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ON THE GEOGRAPHICAL VARIATION IN THE BLACK-HEADED ORIOLE *ORIOULUS LARVATUS* LICHTENSTEIN OF AFRICA

by

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The Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus larvatus* Lichtenstein is a highly polytypic species of southern and eastern Africa, which is divided into a number of geographical races. Study of the pertinent literature in so far as it affects the subspecies arrangement of the various populations of this oriole reveals great irregularity of treatment and marked divergence of opinion on the part of specialists on Ethiopian birds as to the number of groups or subspecies into which the various populations should be arranged, the characters most useful for this purpose, and the precise ranges of the various taxa.

Resulting from a need to place the race of *O.larvatus* occurring in the Inhambane district of southern Portuguese East Africa, I have had cause to re-assess the variation shown by this species throughout its entire range, with results which I believe will be of use to other workers faced with the no small task of allocating specimens from many parts of Africa to the named forms. Through the kindness of the following workers I have been able to assemble an adequate panel of material in the Durban Museum (181 skins): Mr. J. G. Williams, Coryndon Museum, Nairobi and Mr. M. P. Stuart Irwin, National Museum of Southern Rhodesia, Bulawayo. Mr. P. A. Clancey, Director of the Durban Museum, gave much valuable assistance during the course of this research, and I am grateful to him for his encouragement and help.

The populations to which the name *Oriolus larvatus* Lichtenstein, 1823: eastern Cape Province, was originally given consist of large-sized, richly coloured birds. In a good series of topotypes from the eastern Cape Province, the wings of ♂♀ measure 139.0-143.5 (140.9) mm., while the greenish suffused back colouration corresponds very closely to the Pyrite Yellow of Ridgway (1912) but is a little deeper. Birds agreeing subspecifically with the topotypical population range to the eastern limits of the Cape, through Pondoland and East Griqualand, and in Natal and Zululand, northwards to Swaziland, the eastern Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Further north in the east, in the southern littoral of Moçambique, it intergrades with a new race to be described below (*O.l.tibicen*), and to the west on the plateau with the south-eastern elements of a form characterized by darker and greener mantle colouration, for which the name *O.l.angolensis* Neumann, 1905: Malandje, Angola, seems applicable.

The range of *O.l.angolensis* as now determined is very extensive, extending from Angola and the northern limits of South-West Africa, eastwards through the south-eastern Congo and Northern Rhodesia to Southern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, central and eastern Tanganyika and the highlands of Kenya Colony. Chapin (1954) could not distinguish topotypical specimens of *O.l.angolensis* from *O.l.kikuyuensis* van Someren, 1922: Nairobi, Kenya Colony, on size, and placed *O.l.kikuyuensis* with *O.l.angolensis*. They are also similar in colouration. Friedmann (1937) in recognising *O.l.kikuyuensis* makes no mention of *O.l.angolensis* in his treatment of the species. The specimens of *O.l.kikuyuensis*, including topotypical specimens, I have examined from the Kenya highlands are somewhat variable in size, although they are on the whole rather smaller than typical *O.l.angolensis* from further south. This is no doubt due to the intergrading of *O.l.angolensis* with the smaller-sized *O.l.rolleti* and *O.l.reichenowi*, the ranges of which lie due north and east of the population named *O.l.kikuyuensis*. Specimens from the Chyulu Hills, in south-eastern Kenya Colony, referred to by van Someren (1939) as intergrades between *O.l.kikuyuensis* and *O.l.reichenowi* and examined by me, have the colour characteristics of *O.l.angolensis* (= *kikuyuensis*), but are intermediate in size between that race and *O.l.reichenowi*. Schouteden (1956), following Chapin, regards *O.l.angolensis* as extending to Kenya, whereas Mackworth-Praed and Grant (1955) place the populations I refer to *O.l.angolensis* and *O.l.reichenowi* as *O.l.rolleti*.

O.l.reichenowi Zedlitz, 1916: Afgoi, southern Somaliland, has had a chequered career since its description and many workers do not recognise it. I find it to be a very small race of the eastern littoral

of southern Somalia, Kenya and Tanganyika. On size alone it is quite easily distinguished from the forms already dealt with, and in addition to this marked difference is considerably more golden on the neck, mantle, rump and wing-coverts. The under-parts also tend to be a deeper, more golden, yellow.

Of *O.l.rolleti* Salvadori, 1864: 70°N. on White Nile, Friedmann (1937) states "I can find no good way of distinguishing *reichenowi* from *rolleti*", while admitting that the ranges of these two forms are segregated by the north-eastern populations of *O.l.angolensis*. As far as I can determine in the face of inadequate material, *O.l.rolleti* ranges from the north-eastern Congo and Uganda, through the extreme north-western Kenya districts to south-western Ethiopia and the southern Sudan, north of which occurs *O.l.permistus*. I have examined two specimens from Kacheliba, Suam River, north-east of Mt. Elgon, Kenya Colony, which I attribute to *O.l.rolleti*. They differ from one another somewhat in the intensity of the green in the yellow of the upper-parts, but are nevertheless greener dorsally than the specimens I have seen of *O.l.reichenowi*, which are very rich and golden. However, *O.l.rolleti* has the upper tail-coverts a brighter cadmium yellow, less chrome or golden, than in *O.l.reichenowi*, a character also noted by Chapin (1954). The two specimens from Kacheliba agree in size with those cited by Friedmann (1937) from the Gato River, near Gardula, Bodessa and Turturo. In wing-length the two forms *O.l.reichenowi* and *O.l.rolleti* hardly differ at all, but *O.l.rolleti* is longer in the tail and has a shorter culmen than *O.l.reichenowi* (see measurements).

The populations of *O.larvatus* from Moçambique and the lowlands of south-eastern Nyasaland differ from *O.l.larvatus* in being considerably smaller in size, markedly less yellow, more green, on the upper-parts, and in having the yellow of the under-parts paler. They also differ from *O.l.angolensis* considerably in size, but possess a longer culmen. From *O.l.reichenowi*, another littoral coterie of populations, they differ in their larger size and greener upper-parts. These populations are in my view quite discrete, differing from the contiguous populations of *O.l.larvatus* in the south, *O.l.angolensis* in the west, and *O.l.reichenowi* in the north, as demonstrated above, and I believe it advisable to accord them a name of their own. As none is available, I propose below the name *Oriolus larvatus tibicen* mihi, subsp. nov.

The variation in the Black-headed Oriole is comparatively simple. The largest, darkest and longest billed populations occur in the south, interior and west of the continent (races *larvatus* and *ango-*

lensis), and the smallest brightest coloured and shortest billed in the eastern tropical littoral and north-eastern tropics (races *reichenowi*, *rolleti* and *permistus*). The new form *O.l.tibicen* links the two major groupings of forms of *O.larvatus*. The races of *O.larvatus* in southern, central and eastern Africa which may be conveniently recognised are as follows:

(a) **Oriolus larvatus larvatus** Lichtenstein

Oriolus larvatus Lichtenstein, *Verz.Doubl.*, p. 20, 1823: eastern Cape Province.

Yellow of the breast about intense Lemon Chrome, mantle colour a little deeper than Pyrite Yellow, rump not markedly brighter than mantle. Size large (see measurements), and bill long and robust.

Measurements: 9 ♂♂ wing 139-143.5 (140.9), tail 91.0-100.0 (93.4), culmen 30.0-33.0 (31.0); 9 ♀♀ wing 132.0-137.5 (135.5), tail 89.0-93.5 (91.1), culmen 28.0-32.0 (30.2) mm.

Material: 28 (eastern Cape Province 15, Natal 13).

Range: Eastern Cape Province through Natal and Zululand to Swaziland, and the eastern and northern Transvaal and Orange Free State. Intergrades with *O.l.angolensis* and *O.l.tibicen* to the north of its range.

(b) **Oriolus larvatus angolensis** Neumann

Oriolus larvatus angolensis Neumann, *Journ. f. Ornith.*, p. 236, 1905: Malandje, Angola.

Differs from *O.l.larvatus*, as described above, in having the upperparts distinctly greener, less yellow, a tendency to have a smaller yellow apical spot to the outer webs of the tertials, and in being markedly smaller in size, especially in respect of the tail and culmen.

Measurements: 10 ♂♂ wing 136.0-143.0 (139.7), tail 84.0-92.0 (88.5), culmen 25.5-28.0 (26.6); 10 ♀♀ wing 133.0-142.0 (136.2), tail 82.0-91.0 (86.5), culmen 24.5-27.0 (25.6) mm.

Material: 123 (Swaziland 3, Transvaal 13, Southern Rhodesia 32, Caprivi 1, Bechuanaland Protectorate 1, Northern Rhodesia 64, Tanganyika 3, Kenya 6).

Range: Angola, through the Caprivi Strip and northern Bechuanaland Protectorate to Northern Rhodesia, south-eastern and savannas of eastern Congo, Southern Rhodesia, Nyasaland (except the low-

lying south) Tanganyika (except the low-lying littoral region) and the highlands of Kenya Colony. Intergrades in the south with *O.l.larvatus* and in the north-east with *O.l.reichenowi*.

(c) ***Oriolus larvatus tibicen***, subsp.nov.

Type: ♂ adult. Collected at Panda, near Inhambane, Sul do Save, Moçambique. 23 September, 1960. Durban Museum Expedition. In the collection of the Durban Museum.

Diagnosis: Smaller in size than *O.l.larvatus* and markedly less yellow, more green, on the upper-parts, with the yellow of the under-parts paler. Shorter winged than *O.l.angolensis*, but with a markedly longer culmen. Larger in size and deeper green on the upper-parts than *O.l.reichenowi*, less golden-yellow on under-parts, and with larger terminal yellow panels to the inner webs of the rectrices.

Measurements: 6 ♂♂ wing 130.0-140.5 (134.1), tail 79.0-85.5 (83.5), culmen 27.0-29.5 (28.1); 5 ♀♀ wing 127.0-133.0 (130.2), tail 77.5-85.0 (82.0), culmen 26.5-29.0 (27.9) mm.

Material: 18 (Moçambique 11, south-eastern Nyasaland 7).

Measurements of Type: wing 135.5, tail 85.0, culmen 29.5 mm.

Range: Not fully determined in the north, but probably from southern Moçambique north to the littoral of southern Tanganyika, and in the low-lying country of south-eastern Nyasaland.

Remarks: The name appended to the new race is from the Latin *tibicen* — a player on the flute, in allusion to the flute-like calls of the bird.

(d) ***Oriolus larvatus reichenowi*** Zedlitz

Oriolus larvatus reichenowi Zedlitz, *Journ.f.Ornith.*, p. 1, 1916: Afgoi, southern Somalia.

The smallest race, and also differs from the other forms in being considerably more golden on the neck, mantle, rump and wing-coverts. The under-parts also tend to be deeper, more golden yellow.

Measurements: 9 ♂♂ wing 122.5-129.5 (126.7), tail 74.5-81.0 (77.3), culmen 25.0-27.5 (26.1); 1 ♀ wing 120.5, tail 76.5, culmen 24.0 mm.

Material: 10, all from coastal Kenya Colony.

Range: The eastern littoral and low-lying country of southern Somalia, Kenya Colony and Tanganyika, probably as far south

as Dar-es-Salaam. Replaced in the south by *O.l.tibicen*, with which it undoubtedly intergrades. Intergrades with *O.l.angolensis* to the west of its range, as shown by a series from the Chyulu Hills.

(e) **Oriolus larvatus rolleti** Salvadori

Oriolus rolleti Salvadori, *Atti Acad. Torino*, vol. 7, p. 151, 1864: Lat. 70° N. on the White Nile.

Somewhat greener on the upper-parts than *O.l.reichenowi* with the upper tail-coverts a brighter yellow, less golden. Also larger in size, especially marked in the tail and culmen. Smaller in size than *O.l.angolensis* and more golden.

Measurements: (including those given by Friedmann (1937)) 8 ♂♂ 122.0-132.5 (126.8), tail 77.0-89.0 (82.6), culmen 22.5-25.5 (23.6); 5 ♀♀ wing 121.0-130.0 (125.2), tail 76.0-85.0 (81.2), culmen 22.0-24.0 (23.0) mm.

Material: 2 from Kacheliba, Suam R., north-western Kenya.

Range: North-eastern Congo and Uganda, through the north-western districts of Kenya Colony to south-western Ethiopia and the southern Sudan.

(f) **Oriolus larvatus permistus** Neumann

Oriolus monachus permistus Neumann, *Ornith. Monatsb.*, p. 145 1904: Gadat, Gofa, Ethiopia.

Differs from *O.l.rolleti* on the basis of size, *O.l.permistus* being larger in size, and differs from *O.l.angolensis* in being lighter, a paler more yellowish green, above than *O.l.angolensis*.

Range: The Omo district of southern Ethiopia, east to Lake Abaya.

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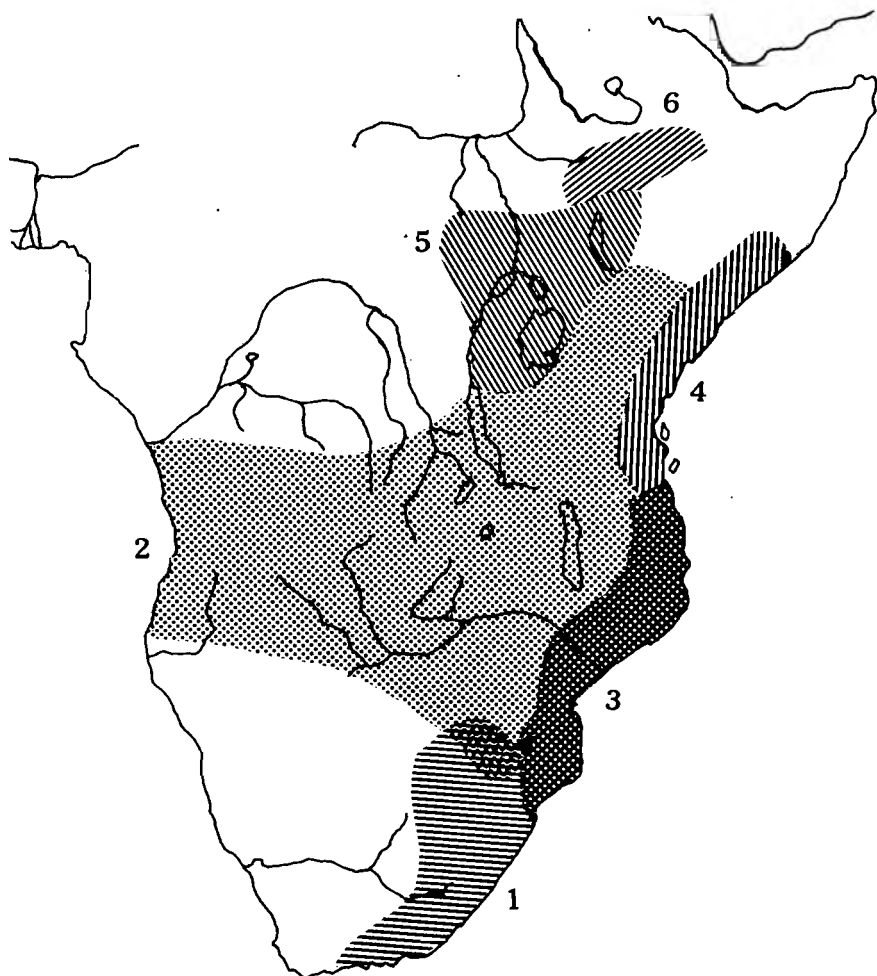
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Sketch-map showing approximate ranges of the geographical races of *Oriolus larvatus* Lichtenstein

1. *Oriolus larvatus larvatus* Lichtenstein
2. *Oriolus larvatus angolensis* Neumann
3. *Oriolus larvatus tibicen* Lawson
4. *Oriolus larvatus reichenowi* Zedlitz
5. *Oriolus larvatus rolleti* Salvadori
6. *Oriolus larvatus permistus* Neumann