A hybrid munia?

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In *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 116: 137–142, R. L. Restall described in detail the new munia *Lonchura pallidiventer*. The bird has a very distinctive appearance and seems to make a good (and attractive) new species. However, I feel that the author did not convincingly exclude the possibility of a hybrid in suggesting the species' authenticity. The following incongruities were found in his account.

1. The birds described show a suspicious amount of variation in plumage pattern, and the following characters in particular were apparently not consistent and not linked with sex: (a) presence or absence of black tips to the under tail coverts; (b) presence or absence of white spots on the breast; (c) colouring of heel barring: chestnut/black or buff/black; (d) colour of lower breast: black or chestnut.

2. It appears that no offspring were produced by the birds, some of which were reportedly kept in captivity by apparently expert munia breeders for five years. Though munias are not always prolific breeders, and some even reputedly difficult, this low fertility (or perhaps sterility) of the birds, suggests hybrids.

3. Though hardly any part of Kalimantan has been explored very exhaustively, the hinterland of Banjarmasin is one of the best surveyed areas, and new species are quite unexpected from this region.

Whilst looking at the illustrations of Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata* and White-bellied Munia *Lonchura leucogastra* (both depicted very conveniently on one plate by Clement *et al.* 1993) I could not help thinking of Cream-bellied Munia being the perfect cross of these two species. The southern Kalimantan race of White-bellied, *castanota*, is very distinct from the other races because of its chestnut or deep warm brown upper parts, contributing even more to the rich brown uppers of Cream-bellied. Moreover, both species co-occur in South Kalimantan and are scarce (Smythies 1981; Holmes & Burton 1987), which would promote hybridization as choice of mates is restricted (see Campbell & Lack 1985). The Cream-bellied's slightly larger size than either of these species can be explained by hybrid vigour producing larger and stronger birds (Campbell & Lack 1985).

Two sex-linked differences were described by Restall: (1) the grizzled lines on the upper part of the cream belly, which are also found in both sexes of White-bellied; (2) slight barring on the lower rump, which is found in both sexes of Scaly-breasted. This may be consistent with subtle sexual differences found in both, supposedly monochromatic 'parent' species.

At least three things should be done to 'test' this new species. 1. Breed the new species and examine its fertility and consistency of specific characters in their offspring, 2. Cross-breed White-bellied and Scaly-breasted Munias, 3. Find the birds in the wild. Especially the last

is of importance because it remains questionable whether or not these birds, if hybrids, are of a natural provenance or a product of genetic manipulation by a local aviculturist. High prices are sometimes paid for rare, exotic bird species, and it is conceivable that especially new and attractive-looking forms would make good prices on the national and international market. The relatively large number of birds during the last five years (13 specimens), as reported by the author, suggests the latter possibility.

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The distribution and type locality of the extinct Slender-billed Grackle *Quiscalus palustris*

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The Slender-billed Grackle *Quiscalus palustris* was described by Swainson (1827), based on specimens collected by W. Bullock. The type locality was described as "marshes and borders of the lakes round Mexico", which was long interpreted as indicating the large lakes that formerly existed within the Valley of Mexico itself. However, this interpretation, and indeed the type locality of the species itself, were changed by Dickerman (1965), and accepted by most subsequent authorities (e.g. American Ornithologists' Union 1983).

Dickerman (1965) provided convincing evidence that the species also occurred in the marshes east of the Valley of Mexico along the headwaters of the Río Lerma. E. A. Goldman collected the species at Lerma in 1904, describing the habitat as follows: "The marsh is filled with a varied assortment of aquatic vegetation, including tules, sedges, and many submerged species . . . The marsh is an important watering place for migratory waterfowl, and a breeding area for resident waterfowl" (Goldman 1951). Wilmot W. Brown, Jr., collected additional series at "San Mateo" in 1910. Dickerman (1965) argued that this locality also was in the Lerma marshes; his identification of this site as San Mateo Atenco, 13.5 km ESE of Toluca, is borne out by

localities given on a few of Brown's labels, which read "Mexico, Toluca (13.5 km ESE; San Mateo)". Hence, the occurrence of Slender-billed Grackles in the Lerma marshes is well established (Dickerman 1965, Hardy 1967).

However, Dickerman (1965) went on to argue that the species never occurred in the Valley of Mexico, and that in fact no grackle had occurred there until the 1950s, when a population of Great-tailed Grackles *Q. mexicanus* was established in Xochimilco. Nevertheless, the marsh habitats in the Valley of Mexico were of impressive dimensions. In 1520, Hernando Cortés described his first view of the valley, in the vicinity of Ixtapalapa, as follows (Morris 1928):

> There are trees and flowering shrubs, and with the lake there are innumerable fish and birds, such as wild duck, wigeon, and other waterfowl, and in such number that they almost cover the surface of the water.

Descriptions provided by several other sixteenth century visitors to the Valley of Mexico (e.g. Gage 1980) support Cortés' view of its immense marshes. After 300 years of European presence, however, in the early 1800s, the valley was described by Mme. Calderón de la Barca (1987; translation mine) as follows:

> The scenery on this side of Mexico is arid and flat, and where the waters of the Lagunas, covered with their gay canoes, once surrounded the city, forming canals through its streets, we now see melancholy marshy lands, little enlivened by great flights of wild duck and waterfowl.

Clearly, these marshes would originally have constituted ideal habitat for Slender-billed Grackles, much as in the case of the Nicaraguan Grackle *Q. nicaraguensis* and Lake Nicaragua, but were on their way to extinction by the mid-nineteenth century.

The type locality provided by Swainson (1827) indicates that the type material was indeed taken in the Valley of Mexico. In the same contribution, Swainson reported on 65 species taken in Mexico, at sites including "near Vera Cruz", "Table land", Real del Monte, Temiscaltipec [*sic*], "Sides of the Cordilleras", and "maritime land"; one other specimen was described as having been purchased in the city of Mexico. Only that of the Slender-billed Grackle was referred to as "the lakes round Mexico", suggesting that the material was *not* just another haphazardly labelled record from Temascaltepec or en route to or from. Remembering that in Mexico, the term "Mexico" frequently refers to the city, Swainson's type locality could easily refer to the lakes and marshes of the Valley of Mexico.

Apart from the type specimen, however, other records exist of Slender-billed Grackles from the Valley of Mexico. Herrera (1891; translation mine), in a report on the vertebrates of the Valley of Mexico, listed the occurrence of Slender-billed Grackles as follows:

> In the marshy areas, among mammals, *Arvicola pinetorum*, *A. mexicana*, and *Mustela brasiliensis*; among birds, besides cranes and waterfowl, *Pandion haliaetus* (Fishing Hawk), *Ceryle alcyon*, *Ceryle cabanisi* (kingfisher), *Sayornis nigricans*, *Sturnella magna mexicana*, *Anthus ludovicianus*, *Quiscalus tenuirostris* [=*Q. palustris*], *Melospiza fasciata mexicana*, *Cinclus mexicanus*, *Anthus ludovicianus*, *Cistothorus palustris* . . .