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Remarks concerning two sympatric seedeaters *Poliospiza* spp. in northwestern Kenya

Two seedeaters (included in *Crithagra* in the 2009 Kenya checklist (Bird Committee 2009)), *Poliospiza (gularis) elgonensis* known as the Streaky-headed Seedeater, and *Poliospiza (reichardi) striatipectus* known as the Streaky-breasted Seedeater are rare or scarce wanderers (or residents) in areas between 1600 and 2000 m around the Tambach and Kongelai escarpments in northwestern Kenya.

Taxonomically these two forms (*elgonensis* and *striatipectus*) have generally been treated as the northernmost races of two species largely centred in southern Africa, and it was only fairly recently that Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) had questioned this position, but they felt that, although there appears to be considerable variation in the ventral streaking, all Kenyan birds seem assignable to either *striatipectus* or *elgonensis*, and

so, following White (1963), they preferred to maintain the two species. Nevertheless, at one time, Sclater (1930) had believed that the plain-breasted *elgonensis* was merely the adult plumage of the streaky-breasted *striatipectus*, and some southern African authorities also considered *reichardi* a race of *gularis* (Skead 1960, Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1963). Currently, however, there is little evidence to support such a theory, and it is now generally accepted that two separate species are involved, at least in southern Africa.

Turning to the East African populations, *P. (gularis) elgonensis* ranges from South Sudan and northeastern DR Congo across northern Uganda to the Mt Elgon district of northwestern Kenya. While seasonally common in Garamba NP, it is decidedly scarce and little known in the dry wooded savanna of northern Uganda, and in Kenya it is known only from the type collected on the southern slopes of Mt Elgon in June 1900, together with less than ten subsequent sight records all within 50 km of the type locality. Despite extensive playback of taped songs of the southern African *gularis*, there have been no vocal responses whatsoever from either *elgonensis* or *striatipectus*, and indeed vocalizations of *elgonensis* remain unrecorded.

P. (reichardi) striatipectus ranges in open wooded savanna in southern Sudan, the western Ethiopian highlands and on shrubby escarpments in northwestern Kenya from Mt Elgon east across Elgeyu (the type locality) and the Laikipia Plateau to the northern slopes of Mt Kenya. In addition, the generally shy and inconspicuous northern *striatipectus* bears little or no similarity to the southern African nominate *reichardi*, itself largely endemic to the miombo woodlands of Zambia and southern Tanzania.

The true taxonomic picture is further obscured by the considerable variation in the calls of *gularis* across its range in both the northern and southern tropics, while the vocalizations of *striatipectus* in northwestern Kenya are a mixture of trills interspersed with some very unmusical twittering coupled with much repetition and extensive imitations of other bird species. Critical comparison of the calls of nominate *reichardi* with those of *striatipectus* is clearly required.

That two similar seedeaters appear to co-exist alongside each other in bushed and wooded savanna of north-western Kenya and southern Sudan is remarkable. The absence of *striatipectus* from Uganda may be real, but at the same time some sight records of *elgonensis* there may possibly refer to *striatipectus*.

Furthermore, if one considers the possibility that *elgonensis* may be linked to the West African *Crithagra canicapilla*, and that *striatipectus* may be better treated separately from *reichardi*, it might not be unreasonable to consider East African birds as the Northern Streaky-headed Seedeater *Crithagra canicapilla elgonensis* and the Northern Streaky-breasted Seedeater *Crithagra striatipecta*.

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Verreaux's Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus* attacked by Thick-billed Ravens *Corvus crassirostris*

While living in Bedele, Illubabor, Ethiopia a few years back (16 September 1989) we came across an incident worth reporting after more than 20 years.

At about 14:00 our attention was drawn to a group of four Thick-billed Ravens *Corvus crassirostris*, normally a noisy species, but the present ones appeared to be unusually agitated in a nearby acacia tree.

As we approached, a Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides radiatus* flew off with two ravens in close pursuit and all disappeared from sight, but the ravens returned after about two minutes. Almost immediately afterwards, what appeared to be a Wahlberg's Eagle *Aquila wahlbergi* also flew away with another two ravens in pursuit. It landed in a nearby dead tree, and was thereafter ignored by the ravens.

Although two possible candidates for the consternation had gone, the agitated calling continued unabated and was increased through the arrival of a pair of vociferous Cape Rooks *Corvus capensis*. It was now obvious that there was some other cause for the mobbing behaviour of the ravens. On closer approach we found a fully grown Verreaux's Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus* perched high in the tree being closely attacked by the ravens. The Cape Rooks provided a rather more distant but very noisy support. The owl was well placed within a tangle of thorny twigs among which it was protected from the ravens' beaks which were only able to attempt to reach it one at a time through one opening among the branches. At this point one of the ravens (frustrated in its attempt to reach the owl?) began to deliberately break off the twigs with its beak in order to increase the size of the hole.

After a few minutes, all four ravens adapted this activity, and soon made an opening large enough for them all to get through and attack the owl from several directions. Despite their numbers, large size and powerful bills, the ravens were very wary of the owl, never facing it and always striking at it by jumping up and pecking at its rear. After a few minutes of being forced to fight against four attackers simultaneously the owl took off pursued by the ravens. It alighted again in a nearby tree, but was almost immediately forced to fly again into another where it remained until dark, continually mobbed by the ravens. The owl was not there the following morning and we did not see it again.

Of particular interest to us was the persistence and ferocity of the attacking ravens, and the fact that two other species of potential predators were also present, and apparently had been attracted to the scene. The late Leslie Brown in his book *African Birds of Prey* (1970) has reported Verreaux's Eagle Owls preying on the young of Pied