation and the birds' stomachs would be allowed to swell for two days, then as the last feed of the day they would each be given one Ford Pill each. Needless to say their constipation was well and truly cured by the next morning!!

R.V.C.