

## Weavers



This fact sheet gives an overview on keeping Weavers.

Spectacularly coloured birds that are easy to accommodate, easy to feed, active

most of the time and a good bird for the beginner, may seem a distant dream but the group of small seedeaters known as Weavers fit this bill. The “True Weavers” are mainly found in Africa and number about 101 species. Many are brightly coloured and once acclimatized, are not affected by the weather and can be housed outside without heat, indeed they have been described as “as hard as nails”.

Planted flights can be used to house groups of weavers but remember, they will use many of the plants to provide weaving material for their nests. The most suitable plants for the birds seem to be grasses and bamboos. The availability of grasses is much easier now, with popular gardening shows on television using them, grasses have become extremely fashionable in garden centres.

Watching the birds collecting material is almost as interesting as watching them weave. The cock birds will fly to the bottom of a stem of grass, make a small incision and then grabbing the end will fly off taking a long piece of material with him. Of course they will also make use of other nesting materials that are supplied such as coconut fibre or string. The most colourful nests can be created by supplying coloured raffia. The nests are spectacular and the cock birds seem extremely pleased with the gaudy coloured attractions they make.

Each species of weaver builds a covered nest, which is unique to that particular species. Some build a simple rounded nest chamber such as the Social Weavers, whilst other species add elaborate entrance lobbies or tubes to stop predators from entering. In the wild, nests can be found hanging from tree branches in large numbers. Some species such as the Thick Billed Weaver (*Amblyospiza albifrons*) build a simple ball nest with a large entrance hole amongst the reeds or bushes. They use this to roost in, and then when the breeding season comes around, they modify the entrance hole and use the same nest for breeding. In an aviary, the birds may decide to build nests from branches or even from the roof. Old nests can be used by many other small birds including Waxbills and Munias.

As for their diet, they are fairly easy to cater for. It usually consists of a good quality foreign finch mixture and millet sprays. They are particularly fond of plain canary and white millet. The daily seed diet should be supplemented with green-food, and when in season seeding grass heads. When breeding, they can become quite insectivorous and will take mealworms, greenfly and even waxmoth. A coarse grade of universal insect food is always a favourite, especially with the medium to large weavers. Grit, cuttlefish and bathing water should be available at all times.

Many weavers go through what is called an “eclipsed plumage”. This means

that out of the breeding season, the cock bird will lose all of his elaborate colour and moult into a drab colour for a short period. This also means that when purchasing birds care should be taken when looking for hens, because they could be eclipsed or young cocks. When looking for hens, care should also be taken that the correct hen is purchased for the cock bird to form pairs. It should be explained that at present, very few weavers are bred in captivity and most of the stock that you will see will have been wild caught. Quite often, when imported, weavers are mixed, and as the hens of certain species are very similar in size, shape, colour and markings to different species, it is recommended that a field guide showing all the weaver cocks and hens is purchased before buying stock.

**Red-billed Weavers** (*Quelea quelea*) are readily available most of the year. They come from dry grasslands and savannahs. They are found in their greatest numbers in East Africa especially Kenya and Tanzania. In these countries they are classed as a major pest, destroying vast field crops of rice and grain. They have been recorded flying in extremely dense flocks where numbers have been estimated in thousands or even millions. Some field guides have reported the birds as being in such great numbers, they have even broken the branches that they roost upon. Two races are available - the first is the masked, this has a black face and red bill. The second is known as the "Russ weaver". This race has no colour on the face. Hens are alike for both of the races, and in eclipsed plumage the cock birds are alike in colour.

The **Red-headed Quelea** (*Quelea erythrogastra*) is about the same size as the Red-billed (4½-5 inches), but is not imported as regularly.

The **Buffalo-Weavers** such as the White-billed (*Bubalornis albirostris*) or the Red-Billed (*Bubalornis niger intermedius*) build bulky communal structures, with individual internal breeding chambers out of large sticks and grasses. These species come into the country on occasions, but care should be taken when housing them. They are not suitable to house with small birds. They are approximately 8½-9 inches in length and can be extremely aggressive. The sexes are alike in colour and do not go into an eclipse plumage.

The **Chestnut Weaver** (*Ploceus r. rubiginosus*) is another species that is found in the savannah and open woodland of Eastern Africa. They breed in large colonies, where the cock birds build the nests and attract females to them. Once a clutch of eggs has been laid the cock birds leave, and the hen has to continue rearing the chicks on her own.

**Napoleon Weavers** (*Euplectes afer*) sometimes called the "Golden Bishops" or

“Yellow-Crowned Bishops” come from West Africa, where they are found in marshy areas. They feed mainly on grass seeds and like to take a variety of insects. Napoleon Weavers love building nests and have been observed attracting a hen into a newly built nest, mating with her to ensure that a full clutch of eggs is laid, and then starting to build another nest to attract another female. Their nests in the wild are found amongst the reed beds, usually overhanging water. If you house more than 2 cocks in the flight it is best to allow for at least 2-3 hens per cock bird. Their courting display is quite spectacular. They puff their feathers until they look like a yellow ball and dance on a perch or on the top of the nest. This species has been bred several times in captivity, so we do know that a normal clutch consists of 2-4 white eggs, which are incubated for 14 days by the female. The young will fledge after 21 days and are coloured like the hen.

The **Speckle-Fronted Weaver** (*Sporopipes frontalis*) sexes are alike in colouration and they do not go into an eclipse plumage. They have been bred in the UK but only on rare occasions. As they are considered quite docile, they can be housed in a flight with smaller finches. Whenever possible it is best to try to keep a small colony of these birds, perhaps 2-3 pairs, this will ensure that the chances of a hen being present in the group are greater. As a group they will all like to roost in the same nest. Their eggs have been recorded as being greyish in colour with dark spots. Live food should be provided at all times for this species. Some breeders have even been known to feed ants eggs, as well as their favourite mini-mealworms.

This fact sheet has been produced for:  
The NCA —Spring Gardens, Northampton NN1 1DR  
[www.nca.uk.net](http://www.nca.uk.net)