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# CHESTER ZOO NEWS



Zoological Gardens  
Chester CH2 1LH  
Tel. Chester (0244) 380280

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# Weavers

The Weavers of the Old World belong to the family *Ploceidae*, consisting of 135 species, with a further 11 species in the sub-family *Viduinæ*. They have a wide distribution throughout Africa and Asia, with representatives having spread beyond and throughout the Palearctic and into the Oriental regions. One species, the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), is probably the most common bird throughout the world, having spread both by its own means and with the assistance of Man. In North America, where it was introduced from Europe in the mid-1850s, it has spread to become a pest in many areas, illustrating yet again the folly of introducing alien species—a practice pursued by so many 19th Century naturalists.

In the breeding season, the males of the family have a very characteristic plumage. At other times, the males are in an eclipse plumage, very like the females in many species. This is particularly striking in the male Widow Birds and Whydahs, which belong to the sub-family *Viduinæ*, which have a colourful plumage, including splendid long tail-feathers, all of which are moulted out after the breeding season. These birds look most handsome in flight, trailing the long plumes behind them. Widow Birds show a parasitic behaviour pattern, rather like that of Cuckoos. They lay their eggs in Waxbills' nests, which are built low among the grasses, and the remarkable feature is that the Widows Birds' eggs are white like those of their hosts, whilst other Weavers have spotted eggs. Additionally, the young have mouth patterns like those of the hosts' young, so ensuring that they get their share of the feed. Widow Birds are polygynous and have elaborate courtship displays similar to the other Weaver Birds.

The true Weavers are most prominent in Africa and parts of Asia. The Masked Weaver (*Ploceus velatus*) is typical of the African group, building a ball-shaped nest



Top: FEMALE AND MALE PARADISE WHYDAH  
Bottom: MALE NAPOLEAN WEAVER  
Courtesy of K. W. Green, A.R.P.S.

with an entrance at the bottom. The male, which is polygamous, weaves several nests before committing himself to a site and being able to "entice" a female to take up occupancy. Once she has taken over the completed nest, the male bird goes off to build another nest for a second female, and so on. In the Tropical House at Chester Zoo, this species may become a problem, for they can destroy some plants in seeking nesting material. In addition to tearing strips off the palm trees, the Masked Weaver tends to defoliate all the branches to which they attach their nests, which hang suspended, often at the end of a branch. In the wild, this defoliating is possibly a means of reducing the chances of snakes being able to get close enough to the nests without being seen. Certainly in my garden, whilst living in Botswana, the Masked Weaver caused some annoyance by stripping our Bourganvillea of leaves and flowers.

The Group obviously obtain their name from their method of nest-building, one of the most striking among all birds. This is taken to the extreme among the Social Weavers (*Philetairus socius*) which construct the individually-woven nests into one huge structure, forming a colony of 100 to 300 pairs. These colonies are several feet in diameter, but each chamber retains its own entrance.

The Baya Weaver (*Ploceus philippinus*) is common throughout India, Indo-China and Malaya and has similar habits to the Masked Weaver. Their nests are more elaborate, having a long funnel below the ball-shaped nest, through which the bird enters, and it is remarkable how the birds actually fly up the funnel. These birds nested in the Tropical House, and their characteristic nests were attached to the fronds of the Palm Tree.

The last type in this family are the brightly-coloured Bishops Weavers, which tend to occupy a wet marshy habitat, unlike most of the remainder, who favour the arid savannah of the tropical regions.

The whole family are seed-eaters—mainly grasses—but will also feed on insects, particularly when feeding young. They all have the strong, blunt, short beak, evident in our native House Sparrow, and also have no song of note, but are limited to chirping and repetitive harsh calls. They lay two to three eggs, which are white with spots, or tinted.

Their feeding habits have caused some species to become pests, being a threat to grain-stores, and none more so than the Red-billed Weaver (*Quelea quelea*) of Africa. These build up into flocks of many thousands and, with such a huge number, the devastation they can cause when descending on a grain crop becomes apparent, and has been likened to the effects of the notorious Locust. For this reason, their population biology and methods of control have been the subject of research by Overseas Pest Control (which also dealt with the locust problem) and this information is made



RUFOUS-NECKED WEAVER—NEST-BUILDING  
Courtesy of K. W. Green, A.R.P.S.

available to the Third World countries suffering from what has become a pest.

The Weavers have a number of features which make them attractive and unusual and, in a Zoo, they can illustrate a number of biological facts, such as nest architecture, male and female plumage, eclipse plumage, parasitism and polygamy. Whilst they are not endangered or threatened in the wild (quite the reverse in several species), they have an important educational role to fulfil in a zoological collection.

P. M. C. Stevens  
Curator of Birds

# The Arctic Fox

The single species *Alopex lagopus* would seem to be an intermediate between the dogs and the foxes. Rather more dog-like in appearance, the Arctic Fox comes from the Arctic regions of Europe, Asia and North America. There are two colour phases, the White Fox being a uniform white in winter, changing to grey or brown in summer; and the Blue Fox, which is pale grey in winter, changing to a dark blue-grey in summer. Both colour phases can be born in the same litter.

Their diet is mainly carnivorous, consisting of birds, fish, Arctic Hares, Lemmings and carrion. When food becomes scarce, they will follow Polar Bears and scavenge the remains of their kills.

Even in the depth of winter, the Arctic Fox does not hibernate, but lives in dens dug into the side of a hill or cliff.

The fertility rate for this species is high, the female producing a litter of between four and ten in May or June, of which many of the young die within the first few days of life. The male helps with the rearing of the young, bringing food for the family and standing guard.

Our Arctic Foxes can be seen in Enclosure No. 64, near Oakfield House.

ARCTIC FOX  
Courtesy of K. W. Green, A.R.P.S.



DONNA HARTLEY HOLDING A KINKAJOU  
WITH COMPETITION WINNERS JULIE JOHNS (left) AND ELSPETH SMALL (right)  
Courtesy of K. W. Green, A.R.P.S.

## Midland Bank Poster Competition

During the past summer we have been running a poster competition in conjunction with the Liverpool region of the Midland Bank. The idea was for children to visit the Zoo and paint a poster depicting one of our animals, including a slogan which would attract children to the Zoo. The entries were divided into three age groups: up to eight years, nine to 12 years, and 13 to 16 year-olds, and the Midland Bank kindly donated prizes in each age group of—first £25; second £15; third £10. There were also five highly-commended prizes in each group of £5 each. The bank received over 350 entries, all being of an extremely high standard, which made the selection of the winners a most difficult task.

We invited all the prizewinners and their parents to the Zoo to receive their awards, which were presented to them by the well-known Olympic athlete Donna Hartley. The group almost filled our Oakfield Restaurant, and it was a most welcome change at this usually quiet time of the year to hear the claps and cheers as the winners received their awards.

The posters were displayed in our Oakfield Restaurant for several days, and have now gone to the Midland Bank in Chester, and will then be on show at various branches throughout the area.

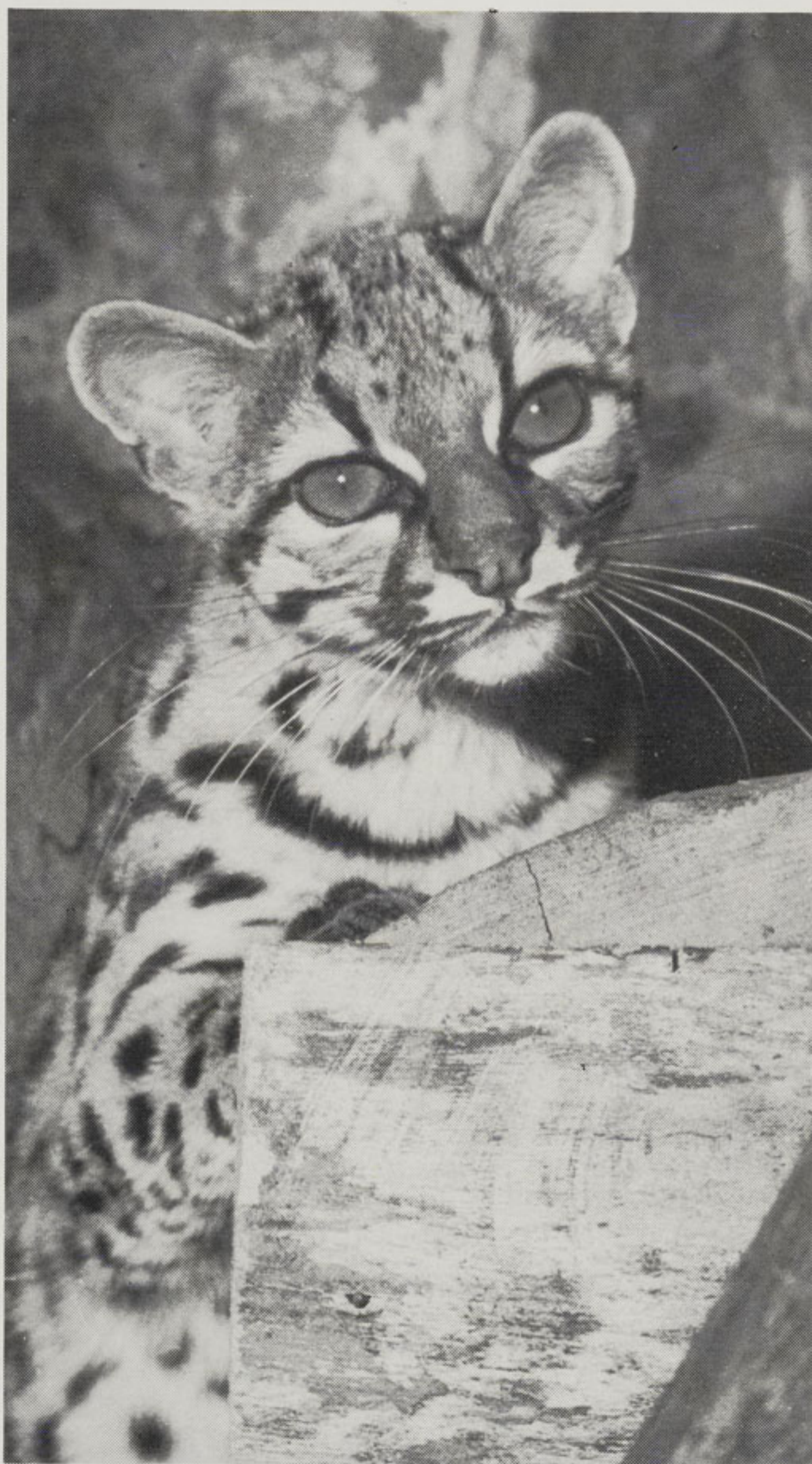
## Arrivals and Births

2 Common Iguanas	Presented
2 Tegus	Presented
3 Capybara	Births
1 Prehensile-tailed Skink	Bred
1 Male Jungle Cat	Received
1 Hamadryas Baboon	Birth
3 Haitian Skinks	Bred
1 Kinkajou	Birth
1 Squirrel Monkey	Presented
1 Female De Brazza Monkey	Exchange
1 Male Black-faced Spider Monkey	Received
4 Mountain Viscacha	Received from Bristol Zoo
1 Margay	Birth
1 Female Black Rhino	Breeding Loan from Bristol Zoo
1 Barbary Ape	Birth
1 Grant's Zebra	Birth

## Subscriptions

CHESTER ZOO NEWS is at present being produced every month and readers who would like to receive the magazine regularly can obtain subscription forms at the Souvenir Shops or the Office. The current charge for 12 issues, including postage, is £3.00 per year.

Completed forms can be handed in to the Souvenir Shops or posted to Mrs. Penny Rudd, Chester Zoo News, Chester Zoo, Chester CH2 1LH.



MARGAY  
Courtesy of K. W. Green, A.R.P.S.

## Black Rhino "Thelma"

Readers will remember that, in the July issue of *Zoo News*, we mentioned the arrival of the Black Rhino "Jaspa" from Paignton Zoo. "Jaspa" has recently been joined by a Rhino called "Thelma", who is 15 years old and has come from Bristol Zoo. Both of these animals have arrived under the Joint Management of Animals Scheme, whereby leading Zoos send endangered species to the zoo which can provide the best chance of breeding success. "Jaspa" and "Thelma" have so far shown little interest in each other and, in fact, there have been

several times when both animals have given voice to loud snorts of aggression, so, at the moment, they are in separate enclosures. However, these are early days, as "Thelma" is not due to come into season until next spring.

The Black Rhino is in grave danger of extinction in its native Africa, owing to the unstable nature of many countries and the poaching of animals.

The White Rhino, the other African species, is relatively secure, but it is only found in reserves where it is strictly protected.

BLACK RHINO—"THELMA" *Courtesy of K. W. Green, A.R.P.S.*

