

# Identifying *Sporophila* grey seedeaters in Venezuela

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**F**our species of grey seedeater of the genus *Sporophila* occur in Venezuela, with a total of 13 or more distinct plumages between them. Each has its own preferred habitat, but there is sufficient, and at times considerable, overlap in range and habitat for uncertainty and confusion to arise. The only grey adult male that can be identified with certainty in the field is Plumbeous Seedeater *Sporophila plumbea*. If

seen alone, none of the females can be identified with certainty. The main problem is that males of the other three species have a somewhat poorly defined first basic plumage, and are easily confused. There is also considerable variation within Slate-coloured Seedeater *S. schistacea* that contributes further to the confusion. This paper aims to help clarify the differences between them.

Figure 1. Plumages of grey seedeaters in Venezuela (opposite page).

1. Grey Seedeater *Sporophila intermedia* (a) adult female: note large heavy bill with curved culmen and generally cinnamon tone to face and breast. Female Ring-necked Seedeater is virtually identical but, on average, bill is smaller. The bill of female Grey Seedeater is on average larger than that of males, whereas in Ring-necked Seedeater the reverse is true. Juvenile virtually identical to the female, but bill marginally smaller and culmen less pronounced. (b, head) young adult male that has not completed change in bill colour. Such intermediate bill coloration also occurs in Ring-necked and Slate-coloured Seedeaters. (c) adult male in first basic plumage: note uniform grey forehead to uppertail-coverts and absence of any white markings except speculum; grey rather dull and buffy (distinctly so when examined in the hand). Centre of belly and undertail-coverts pale cream. Yellow bill large and culmen well rounded, sometimes with a pinkish tone. (d) older adult male in basic definitive plumage: note uniform, cool grey colour and white centre to belly and undertail-coverts.

2. Ring-necked Seedeater *Sporophila insularis* (a) female, essentially as female Grey Seedeater, but see above. It has not been possible to identify female Ring-necked Seedeaters with certainty, but older birds seem to have paler fringes to the inner 3–4 median wing-coverts (same but more pronounced pattern in old males), and generally slightly less cinnamon and slightly greyer upperparts than female Grey Seedeater. Juvenile virtually identical to female, but bill marginally smaller and culmen less pronounced. (b) adult male in first basic plumage: warm grey tends to be darker on head and paler on uppertail-coverts, grading from one to other; white rump bar diffuse but definite; white markings of neck-sides and across throat indistinct; and bill is slightly larger than that of male Grey Seedeater. (c) adult male in basic definitive plumage: in terms of age and intensification of plumage colour, this bird is equivalent to old Slate-coloured Seedeater (see 3e). All white markings are clearly

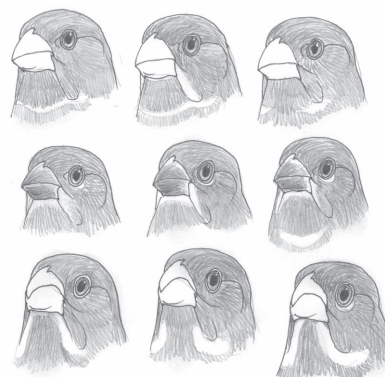
defined and clean against solid dark grey. White rump band is a sure discriminator from any other grey seedeater.

3. Slate-coloured Seedeater *Sporophila schistacea* (a) adult female not easy to separate from other grey seedeater females in the field (but see text). Plumage olivaceous and underparts distinctly yellowish. Note pale cinnamon undertail-coverts. Juvenile slightly browner and cooler in coloration, with very variable undertail-coverts. Young males begin to show yellow streaks on bill. Legs and feet are olive-greenish with pale, yellowish nails. Juvenile has duller, browner legs, feet and nails. (b) intermediate male, citron morph: clean sulphur-yellow central belly and vent, complete yellow eye-ring, orange bill, legs and feet olive-green and nails yellowish. (c) adult male, intermediate, grey morph: virtually inseparable from Grey Seedeater in the field, unless bill is seen clearly, with its distinctive mandible shape. Bill yellow. Legs, feet and nails may be greyish. (d) adult male, first basic plumage, with very small amount of white on sides of throat, vestigial white eye-ring and innermost median wing-coverts. White spot at base of primaries. (e) basic definitive plumage: evenly dense cool grey with white markings clearly defined. Usually has white crescent below eye. Legs and toes olive greenish and nails pale yellowish. Bill orange. The classic plumage shown in field guide illustrations. (f) old adult male (over five years): grey has intensified to charcoal on head and bold white markings all clearly contrast with grey.

4. Plumbeous Seedeater *Sporophila plumbea whiteleyana* (a) adult female: cool brown and greyish brown, whitish on belly and undertail-coverts. Note neat conical bill, slightly bicoloured. Juvenile very similar but has more noticeably bicoloured bill with lower mandible more pale orange (see young male). (b) bills of old and young, male and female, are somewhat variable. (c) adult male first basic: softer warmer grey than old male, with soft buffy tinge. White markings on face less well developed and contrasting. (d) adult male basic definitive: clean grey plumage contrasts with pure white markings of face, belly and undertail-coverts. Bill black. Legs, feet and nails dark olive-green (Robin Restall).



Figure 2 (right). Extent of variation in white patterns on heads of male grey seedeaters in Venezuela. Top row, Ring-necked Seedeater *Sporophila insularis*; note vertical white line is on malar. In case of old males, chin may be white also. Centre row, Plumbeous Seedeater *S. plumbea*; note smaller, black bill is constant in race *whiteleyana*. The bird on the right is an unusually marked older bird. Bottom row, Slate-coloured Seedeater *S. schistacea*; note that vertical white markings are on sides of throat (not the malar). In extreme cases of old males, chin may be white also. Note also scimitar-shaped maxilla.



## &gt;&gt; IDENTIFICATION WORKSHOP SPOROPHILA GREY SEEDEATERS

Adult male grey <i>Sporophila</i> seedeaters in basic definitive plumage	Soft parts												White in plumage							
	Bill			Legs & feet						Nails			Head				Irides		Wings	Rump
	black	yellow	orange	grey	vinaceous	dull grey	olive or greenish	brownish	brownish olive	yellowish	grey	dark	on throat	on chin	on malar	on neck-sides	full ring	crescent below	inner coverts	white bar
Plumbeous Seedeater <i>S. plumbea whiteleyana</i>	✓							✓	✓			✓		✓	✓			✓		
Grey Seedeater <i>S. i. i. intermedia</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	☑									
Ring-necked Seedeater <i>S. insularis</i>		✓		✓	✓					✓			✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
Slate-coloured Seedeater <i>S. schistacea longipennis</i>		☑	✓	☑		☑	✓		☑	✓	✓		✓	☑		✓	☑	✓	☑	

Figure 3. Key to characteristics of males of four species of grey seedeater in Venezuela. Note that Slate-coloured Seedeater *Sporophila schistacea* is more variable; the checks in boxes indicate less common occurrence of character. In the case of the soft parts, usually found in young birds or those in first basic plumage. Complete eye-ring is usually found only in adults in first basic plumage. White chin only in older birds.

Adult female grey <i>Sporophila</i> seed eaters	Soft parts									Plumage								
	Bill			Legs & feet			Nails			Breast			Belly			Undertail-coverts		
	pale or orange lower mandible	dark brown	bicoloured	grey or vinaceous grey	olive or greenish	brown	grey	pale or yellowish	brown	greyish brown	cinnamon	yellow centre	pale cinnamon	yellowish	white	pale creamy	pale cinnamon	white
Plumbeous Seedeater <i>S. plumbea whiteleyana</i>	Juv.		✓			✓			✓	✓					✓			✓
Grey Seedeater <i>S. intermedia intermedia</i>		✓		✓			✓				✓		✓			✓		
Ring-necked Seedeater <i>S. insularis</i>		✓		✓			✓				✓		✓			✓		
Slate-coloured Seedeater <i>S. schistacea longipennis</i>		✓			✓	☑		✓	☑			✓		✓			✓	

Figure 4. Key to characteristics of females of four species of grey seedeater in Venezuela. Females of Grey *Sporophila intermedia* and Ring-necked Seedeater *S. insularis* are virtually impossible to separate in the field. If compared side-by-side, Grey Seedeater tends to be richer cinnamon below and warmer brown above; older female Ring-necked Seedeaters have slightly smaller bills, longer tarsi and may have pale fringes to the inner median wing-coverts and greyer upperparts. Female Slate-coloured Seedeaters *S. schistacea* have the legs, feet and nails more consistently yellow-olive green than males, but young may have these parts olive-brown (checked in box).

**Grey Seedeater** *Sporophila intermedia* (race *intermedia*) is a year-round resident in Venezuela, wandering to greener areas during periods of low rainfall, but sedentary in areas like northern Lara where grasses seed year-round. It is generally a bird of open savanna and grassy areas, and I always manage to find it in rice-growing country. Since rice is irrigated and grows year-round in Venezuela, such areas are assured for finding the species. It is generally in pairs, small groups and often in the company of other seedeaters, when a mixed flock forages in an open grassy area. The female is the most cinnamon of the *Sporophila* seedeaters, and has a fuscous bill that is actually slightly larger than that of the male. The dark-coloured bill contrasts with the pale yellow of the male's bill, making the size difference appear greater than it really is. The juvenile looks much like the female, is perhaps slightly less cinnamon and has a smaller bill, but neither of these differences will necessarily be apparent in the field.

**Ring-necked Seedeater** *Sporophila insularis* was described by Gilliard<sup>1</sup> as a subspecies of Grey Seedeater, with the type location of Trinidad, on the basis of rather variable and somewhat indistinct terminal white markings on the malar stripe. It was synonymised under Grey Seedeater by Meyer de Schauensee<sup>2</sup>. Neither of these commentators apparently noticed that it has a white band across the rump (see Fig. 1, 2b), a characteristic hidden by the folded wings in a museum specimen, and which is not always easy to see in the field either. However, it shows perfectly when the male perches on an exposed branch to sunbathe or sing, when it lowers its wings slightly. Subsequent analysis of 33 specimens revealed that it is a cryptic species from Trinidad (where it is now apparently extinct) and across northern Venezuela<sup>3</sup>. In addition to the white rump band, the bill is larger and the tarsus longer than in Grey Seedeater; and the bill of the female is smaller than that of the male, which differences are not apparent in the field. It too is a year-round resident and probably more sedentary than Grey Seedeater. In comparison to the latter, it seems to be more a bird of grassy, scrubby areas and forest edge, farms and plantations, though the two definitely overlap in, for example, rice-growing areas in Portuguesa state.

**Slate-coloured Seedeater** *Sporophila schistacea* (race *longipennis*) is a nomadic species generally found as it transits forested areas<sup>4</sup> in search of flowering bamboo. The species

has been recorded in rice fields, in groups or flocks, in Peru, Colombia, Guyana and Brazil, but so far, no observations have been made in this habitat in Venezuela. It seems to be a most likely place to look. The species is usually found in pairs and is easily the most difficult grey seedeater to identify, despite the apparent number of distinguishing marks (Fig. 3), as the progression of plumages shown for adult males attests (Fig. 1). Note that not all birds have olive-yellow legs, feet and nails; neither do all have white markings on the head and wings. Juvenile males lack white at the base of the primaries, but start to show yellow-orange streaks on the bill from c.4–6 months old. As shown in Fig. 1, the first grey plumage may be quite indistinguishable from that of Grey or Ring-necked Seedeaters in the field. The only absolutely certain means of identifying a bird in this plumage state is by the shape of the maxilla, which is not at all easy to observe in the field, and virtually impossible to see on females and juveniles because of their dark-coloured bills. Old males in the classic plumage of field guides (Fig. 1, 3e, 3f) are comparatively slimmer and longer winged than other grey seedeaters.

**Plumbeous Seedeater** *Sporophila plumbea* (race *whiteleyana*): males are easy to identify, as it is the only grey seedeater with a black bill. The female is less certain, but is a neater bird with a smaller bill than any of the others. The species is a non-breeding migrant from northern Brazil and is most numerous in the southern states of Venezuela, occurring in savanna and open scrub with grassy areas.

#### REFERENCES

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