

FURTHER NOTES ON AN AFRICAN BUNTING

by Neville Brickell

Cabanis's Bunting *Emberiza cabanisi*

Description

Length 15cm-17cm (6in-6¾in). The adult male is shown in the photograph on the following page. Unlike other similar looking African buntings, this species lacks a white stripe below the eye. Sinclair & Ryan (2003) and Hockey, Dean & Ryan (2005) recognised three subspecies. These differ from each other mainly in the shades of streaking and striping on the head, back and mantle, and in size. The former list the northern nominate subspecies *E. c. cabanisi* and two southern subspecies *E. c. orientalis* and *E. c. cognominata*, the latter two formerly and, alternatively still sometimes, known as the Three-streaked Bunting. Clements (2007) recognised only *E. c. cabanisi* and *E. c. orientalis*. *Emberiza c. cabanisi* is larger and is darker on the head and also on the upperparts, the latter being grey with black streaking. Its chin and throat are white. *Emberiza c. orientalis* has an inconspicuous narrow white or whitish stripe down the centre of its crown, which usually broadens at the back of the neck, and has the feathers of the mantle and back chestnut, with sooty-brown centres, grey edges and bluish-grey bases. Only the chin is white. *Emberiza c. cognominata* has a narrow pale greyish stripe down the centre of the crown, greyer upperparts than *E. c. orientalis* and is larger (Hockey, Dean & Ryan, 2005). There is a slight seasonal variation as the fresh plumage becomes worn and fades.

The female is a paler/duller version of the male. Her head and face markings are dark brown (rather than black), her eye stripe has a buffish tinge and is less conspicuous, her throat is tinged buffish and her wing bars are less striking; the centre of her breast may be washed orangish-brown, with the rest of the underparts yellow. The juvenile is in turn a duller, browner version of the female. Its upperparts are pale tawny-brown with blackish streaking and its eye-stripe is also pale tawny-brown; its breast is pale dull yellow with, according to some descriptions, dark brown streaking on the chest and often also on the flanks.

Voice

Song, delivered from a prominent perch, a piercing, sweetly modulated and variable "wee, chidderchidder, chidder, we," "her, ip, ip, ip...her, hee," "sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet," "peetu-peetu-peetu" or a rapid "twi-twi-twi-twi." Call a soft, clear, whistled "turee" (Hockey, Dean & Ryan, 2005). Stevenson & Fanshawe (2002) described the song of *E. c. cabanisi* as a fairly rapidly



Neville Brickell

Male Cabanis's Bunting.

delivered “*swi chi chi chi chi chi*,” while that of *E. c. orientalis* is a much sweeter “*swi sisi swee swee swee swee*.” Both are described as loud and far-carrying.

Distribution

Emberiza c. cabanisi occurs from Sierra Leone and Guinea on the west coast, eastwards across Africa to southern Sudan, the north-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo and north-west Uganda. *Emberiza c. orientalis* occurs from the south-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania to Zambia, Malawi, northern Mozambique and eastern Zimbabwe. *Emberiza c. cognominata* occurs in southern Gabon, the Congo, Angola, the south-west of the Democratic Republic of Congo, western Zambia and north-western Zimbabwe.

Habitat

Miombo (*Brachystegia*) woodland with little or no undergrowth in southern Africa, at the forest edge and bushed and wooded grassland from 300m-2,000m (approx. 985ft-6,550ft) in East Africa and wooded, savannah in West Africa.

Behaviour

Forages on paths, at roadsides and on patches of open ground, particularly those on poorly drained soil. It is usually solitary or in pairs, or may form

small flocks with other small birds, feeding on the ground, in the non-breeding season.

Food

Eats seed and grain, including millet and rice, and insects including beetles and grasshoppers, the remains of which were among the stomach contents of specimens collected in Nigeria. A captive pair belonging to Ken Arnold, formerly of Zimbabwe, then residing in KwaZulu-Natal, was fed a finch seed mixture and mealworms, along with livefood recorded in the wild, including the Common Green Mantis *Sphodromantis gastrica* and crickets, from which the legs were removed by the parents before they were fed to the nestlings between day seven and day II, after which seed was offered. Chickweed, thistle and dandelion leaves were also offered, plus a softfood with the addition of hard-boiled egg. The birds were also provided with finely crushed cuttlefish bone.

Our Feeding Record Cards show that this species has a liking for three indigenous grasses, namely: Natal Red-top *Melinis repens*, Guinea Grass *Panicum maximum* and Natal Panic *P. natalense*, as well as livefood collected from the wild, along with mealworms, when it is breeding.

Breeding

Nigeria and Cameroon, June-September; Central African Republic, February-May; Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia, March; Angola, September-January; Malawi, October-November; Zimbabwe, September-March (30 out of 44 records October-November).

Nest construction is undertaken by the female alone, with the male in constant attendance, including following her on nesting material collecting trips. The nest is usually 1m-2m (approx. 3ft 3in-6ft 6in) above the ground but can be up to 5m (approx. 16ft) above the ground. It is usually built in a multiple-twigged fork of a small tree or bush and screened by leafy foliage. In Zimbabwe a Mufuti *Brachystegia boehmii*, Munondo *Julbernadia globiflora* or Camels-foot *Piliostigma thonningii* is frequently chosen. A pair built in a bunch of plantains in full view of Bate's house in southern Cameroon. He found the birds so shy that they were seldom seen, so it came as a surprise to him that they chose such an exposed site. Bannerman (1953) also mentioned a nest in an exposed situation in a yam vine in southern Nigeria.

Bannerman (1953) described the nest as "shallow and loosely made" but Hockey, Dean & Ryan (2005) described it as a "deep, almost thrush-like cup" made of roots, twigs, grass and weed stems (often with flowers and leaves attached) and dry and skeletonised leaves. It is lined with soft, fine grass and rootlets. The outside of the nest measures up to about 110mm in

diameter, with the cup about 50mm in diameter and 30mm deep. The nest is about 60mm-80mm high.

One to three eggs may be laid, but the usual clutch consists of two eggs, which measure on average about 20.2mm x 14.6mm. They are white or pale greenish blue, with large and irregular fine twirling lines, short wavy pencillings, hair lines and blotches coloured brown and grey, often in a ring around the thick end. The incubation period is 12-14 days. A nestling period of 14-16 days has been recorded in captivity. On vacating the nest the fledglings are fed by the male for a further eight to 10 days. An attempt to consume dry seed was observed after 12 days of having left the nest. Cabanis's Bunting is parasited by Klaas's Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx klaas*.

Acknowledgements

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BLACK-AND-WHITE LAUGHINGTHRUSH

Dave Coles remembers the Black-and-white Laughingthrushes *Garrulax bicolor*, then called Sumatran Jay Thrushes or Sumatran Laughingthrushes *G. leucolophus bicolor*, living in one of Raymond Sawyer's aviaries at Cobham, Surrey (see Vol.114, No.3, p.132 (2008)). The pair was, Dave wrote, there when he left in 1987. So far as he is aware, the pair never bred and came, he believes, from Rex Merritt.

THE CHALLENGE OF KEEPING KINGFISHERS

by Gary Bralsford

Over the past 25 years, I have kept many foreign birds. Softbills have been my first love, my favourites being the kingfishers, rollers and bee-eaters. Of these, the kingfishers are to me the real beauties and have presented the greatest challenge to my birdkeeping skills.

I bought my first kingfisher, a Grey-headed *Halcyon leucocephala*, from a dealer in Doncaster named Terry Merrick, who sadly is no longer in the hobby. Its staple diet was mealworms, crickets and locusts. At the time, in the early 1980s, I also had a pond with a thriving goldfish population and the fry were eagerly consumed by the kingfisher. My bird was a male (which in my experience has a more prominent grey head) and as I could not get a female to pair it with, after about 18 months I sold it to someone who already had three Grey-headed Kingfishers.

This species has a wide range in Africa and is also found on the Red Sea coast of the southern Arabian Peninsula. It inhabits woodland and bush, usually near water. Some populations are migratory, breeding in one part of Africa and spending the non-breeding season elsewhere in Africa. The Grey-headed Kingfisher feeds on a wide variety of prey, including insects (mainly grasshoppers, locusts and crickets), lizards, small mammals such as mice and more rarely takes frogs and small fish.

I then went on to keep the slightly larger Blue-breasted Kingfisher *H. malimbica*. It is a fantastic bird to keep, being both a colourful and an energetic aviary inhabitant. It is found from the Senegambia region of West Africa, south to Cameroon, Angola and Zambia, and eastwards to southern Sudan, western and southern Uganda and right up in the north-west corner of Tanzania. It is primarily a forest kingfisher, that keeps in deep shade below the canopy, but may also be found in dense riverine woodland and in mangroves. Like the Grey-headed species, it feeds mainly on insects, but may also catch frogs, crabs and prawns but not fish. It is said often to nest in an arboreal termite nest, 10m (30ft) or more above the ground, or in a hole in a tree. Up to four, round, smooth, glossy white eggs are laid.

I bought my first Blue-breasted Kingfisher from Mark Peckett of Preston and later bought two more from Pegasus Birds. I found that Blue-breasted Kingfishers were prone to arrive from quarantine with damaged beaks, which was the case with one of the latter, that had a chip out of its upper mandible. All three were quite nervous and whenever I entered their flight would crash against the wire mesh. I therefore put up mini-corrugated sheeting on the inside of the flight to prevent them crashing against the wire and to protect



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