
Field identification of Lesser Grass-finch

Emberizoides ypiranganus

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Emberizoides ypiranganus se encuentra incorrectamente descrito e ilustrado en las guías de campo disponibles. Como resultado, esta especie casi-amenazada habitante de bañados y pastizales puede ser pasada por alto, siendo de hecho, menos rara de lo que generalmente se piensa. Aún observándola posada y de lejos, o en vuelo, *E. ypiranganus* es notablemente más delgado que el común y simpátrico *E. herbicola*, y muestra mayor contraste entre el área facial gris, espalda verdosa y ventral blancuzco. Las vocalizaciones de las dos especies son bastante diferentes. Esperamos que los aspectos identificatorios resaltados aquí ayudarán a los ornitólogos de campo a aclarar el verdadero estatus de *E. ypiranganus*.

Introduction

For years, the genus *Emberizoides* was considered monospecific: Wedge-tailed Grass-finch *E. herbicola*. As recently as 1982, the work of Eisenmann & Short² revealed two other taxa to be worthy of specific status: Lesser Grass-finch *E. ypiranganus* and the localised Duida Grass-finch *E. duidae*, restricted to Cerro Duida in south Venezuela^{2,7}. This treatment is now widely adopted⁷. Unless singing, they are usually inconspicuous and furtive, with identification reliant on brief views of perched or flying birds. When flushed, they fly jerkily away revealing distinctive long pointed tails before diving back into cover.

The most widespread taxon is the Wedge-tailed Grass-finch *E. herbicola*, and over most of its wide range — from Costa Rica to Argentina — there are no confusion species (aside *E. duidae*, which occurs on Cerro Duida, but is beyond the scope of this article). However, in southern Brazil (São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul), northern Argentina (eastern Formosa, Misiones, Santa Fe and Entre Ríos) and Paraguay (throughout the east and marginally into the Bajo Chaco), the possibility of Lesser (or Grey-cheeked¹) Grass-finch *E. ypiranganus* must be taken into account (see Figure 1). Recent surveys have revealed this near-threatened species¹ to be more common and wide-ranging than previous records implied^{3,5}, and identification difficulties may have clouded assessments of its status. Here we discuss the separation of the little-studied *E. ypiranganus* and the sympatric nominate *E. h. herbicola*, which occurs in eastern, central and southern Brazil, from Pernambuco south to Rio Grande do Sul and west to Mato Grosso (see Figure 1).

The identification problem

The identification features of *E. ypiranganus* are insufficiently or inaccurately covered in the available literature. The only illustration in a widely available field guide⁴ depicts a passerine completely unlike *E. ypiranganus*, with an incorrect tail-shape, a conspicuous dark mask, and unmarked vent and flank feathers. These features were not apparent in any of the 100 or so birds seen by the authors.

Structure

E. ypiranganus and *E. herbicola* are structurally similar. Individuals of both species caught in Paraguay in 1995 (see Appendix 1) overlapped in total and tail length measurements. *E. ypiranganus*, however, is a significantly less bulky, slimmer-looking bird, weighing on average c.7 g less than *E. herbicola*. In the hand, morphological differences such as wing and tarsal length appear to aid separation. Although the *E. ypiranganus* that we caught did not actually have a shorter tail than *E. herbicola*, field observations do give this impression (perhaps when the rectrices are worn), with a tendency for the central feathers to be more attenuated (albeit not to the extent illustrated by Narosky & Yzurieta⁴). *E. ypiranganus* also has a slimmer bill with a slightly more curved culmen and more pointed tip.

Bare parts

The bill of *E. herbicola* is largely yellow to yellow-orange with a blackish culmen, whereas that of *E. ypiranganus* is a deeper orange with a (perhaps slightly more extensive) blackish culmen. Leg colour is similarly variable, ranging from yellowish and brownish to flesh-pink.

Plumage

The species are similar in plumage, essentially being olive-brown streaked blackish above, and pale, relatively unmarked, below. In general, *E. ypiranganus* exhibits greater contrast than the duller *E. herbicola*. The key to confident identification of *E. ypiranganus* is familiarity with the more common *E. herbicola*, and especially with the plumage variation it exhibits.

Emberizoides herbicola has a plain head pattern, lending it an ‘open-faced’ appearance, most commonly with

pale olive-brown lores, face and ear-coverts and diffuse whitish supraloral and prominent eyering. The throat is grey-brown, with the rest of the underparts becoming buff towards the vent. Remiges are prominently fringed bright green while the mantle is brown, narrowly streaked black (the black narrower than the brown, or of equal width). Rectrices are dark brown fringed greyish. The uppertail-coverts of *E. herbicola* are streaked darker brown, most prominently on the longest coverts. Occasionally this streaking extends indistinctly onto the rump.

The nominate *Emberizoides h. herbicola* appears to never show streaking on the flanks or undertail-coverts. The more northerly *E. h. sphenurus*, which occurs in northern Colombia, Venezuela, the Guianas and northern Brazil (see Figure 1), sometimes shows restricted streaking on the breast sides and shaft streaks to the undertail-coverts. Overall upperpart tones are variable, with some birds a relatively cold grey-brown, others very olive and a few strongly tawny.

A close examination of *E. ypiranganus* will reveal several obvious differences to *E. herbicola*. Of particular note are a much greyer face (hence the alternative English name for the former species¹), composed of dark grey (occasionally black) lores, paler blue-grey cheeks and ear-coverts, with a (sometimes inconspicuous) white supraloral spot and eyering. *E. ypiranganus* thus lacks the open-faced appearance of *E. herbicola*. Occasionally *E. herbicola* has a much greyer, less 'open-faced' appearance, thereby recalling *E. ypiranganus*. However, the grey on these individuals is either uniform, or strongest on the ear-coverts, hence lacking the contrast between the very dark lores and paler ear-coverts typical of *E. ypiranganus*.

The underparts of *E. ypiranganus*, especially the throat, are whiter than in *E. herbicola*, this being readily apparent even at long range. Most importantly the vent, lower flanks, rump and uppertail-coverts of *E. ypiranganus* are darker than its congener, with the undertail-coverts, uppertail-coverts and rump prominently streaked blackish. The lower flanks are also distinctly streaked, albeit less boldly. The mantle is usually a brighter and greener brown, thickly striped with black (the black being much broader than the brown, as correctly illustrated in Narosky & Yzurieta⁴). Remiges are fringed bright green, while rectrices are blackish brown fringed whitish grey. Old male *E. ypiranganus* may show a rufous suffusion on the tertial fringes, uppertail-coverts and breast; at distance, these warmer and browner plumaged birds may more closely resemble *E. herbicola* (R. Restall *in litt.* 1997).

Flight identification

The typical flight views of grass-finches do not usually allow confirmation of plumage details. With practice, however, *E. ypiranganus* can be identified by its much slimmer appearance (this helping to impart the impression of a smaller bird), the apparently shorter tail, and considerably darker upperparts and flanks, contrasting with whitish underparts. In flight, *E. herbicola* frequently carries its tail half-cocked, which we have never seen in *E. ypiranganus*.

Vocalisations

Vocally, *E. ypiranganus* is quite distinct from *E. herbicola*, although some contact and alarm calls are similar. The typical song of *E. h. herbicola* is a melodious double whistle, the first upward inflected, followed by a pause and a second downward-inflected whistle *juwLEE....juwLoo*. This song is usually given from a prominent perch (e.g. top of a bush or grass stem).

A more complex, quite variable song is sometimes given, particularly shortly after dawn, and often during a jerky display flight, wherein the birds rise 2-4 m, then continue horizontally, before descending in silence. Sick⁸ considered this song type to be a variation on *wewt-wewt hee-TSEEew*, but in Paraguay it often consists of a series of *chk* notes, followed by 2-3 more musical notes such as *teu juwLoo* and sometimes terminating with another series of *chk* notes. This more complex song of *E. h. herbicola* is not dissimilar to that of *E. ypiranganus*.

The typical song of *E. ypiranganus* is a harsh, monotonous chatter, consisting of cadences such as *ch-ch-ch-ch-ch...*, *wet-wet-wet...* and *JAda-JAda-JAda...*, reminiscent of other wetland birds such as *Cisthorus* wrens and (Old World) *Acrocephalus* warblers⁸. This song is sometimes given from a prominent perch or during a display flight, but more frequently when the bird is concealed in vegetation.

The contact and alarm calls of the two species are similar. Those of *E. herbicola* are typically more emphatic, an abrupt *tsik*, *tip* or *chik* and a high *seet*, usually given as a single note. In contrast, *E. ypiranganus*, gives a more insipid *tse tse tsee*, usually as a series of notes, and a short, scolding *ch-ch*. In mixed *Emberizoides* assemblages, however, these differences can be hard to detect.

Habitat

E. ypiranganus is usually found in damper habitats than *E. herbicola*, frequenting marshes and swampy meadows. However, the strict division of habitat preferences outlined by Ridgely & Tudor⁶ does not exist. We have found *E. ypiranganus* in well-drained grasslands and *E. herbicola* in swampy areas, both during and outside the breeding season, in eastern Paraguay. Therefore, whilst habitat is a clue, it should not form a basis for grass-finch identification.

Conclusion

Emberizoides ypiranganus is inaccurately described and illustrated in field guides. As a result this near-threatened inhabitant of marshes and grasslands may be overlooked, it probably being less rare than generally recognised. Even given perched views at long range or in flight, *E. ypiranganus* is obviously slimmer than the more common and sympatric Wedge-tailed Grass-finch *E. h. herbicola*, shows greater contrast between its grey facial area, green mantle and white underparts, and exhibits streaked undertail-coverts and flanks. Vocally, the two species are quite distinct.

Acknowledgements

We thank Durwyn Liley, Bernabe López Lanús, Juan Mazar Barnett, Mark Pearman and Jane Reid for sharing their knowledge of *Emberizoides* grass-finches. Juan Mazar Barnett commented on an earlier version of this paper and provided the Spanish abstract. Robert Restall kindly reviewed the text. Fieldwork in Paraguay was conducted with the support of the Dirección de Parques Nacionales y Vida Silvestre and the Fundación Moisés Bertoni.

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Appendix 1. Measurements of *Emberizoides* spp. from Reserva Privada Natural Sombrero, Dpto. Cordillera, Paraguay; August 1995

(Mean followed by range in parentheses.)

E. herbicola (n=5): weight 28.4g (25.8-31.1); wing chord 73.8 mm (72.0-76.0); wing maximum 75.8 mm (75.0-78.0); bill length 16.8 mm (13.0-19.3); bill depth at nostril 7.2 mm (6.6-7.8); bill width at nostril 6.4 mm (6.0-6.6); tarsus 26.0 mm (25.6-27.0); total length 201.5 mm (200-203).

E. ypiranganus (n=2): weight 21.5g (21.5-21.6); wing chord 64.0 mm (62.0-66.0); wing maximum 66.0 mm (64.0-68.0); bill length 15.9 mm (14.4-17.4); bill depth at nostril 6.4 mm (6.4); bill width at nostril 5.2 mm (4.7-5.7); tarsus 21.8 mm (21.6-22.0); total length 200 (200).