

The rediscovery of Tumaco Seedeater *Sporophila insulata*

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Male Tumaco (right) and Chestnut-throated Seed eaters (left) (Paul Salaman)

Between 26 and 30 July 1912, four specimens of a new species of *Sporophila* seedeater were collected on Isla de Tumaco, a small sandy island on the Pacific coast of Nariño, south-west Colombia¹. Despite subsequent searches for this bird, the Tumaco Seedeater *Sporophila insulata*, has remained unrecorded since 1912². Isla de Tumaco is now covered by the city of Tumaco, the second largest port on the Pacific coast of Colombia, raising grave doubts as to the species' continued survival².

During September 1994, the author and Robert Giles decided to visit Isla Bocagrande, 10 km west of Tumaco, and one of the region's main holiday resorts. Numerous migrants, including nighthawks and shorebirds, promised for some interesting birding, which soon resulted in the discovery of Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (the first record for Colombia) and Surfbird *Aphriza virgata* (the second record for the country). There were few passerines on the narrow sandy island, other than a large population of Chestnut-throated Seedeater *Sporophila telasco*.



Male Tumaco Seedeater (Paul Salaman)

On 12 September 1994 we noticed a striking male seedeater, with bright chestnut underparts, in amongst a small flock of Chestnut-throated Seedeaters. After a quick field description we consulted Hilty & Brown³, and realised that we had rediscovered the Tumaco Seedeater, 82 years after it was first found and described (the species' identity was confirmed by Dr F. Gary Stiles in Bogotá from photos of the male). The following day we carefully studied both the Chestnut-throated and Tumaco seedeaters and obtained more important information.

Description of the male

Bill: dark horn. White spot by the base of the lower mandible as in *S. telasco*.

Upperparts: pale grey with slight brownish tips to the mantle feathers; narrow red rump band; partly concealed dark feather centres from the mantle to uppertail coverts give a slightly streaked appearance (less so than in *S. telasco*).

Tail: broad white base only visible in the hand, otherwise black with pale grey edges and brownish tips.

Wings: flight feathers black, thinly edged white on the inner secondaries, fading to buff towards the outer primaries; broad white base forms a distinctive wing-bar; upperwing coverts dusky, edged buff and tipped grey; tertials broadly edged grey-buff.

Underparts: throat, breast, flanks to undertail coverts bright chestnut, fading on the belly between the legs.

Female and immature Tumaco Seedeaters could not be confidently identified from Chestnut-throated in the field.

Taxonomically, Tumaco Seedeater was traditionally associated with Ruddy-breasted Seedeater *S. minuta*, although, as suggested by Ridgely & Tudor⁴, it is almost certainly more closely allied to Chestnut-throated. As Tumaco and Chestnut-throated seedeaters occur sympatrically, it seems probable that the former is indeed a valid species rather than (as has been suggested) an isolated or hybrid

population of Chestnut-throated. Some observed plumage variation in male Tumaco Seedeaters (i.e. the extent of chestnut on the underparts) probably relates to immature birds (F. G. Stiles verbally 1994).

On 12 and 13 September 1994, six adult male Tumaco Seedeaters were observed. The species appears to be restricted to a 4 km stretch of very narrow, raised beach habitat on the seaward side of Isla Bocagrande. This habitat comprised marram-type grasses (at various stages of seeding) and scattered patches of scrub. Only c.1 ha of such habitat was found on Isla Bocagrande. Several large flocks of Chestnut-throated Seedeater were noted across the island, particularly in extensive areas of grass. However, the Tumaco Seedeaters were found feeding on seeding grasses close to, or amongst patches of scrub. Both species occurred together in large feeding flocks of up to 40 individuals (up to five adult male Tumaco Seedeaters) when foraging close to scrub patches. In these mixed flocks, the Tumaco Seedeaters foraged at lower levels, even on the ground, whilst Chestnut-throated concentrated on seed-heads. Several male Tumaco Seedeaters were heard singing from bushes (windy conditions prevented recording), the song being superficially similar to that of Chestnut-throated.



Dune vegetation on Isla Bocagrande (Paul Salaman)

The dune habitat on which the Tumaco Seedeater appears dependent is extremely restricted and highly threatened on Isla Bocagrande: the development of the Bocagrande tourist resort threatens the entire species' survival. Regular clearance and burning of scrub for beach cabins will have a profound effect on the species' habitat, and

severe disturbance on the island during the holiday season (December–January and June–August) may also affect the species. Now that the basic habitat requirements of the Tumaco Seedeater are known, and tangible threats to its continued survival have been identified, the species clearly demands immediate conservation attention, both in the form of targeted surveys and protection.

References

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