

Sulphur-throated Finch *Sicalis taczanowskii*: a little-known and declining Tumbesian endemic

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The Sulphur-throated Finch *Sicalis taczanowskii* is a little-known bird endemic to the Tumbesian region of extreme western Ecuador and north-west Peru⁹. It frequents arid scrub in the lowlands west of the Andes, mostly below 300 m elevation but exceptionally to 650 m. In Ecuador this finch is now confined to a small area on the arid Santa Elena peninsula, whereas in Peru, it is found from coastal Tumbes south through Piura to western Lambayeque, and it was historically also known from La Libertad. Within this range the distribution is patchy and the species is perhaps irruptive. There are apparently no studies of the species' ecology, population status or taxonomy.

Sulphur-throated Finch was described in 1877 by Władysław (Ladislav) Taczanowski as *Gnathospiza raimondii*, but was subsequently placed in *Sicalis* by Sharpe⁸ in 1888, thereby creating a conflict with the name for Raimondi's Yellow Finch *Sicalis raimondii* Taczanowski, 1874. Given the problem of homonymy, Sharpe therefore renamed it *Sicalis taczanowskii*⁸. Subsequently, the species was returned to *Gnathospiza*^{1,3}, but was then re-submerged into *Sicalis* by Paynter in 1970⁴ and this arrangements has been followed by most subsequent authors⁵⁻⁷.

The dullest-coloured member of the genus *Sicalis*, in contrast to most members of the genus, Sulphur-throated Finch is predominantly unstreaked whitish grey on the underparts, but is heavily streaked over the mantle and wings with a uniform greyish rump. The head is greyish with a noticeable yellow throat patch, malar and supercilium. The primaries and rectrices are fringed pale yellow; although this is hard to see when perched, it is reasonably obvious in flight. The legs are pale flesh and the bill is large, especially the mandible, and is pale horn, becoming slightly darker on the maxilla. The amount of the yellow on the face and throat appears to vary, with what are presumably juveniles lacking this coloration; there is also

occasionally a yellowish wash visible on the underparts in a few individuals.

This finch feeds on the ground in large flocks, which move forward steadily in a 'rolling' fashion with the rear birds flying over the flock and landing at the front. When flushed they swarm into bushes and low shrubs. At Chaparri, where all of the accompanying photographs were taken, the author and others have observed that the species drinks in large numbers every morning at a permanent stream. Predation by Aplomado Falcon *Falco femoralis* has also been witnessed.

S. taczanowskii was plainly very abundant historically. Taczanowski¹⁰ quoted Jelski, who collected the type near Tumbes, as saying that the species occurred in the largest flocks of any bird he had encountered in his ornithological career. Vast flocks were also reported formerly from the Santa Elena Peninsula in Ecuador². However, most recent observations by the author and others have involved much smaller flocks, with 10–50 individuals being the norm. It is clear that the species has undergone a severe decline in abundance across most of its range. This decline had been previously noted for Ecuador, where it has been considered especially rare since the 1980s⁴. It was considered common in Peru⁶, although no details were presented, but in any case this would no longer seem to be true.

The species is known only from two protected areas: the Bosque de Pomac Historical Sanctuary, where it is probably only an irregular visitor to a small area of suitable habitat, and the Chaparri Private Conservation Area, both in Lambayeque. The latter is seemingly the only place where the species is still reliably seen in large flocks, regularly 200–300 birds and occasionally 800 or more. At Chaparri the species appears to be a year-round resident and is reliably found in the arid scrub along the entrance road or drinking at the main stream most mornings. This has provided an opportunity to study the species and obtain the photographs presented here. Details of its breeding





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Figure 1. Sulphur-throated Finches *Sicalis taczanowskii* perch in low bushes and trees, and in dense flocks when flushed.

Figures 2–3. The extensive yellow supercilium is not well illustrated in some guides.

This page, clockwise from top left:

Figure 4. The yellow throat can be well marked on some individuals, but can be hard to see in distant views, while the yellow fingering to the remiges is consistently hard to see in the field.

Figure 5. Sulphur-throated Finches *Sicalis taczanowskii* are very wary and if flushed often fly long distances.

Figure 6. In suitable habitat, the species can still be found in large flocks of up to several hundred birds.

Figure 7. Feeding flocks on the ground can be surprisingly cryptic and difficult to observe.

All photographs were taken by the author (except Fig. 5 by Heinz Plenge) at Chaparri Private Conservation Area, Lambayeque, north-west Peru.



and other ecological data will be published elsewhere.

It is clear that the Sulphur-throated Finch has declined dramatically in recent decades and that it now occupies a small geographic range that is largely unprotected with a high human population density and where human activity is altering the remaining habitat. Given this situation, I suggest that the species should be considered at least Near Threatened and that surveys of the species are required to obtain a population estimate and to better identify important sites for the species. Given that ecological, morphological and behavioural differences exist between Sulphur-throated Finch and the other members of the genus *Sicalis*, a genetic study to assess if the species is correctly placed within *Sicalis* or if it should be returned to the monospecific *Gnathospiza* might prove interesting.

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