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Quailfinches *Ortygospiza* spp. in East Africa

Quailfinches are characterised by their exclusively grass-dwelling habits, they are always difficult to see well, and equally difficult to catch and examine closely. They are widely distributed throughout sub-Saharan Africa and may be considered true grassland endemics. Gregarious in habits and exceedingly cryptically plumaged, they spend much of their lives on the ground, and are easily disturbed when approached. A single superspecies, the quailfinch comprises no less than eleven forms together with a complex and often confusing taxonomy. Traylor (1963) and Dickinson (2003) recognised two species, *Ortygospiza atricollis* and *O. gabonensis*, while White (1963) preferred *O. atricollis* and *O. fuscocrissa*.

Following the DNA sequencing of several taxa, which appeared to show that the forms *atricollis* and *ansorgei* were as closely allied to each other as were *fuscata* and *gabonensis*, yet *atricollis-ansorgei* and *fuscata-gabonensis-muelleri* were as distant from each other as were several other pairs of African waxbills. As a result Fry (2004) felt it best to separate *gabonensis* and to divide *atricollis* into two species (*O. atricollis* and *O. fuscocrissa*), thus recognising **three** species within the single superspecies of eleven forms.

East African populations can be defined as follows:

- (a) **The atricollis group:** *ugandae* Van Someren 1921. Type locality Mumias, western Kenya. It was considered synonymous with *O. fuscocrissa muelleri* by White (1963), recognised by Paynter *et al.* (1968), but not by Britton (1980), Nikolaus (1987, 1989) or Zimmerman *et al.* (1996). Traylor (1963) felt that West African *atricollis* and East African *ugandae* 'composed a natural group', while more recently, *ugandae* was treated as a race of *atricollis* by Dickinson (2003). The *atricollis* group ranges from southern Sudan and northwestern Uganda down the Nile to Murchison Falls National Park. In addition, there are old specimen records from Entebbe (Grauer 1907) and Mumias, western Kenya (Van Someren 1917). Recent sight records close to Mumias (B. Finch, *pers. comm.*), together with sight records from the Kibinda Rice Scheme in eastern Uganda (attributed to *O. g. dorsostriata* by Carswell *et al.* 2005) may also refer to *ugandae*.
- (b) **The 'black-chinned' gabonensis group:** *dorsostriata* Van Someren 1921. Type locality Ankole, southwest Uganda. It was considered as a

race of *O. a. atricollis* by Jackson (1938), Chapin (1954) and White (1963), but treated as a race of *gabonensis* by Traylor (1963), Britton (1980) and Dickinson (2003). They are widespread and at times common in many parts of Burundi and Rwanda north to southern and southwestern Uganda and northwestern Tanzania. The closely related *fuscata* of northern Zambia may extend into extreme southwestern Tanzania.

- (c) **The 'white-chinned' fuscocrissa group:** *muelleri* Zedlitz 1911. Type locality Sibiti River, Wembere, Tanzania. It was recognised by White (1963), but treated as a race of *atricollis* by Jackson (1938), Traylor (1963), Britton (1980), Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) and Dickinson (2003). It is common and widespread throughout interior Tanzania north to southern and central Kenya.

Given that *dorsostriata* meets and possibly overlaps with *ugandae*, and that *fuscata* overlaps with *muelleri*, two species could be involved, assuming that this apparent overlap relates to actual breeding populations and not merely wandering birds. Meanwhile in Uganda, *gabonensis* is parapatric with *atricollis* and closely resembles it; both are separated by Lake Victoria from the rather dissimilar *fuscocrissa*.

However, several neighbouring populations appear to intergrade morphologically, and some groups have even been recorded breeding as little as 50 km apart from one another. In addition, given the general overall uniformity in plumage as well as in both the mouth-colour and patterns of all nestlings across all quailfinch taxa, it becomes difficult to separate any group with any degree of certainty. This, coupled with the consistency of song patterns across all groups, makes visual separation at the species level almost impossible. After all, any subtle variation in plumage patterns and colour between the black- and white-chinned forms may be no greater than variation between subspecies. Taking these points into consideration, together with their genetic data, Payne & Sorenson (2007) felt that with seasonal movements and such similarity in the vocalisations of all three groups, gene flow between adjacent populations would be inevitable. As a result they concluded that African quailfinches would best be recognised as a single, geographically variable species *Ortyospiza atricollis*.

Such an arrangement would necessitate the removal of Black-chinned Quailfinch *O. gabonensis* from the East African list, whilst the African Quailfinch reverts back to *Ortyospiza atricollis* in the Kenya Checklist.

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Recommendation to remove the Somali Bee-eater *Merops revoilii* from the Tanzania list

Britton (1980) admitted the Somali Bee-eater to the Tanzania list on the basis of a single record "One seen 10 km north of Dar es Salaam on 22 November 1970". Although not referenced this surely refers to Harvey (1970) who claimed a single bird at salt pans north of Dar es Salaam in November 1970 (cited again in Harvey & Howell 1987).

There have been no further records from Tanzania despite considerable fieldwork in Mkomazi National Park during the early 1990s (Lack *et al.* 1999) and many occasional visits by birdwatchers since. There are 4,821 bird records for Mkomazi from the 882,000 on the Tanzania Bird Atlas database covering every month of the year (www.tanzaniabirdatlas.com). Although Archer (1979) documented a southward expansion of range in the Tsavo area of Kenya in the late 1960s and early 1970s there is no evidence that this has continued (Brian Finch, *pers. comm.*): "In April 2008, I found a pair [of Somali Bee-eaters] behaving as if nesting on the road in Tsavo West National Park, about 20 km from Maktau Gate on to the Taveta-Voi Road. I would imagine that this is barely 40