

# The Dusky Lark *Mirafra nigricans* (Sundevall)

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*Ploceus jacksoni*.

Chapin (1954) admits the subspecies *jucundus* of Friedmann, Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1955) regard it as synonymous with the nominate form. The traces of chestnut behind the black of the crown in *jucundus* occur also in some of the East African birds, but two males lent by the U.S. National Museum have the vent and under tail-coverts greener, less yellow, than a series from Kenya and Uganda, as Chapin found. *P.j. jucundus* seems a poor subspecies but provisionally I retain it.

*Ploceus taeniopterus*.

East of, and allopatric to, *P.m.capitalis* there is another, rather similar bird, *taeniopterus*, which occupies the Sudan as far east as the White Nile and has always been treated as a separate species. It differs from *melanocephalus* subspp. in lacking black on the head above the eyes, but according to Chapin (*in litt.*) it is very like these birds in life and its females and out-of-plumage males are indistinguishable. Hence if *taeniopterus* subspp. nowhere overlap *melanocephalus* subspp. they could be treated as conspecific, especially as Chapin collected a specimen at Niangara, in the extreme north-east of the Belgian Congo, that he thinks somewhat intermediate between *m.duboisii* and *taeniopterus*.

It may be that the necessary allopatry between the two groups exists. *P.t.taeniopterus* has been traced south only to Lado (B.M.specimen), nearly 100 miles north of *m.fischeri* (Wadelai, as noted above). And although *taeniopterus* has been reported (on B.M. identification) from western Eritrea in the immediate neighbourhood of *m.dimidiatus* ('Ibis' 1957: 329-330), the specimen proves to be an out-of-plumage male, which might equally well be a *dimidiatus*. Thus, overlap has not been proved. Nevertheless, I prefer to err on the side of caution and treat *taeniopterus* as specifically distinct from *melanocephalus*, until we know something of what happens in their presumed meeting-zone near the western and south-western border of the Sudan.

*Ploceus temporalis*.

As noted elsewhere, provisionally I regard this as conspecific with *capensis* in view of the close resemblances in plumage, although the beak of *temporalis* is markedly shorter in proportion. The female of *temporalis* has not been described but thanks to a description by Chapin, *in litt.*, and the subsequent loan of a specimen, it can be said that in plumage it differs from the female of *capensis* only in having a little less yellow pigment above and below. In both birds the beak is pale brown but in *temporalis* it is much shorter.

*To be continued.*

## The Dusky Lark *Mirafra nigricans* (Sundevall)

by MR. C. W. BENSON

Received 31st March, 1959

The notes by Winterbottom, "Ostrich", 1957: 240-1, and 1958: 88, have prompted me to investigate further the status of this lark, especially the evidence of breeding in the northern part of its range, which he suggests can only be occasional. To this end, I have examined twenty specimens

in the British Museum, and thanks to Mr. R. H. N. Smithers and Miss Mary Paterson have also had the loan of some thirty specimens in the National Museum, Bulawayo, and to Dr. H. Schouteden, of twenty in the Congo Museum, Tervuren.

Evidence of breeding in the northern part of the range, which for the present purpose may be taken as the area north of the Zambesi, is as follows. In the British Museum there is a female collected by Lynes near Dilolo, southern Belgian Congo, 6th September, and labelled "soon to breed" (this was duly recorded by Lynes, *Rev. Zool. Bot. Afr.* 31, 1938: 74). In the Northern Province of Northern Rhodesia, as recorded in "Ibis", 1956: 601, I collected two males near Fwaka, 11-12th August, and four near Kawambwa, 1st September. All showed gonad activity, the testes averaging about 8 x 5 mm. In the latter locality, moreover, an aerial song, with rapidly fluttered wings was observed. Less conclusive evidence is forthcoming from immature specimens, perhaps fully grown, though it is unlikely that they had moved far from the site of breeding. These have the dark coloured parts of the plumage brownish rather than blackish, with a tendency to isabelline marginations, especially in the wings, while the white of the underside is somewhat isabelline in tone, and the markings on the chest are less heavy than in adults. There are the following such specimens:— (a) British Museum: one, Luangwa Valley, 16. 12. 05 (Neave); one, Zambesi, two, Kafue, 26. 12. 98 (Boyd Alexander) (from "Ibis", 1899: 653-4 it is clear that these three were all collected on the left bank of the Zambesi, near its confluence with the Kafue). (b) National Museum, Bulawayo: Kasama, 30. 11. 54. (c) Congo Museum, Tervuren: Kasaji, southern Congo, 13. 10. 50 (two) and 26. 10. 50. Verheyen, "Exploration du Parc National de l'Upemba", 1953: 424, describes such a specimen collected at Kilwezi, 18th August. Incidentally, there is another immature specimen in the British Museum, collected by Mrs. B. P. Hall near Panda Matenga, north-eastern Bechuanaland, 25th November, and discussed by her in "Ostrich", 1956: 103.

Considering material apparently adult, northern specimens tend to have the markings on the chest heavier than in southern. The difference is not such that I am prepared to designate the difference formally by creating a new subspecific name. Nevertheless there is this distinct tendency. In the National Museum, Bulawayo, six specimens from the Northern Province of Northern Rhodesia have the markings decidedly heavier than in three from the Okahandja River, South-West Africa (February), two from Nata, Bechuanaland (January, February), and two from Francistown (January). Fifteen specimens from Southern Rhodesia (January, one; February, two; March, one; April, five; May, four; July, one; November, one) are closest to the Bechuanaland and South-West African specimens, the chest markings being relatively scanty. On the other hand, specimens from the south of Northern Rhodesia are on the whole closest to those from further north. This certainly applies to four out of five from Livingstone (all May), though the fifth is closer to more southern material. Of two from Mazabuka (both April), one is more like southern material, the other northern. One each from Chilanga, Mpika and Bulaya (all May) have the chest decidedly heavily marked.

Of material apparently adult in the British Museum and the Congo Museum, as might be expected, practically all the specimens examined

from the Belgian Congo are in the latter museum, while practically all the remainder are in the former. Three specimens from Mpanda and Kigoma, western Tanganyika Territory (May, June), and nineteen from the southern Belgian Congo (mostly from Kasaji, all May—October) have on the whole the chest markings heavy, especially those from Tanganyika, and this applies likewise to one from the Tabora district, Tanganyika (May), loaned from the Coryndon Museum by Mr. J. G. Williams. But the markings are relatively light in three from near Kamanjab, Damaraland (April), one from Ngamiland (April), and one from Rustenburg, Transvaal (January). Four from Livingstone, Mazabuka and Mongu, Northern Rhodesia (all May) are more or less intermediate. But in addition there are the following specimens which are rather markedly exceptional:—  
 (a) Chest markings heavy: one collected by Bradshaw, merely labelled "Zambesi", but probably from the Makalaka country (see "Hist. Collections in Brit. Mus." 2, 1906: 317), which is in Bechuanaland, west of Bulawayo. (c) Chest markings light: one from Leopoldville, Belgian Congo, 18. 1. 44, and one from Fort Johnston, Nyasaland, 23. 5. 36.

Wing-measurements (in millimetres) do not suggest any geographical variation in size:—

South-West Africa	2♂	116, 123
	3♀	108, 109, 112
	1 sex?	109
Transvaal	1♂	118
Bechuanaland	2♂	112, 122
	2♀	114, 115
	1 sex?	119
Southern Rhodesia	4♂	116–120
	9♀	110–115
Northern Rhodesia	8♂	115–121
	13♀	110–116 (one 120)
Nyasaland	1♀	114
Belgian Congo	10♂	117–125 (one each 112, 113, 114)
	9♀	111–117 (one each 120, 121)
	3 sex?	108, 112, 113
Tanganyika Territory	3♂	119, 119, 125
	1♀	116

Males seem rather larger than females. There appears to have been some mis-sexing, especially in the Congo series.

To summarise, there is a fair amount of evidence that the Dusky Lark does breed in the northern part of its range as well as the southern (the evidence for which is quoted by Winterbottom), while the fact that northern birds are on the whole more heavily marked on the chest does not point to any extensive northward migration of southern bred birds in the non-breeding season. It may also be noted that except for the Leopoldville specimen there are no records above from north of the Zambesi during the period January—March. Nor do Benson & White, "Check List of the Birds of Northern Rhodesia", 1957, give any records for this period, except for late March. Apparently there is a migration, but this of course requires further investigation. An analogous case may be that of the Capped Wheatear *Oenanthe pileata livingstonii* (Tristram), of which there are no records from Northern Rhodesia during December—March, see Benson & White, *op .cit.*

I thank Mrs. B. P. Hall for commenting on the draft of this note.

*Note*.—Mr. M. P. Stuart Irwin, who agrees with my comments on the specimens in the National Museum, Bulawayo, that the northern ones tend to have heavier chest markings, informs me that there are a further six specimens therein with decidedly heavy markings. These were collected near the Sebungwe River, in the Zambesi Valley in Southern Rhodesia, at 17°45' S., 27°12' E., in early May, and were definitely not seen by me.

White, "Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl." 79, 1959: 54, may well be correct in suggesting that *M.nigricans* is nomadic rather than migratory.

### Some Remarks on *Prinia flavicans* and its Allies

by MR. MICHAEL P. STUART IRWIN

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#### (a) The Status of *Prinia flavicans nubilosa* Clancey.

Clancey *Durban Museum Novitates* V, (4) 1957: 46 described as new *Prinia flavicans nubilosa* with type locality Kendal, near Witbank, Transvaal, as differing from nominate *P. flavicans* in being darker brown on the mantle and the underparts more deeply tinged with sulphurous yellow, flanks strongly washed with rusty buff. The type series were based on fresh plumaged birds in non-breeding dress.

When describing this new race, the author drew attention to the existence of the name *P. (Drymoica) ortleppi* Tristram *Ibis*, 1869, 207., a seldom quoted synonym, with type locality Colesberg, northern Cape Province. It was assumed by Clancey that material of *P. flavicans* from Colesberg would have shown intergradation between *P.f.nubilosa* and *P.f.flavicans*, but unfortunately this author was unable to obtain topotypical material of *P.f.ortleppi* before describing *nubilosa*. I have not seen the Type of *ortleppi* itself, which would appear to be in Liverpool with Tristram's Collections, but through the courtesy of Dr. J. M. Winterbottom of the South African Museum, Cape Town, I have been able to examine a non-breeding, undated and unsexed specimen collected by Ortlepp from the type locality. Though badly foxed through age, especially on the mantle, this specimen agrees with the Type and paratypical series of *P.f.nubilosa* in being darker above on the mantle and in having the flanks rusty buff, also in the unusually dark tail and broader rectrices.

Dr. J. M. Winterbottom and Mrs. B. P. Hall inform me (*in litt.*) that they have independently arrived at the same conclusion, that *P.f.nubilosa* is the same as *P.f. ortleppi*. It is therefore considered that *P.f.nubilosa* Clancey 1957 should be placed in the synonymy of *P.f. ortleppi* Tristram 1869.

#### (b) The status of *Prinia ansorgei* Sclater.

*Prinia ansorgei* Sclater *Bull. B.O.C.* 48, 1927: 18, was described from a series of fifteen specimens collected by Ansorge at Huxe, Catumbella, and near Benguella Town in September and October. To date its status as a species has never been disputed, but Mrs. B. P. Hall, who has collected some specimens of *P. ansorgei*, drew my attention to their obvious close relationship to *P. flavicans*, and suggested that they were conspecific.

Sclater, in describing *P. ansorgei*, for some reason failed to compare it with *P. flavicans*. Traylor, of the Chicago Natural History Museum, remarks (*in litt.*) that there is very little difference between *ansorgei* from Angola and *P. flavicans* from Damaraland, and this is borne out by the