

Range expansion in the Somali Sparrow *Passer castanopterus* in east and northeast Africa

The Somali Sparrow *Passer castanopterus*, discovered by John Hanning Speke on the Somaliland Plateau back in 1855, is a common and widespread species throughout much of the Horn of Africa, and comprises two widely disjunct populations. The nominate form occurs in northern Somalia, where it is a common and well established resident in coastal towns and villages as well as inland along well-watered riverine valleys, also in villages throughout much of the Ogaden region astride the south-eastern Ethiopia-Somalia border. The race *fulgens* ranges from the Lake Turkana basin in northern Kenya and adjacent Ethiopian border areas south to the Ndotos, Kapedo, the Dida Galgalla, Kaisut and Koroli deserts, Marsabit and Laisamis, and now more recently to the Northern Uaso Nyiro in Isiolo District.

The Somali Sparrow is a highly adaptable species, which at the turn of the last century spread far inland from the Somaliland coast by following the animal food ration convoys supporting the troops engaged in conflict at the time (Ash & Miskell 1998), and today we appear to see a similar expansion of range south from the Marsabit area to the Northern Uaso Nyiro river. In November 2015 a male and female were observed and photographed at a nest at Archer's Post by K. Easley (B. Finch pers. comm.). This extension may have been facilitated by the movement of truck convoys between Marsabit and Isiolo, though several years of prolonged drought in northern Kenya could also have been a contributing factor.

Elsewhere, in January 2013, what appeared to be 2–3 possible Somali x House Sparrow hybrids were photographed at Sala Gate in Tsavo East NP, southeast Kenya (D. Fisher *in litt.*), including an adult feeding a juvenile. This is an arid area many hundreds of kilometres from the nearest known Somali Sparrow localities. House Sparrows reached the Tsavo area during the early 1980's apparently as a result of assisted passage from Kenya coastal towns (Lewis 1983). A solitary male Somali-type sparrow (with bright rufous crown, white cheeks and underparts) was then photographed close to the Galana River in Tsavo East NP in December 2013, within 50kms of the Sala Gate locality, and to date these remain the sole records of Somali-type sparrows from southeastern Kenya.

In southern Somalia, a Somali x House Sparrow hybrid was reported near the port of Mogadishu in 1980, (Ash & Colston 1981), among a small colony of nominate *P. castanopterus* 206km southeast of the nearest previously known nominate Somali Sparrow population near Baidoa (03 07N 42 38 E). This could possibly be the source of the Tsavo birds. Elsewhere, mystery and hybrid sparrows have in recent years been reported from Djibouti (Cohen & Mills 2010) and other parts of northwestern Somalia, particularly in areas recently colonized by House Sparrows (N. Redman *in litt.*).

Several observers have remarked on the apparent absence of any yellow on the underparts of the birds photographed in Kenya at Archer's Post (and also on the Tsavo birds), yet a feature of *fulgens* is that it is said to differ from typical *castanopterus* in being more yellowish on the cheeks and underparts, while males have the top of the head and nape brighter cinnamon-rufous, and the upper back with a slightly more greenish tone (Friedmann 1937). Through the kind assistance of Dr Ben Marks, collection manager at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, the 1923 van Someren specimens from Marsabit have been examined, and they too show no trace of yellow on the underparts, and contrast sharply with specimens of *fulgens* from the Lake Turkana basin that clearly show a lemon-yellow wash on the belly and flanks.

With House and Somali Sparrows known to hybridize, and to take advantage of assisted passage by ship, rail or truck, it would seem that these factors could have been responsible for the recent influxes to northern and southeastern Kenya. Regarding the lack of any yellow colouration in the Marsabit and Archer's Post birds it remains to be seen whether this is a stable feature, and whether further subspecific division may be indicated. Meanwhile there remains no conclusive evidence as yet of the occurrence of the nominate race of the Somali Sparrow in Kenya.

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