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February / février 2010

A NEW SPECIES OF *MALIMBUS* SIGHTED IN SIERRA LEONE AND A REVIEW OF THE GENUS

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Received 27 July 1978

Revised 6 November 1978

The genus *Malimbus* has hitherto consisted of nine species of forest weavers, overwhelmingly West African in distribution, typically ploceine in all ways except for their patterning in black and red which makes them an obvious natural group and is the sole cogent reason for their generic separation from *Ploceus*. (Nest construction is sometimes added as a defining character but, for example, *Ploceus nigricollis* makes a more typical *Malimbus* nest than *M. nitens*, and nest characters in the Ploceinae are clearly adaptations to site and circumstances - communal or single, exposed or protected - which run through the whole sub-family, the exceptionally elaborate nests of *M. cassini* and *M. scutatus* being just one end of the spectrum.) This homogeneity was disturbed when Moreau (1960) added to the genus *Anaplectes rubriceps*, a savanna species with very little black; it is red, brown and white, the female yellow in some races. No field ornithologist thoroughly familiar with *Malimbus* species whom I have been able to consult accepts its inclusion in *Malimbus* and I propose to ignore it here.

Major differences between the species, apart from the shining blue-grey beak of *M. nitens*, the crest of *M. malimbicus*, and the presence of yellow in *M. racheliae*, are confined to the arrangement of the black and red plumage, as shown in Figs. 1-3, although the shade of red varies from scarlet to crimson. Interestingly, young birds usually differ in pattern from either adult, e.g. juvenile *malimbicus* has nape as well as crown red, throat black*; *nitens* has forehead, face, chin and throat as well as breast a rusty red; *M. coronatus* some rufous spotting on chest and an orange-brown crown patch in both sexes, and so on. In fact only the *M. rubricollis* juvenile remains a duller addition of the adult. I take this to mean that the patterning of the species has been stabilised comparatively recently.

The maps (Figs. 1-3) show that over most of their range several species are sympatric, and it is not unusual to find five or even six

* Fig. 3, drawn from specimens selected from the B.M.N.H. collection, shows juvenile *M. malimbicus* having red chin and throat, not black. The specimen concerned is from Kumba, Cameroun, and is of the race *M. m. malimbicus*; and evidently the Sierra Leonean *M. m. nigrifrons* juveniles differ in that respect.

in the same locality. Segregation is achieved by differences in habit. The most obviously differentiated species is *rubricollis*, the largest, with stoutest legs and the habit of climbing, nuthatch-like, over trunks and boughs, able to survive where all true forest has long been destroyed. *M. nitens* and *malimbicus* are interior forest species, *nitens* usually nesting over water and especially associated with swampy areas, freely leaving the forest to inhabit thickets of swamp trees; *malimbicus* is more strictly a forest inhabitant but even here I have watched it building in small *Raphia* palms in open swampy valleys some way from forest, just as I have watched *nitens* building thirty feet up in dark, dry forest in a typical *malimbicus* situation. The two species are often together in the under-canopy forest bird armies.

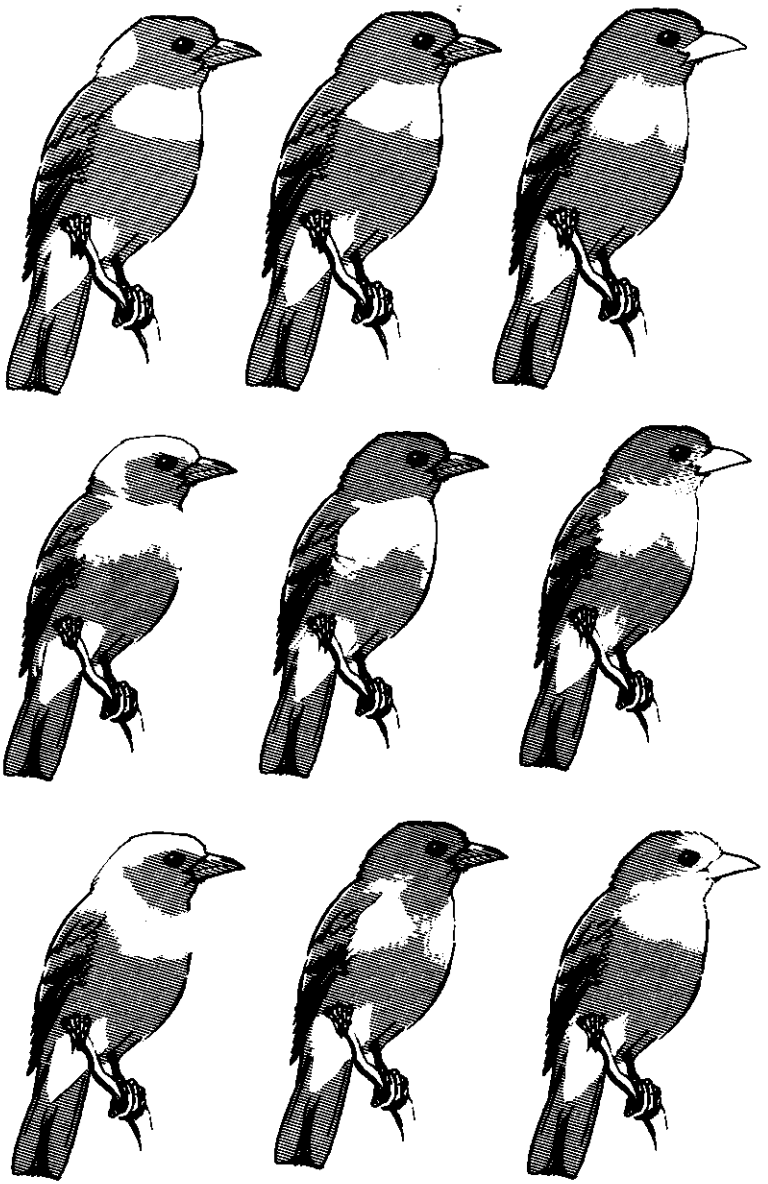
Of *M. coronatus* little has been reported and that somewhat contradictory. Chapin (1954) thought of it as a bird of the undergrowth and often with the bird armies (i.e. not unlike *malimbicus*) and it is thus depicted in Hall and Moreau (1970), but Brosset (1978) considers it more of a canopy species, a secretive bird of virgin forest, building under the canopy but usually at a higher level than *malimbicus*.

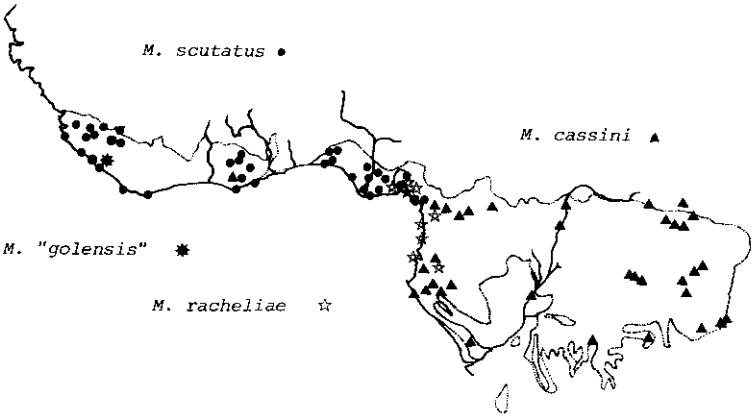
The remainder are canopy species falling into two groups:

(a) *M. erythrogaster* and *M. ibadanensis*, a superspecies, allopatric, with rather similar patterning except for the greater area of red in *erythrogaster*, particularly noticeable in the female. *M. erythrogaster* is a forest bird which comes into the trees of clearings (Chapin *op. cit.*), while *ibadanensis*, remarkably not discovered until the fifties (Elgood 1958) and apparently confined to southern Nigeria where little true forest now exists, has adapted to farmland and gardens. It is odd that there should be no representative of this superspecies in the western forest block and that *ibadanensis* should have so circumscribed a distribution when it has so successfully adopted a non-forest habitat.

(b) *M. scutatus*, *M. cassini*, *M. racheliae*, three closely related species, e.g. in pattern *scutatus-racheliae*, and in nest building *scutatus-cassini*. If *cassini* had not recently been found in Ghana (Macdonald and Taylor 1977) there would be much to be said for considering *scutatus* and *cassini* a superspecies, as otherwise they are probably allopatric (at least part of the reported occurrence by Bannerman of *cassini* in southern Nigeria is due to confusion with the then unknown *ibadanensis*). *M. cassini* and *racheliae* both seem to be birds of heavy forest, *cassini* associated more with swampy areas; *scutatus* has moved out of the forest where necessary, although, (for instance) in eastern Sierra Leone with no competitors it is a common high forest bird, restlessly flying long distances over the canopy and breeding, like *cassini*, on the climbing palms *Ancistrophyllum* and *Eremospatha*.

I now use the happy coincidence of the new name of this journal to report the sighting of a new species in Sierra Leone in the hope that, at least as an interim report, it may be acceptable despite





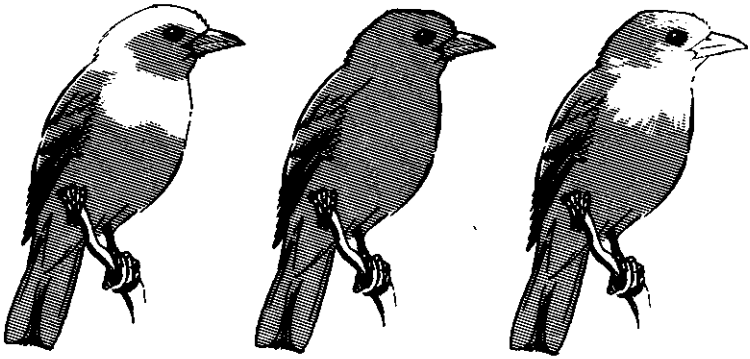
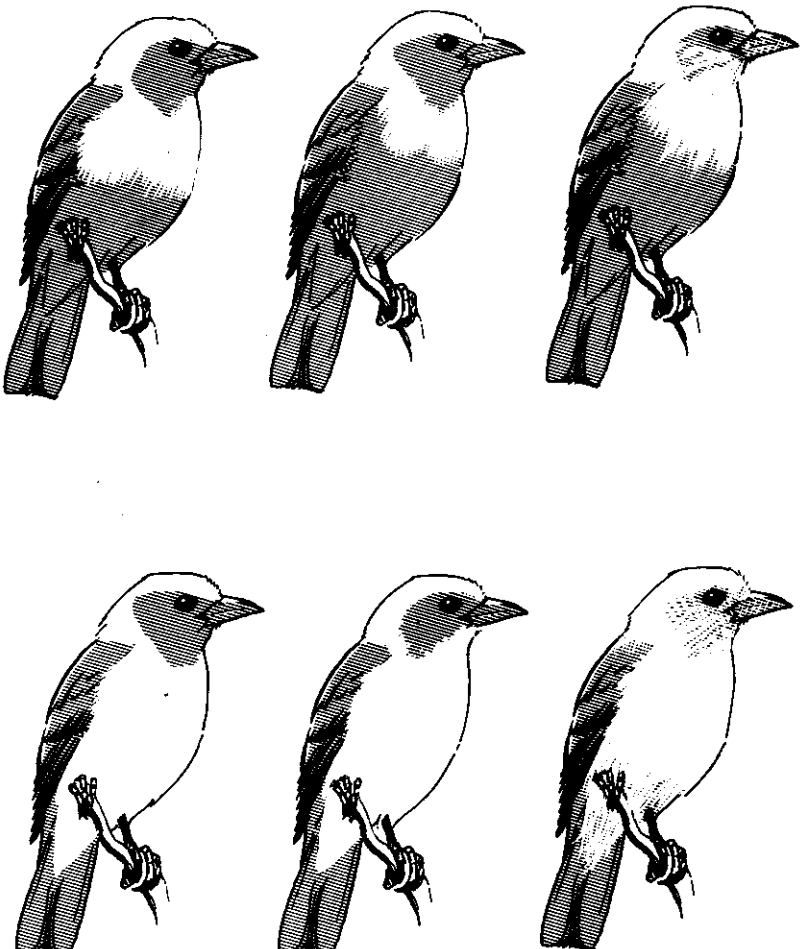
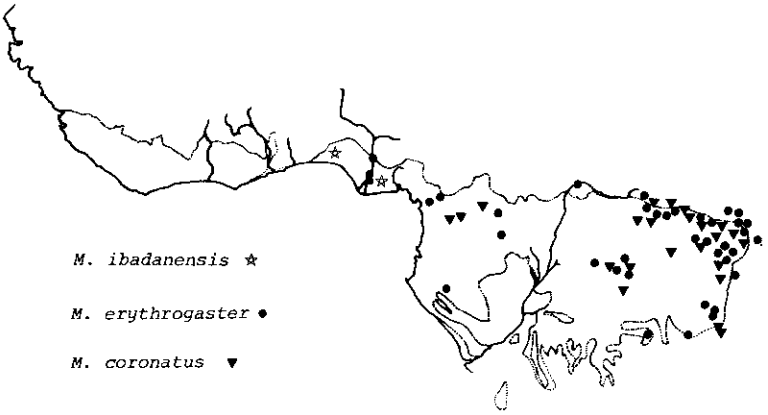


Figure 1 Opposite : *upper M. "golensis", male* on left, *female,* and *juvenile* on right; *middle M. racheliae m, f, juv; lower M. scutatus m, f, juv.* Above : *M. cassini m, f, juv,* and distribution of the four species.

The female *M. scutatus* is of the race *scutopartitus;* the female of the nominate race *scutatus* (not shown) has a red pectoral area more like that of the female *M. "golensis"*.

Figures 1 and (following pages) 2-3 : hatching = black or (juveniles) dusky; white = red (yellow in *M. racheliae* and horn-colour in juvenile beaks). The drawings, except *M. "golensis"* were made from specimens selected at the Brit. Mus. Nat. Hist. and are to one scale.





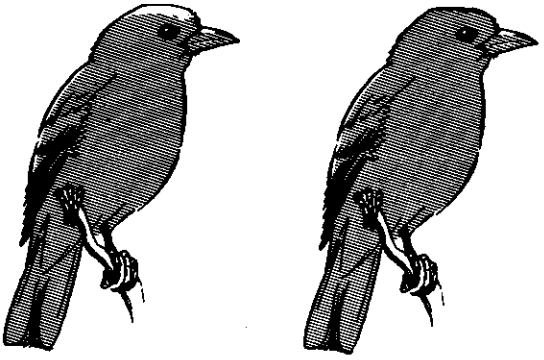
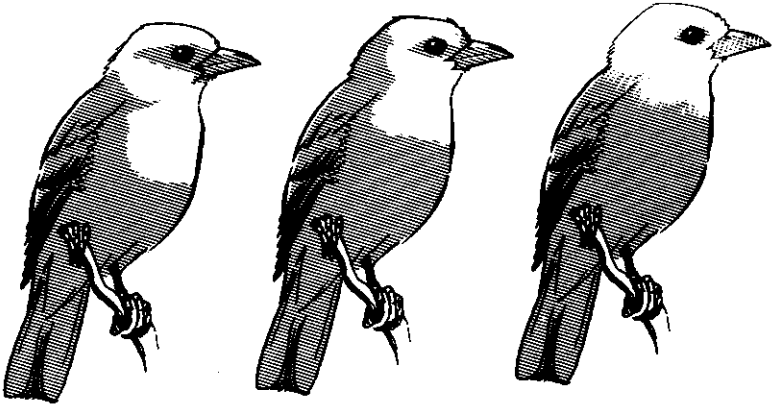
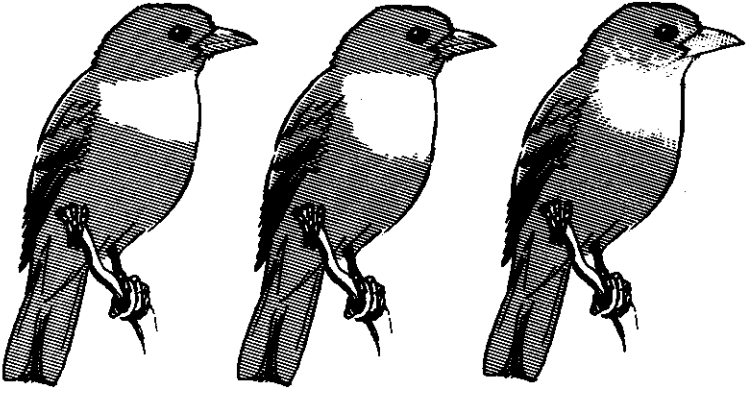
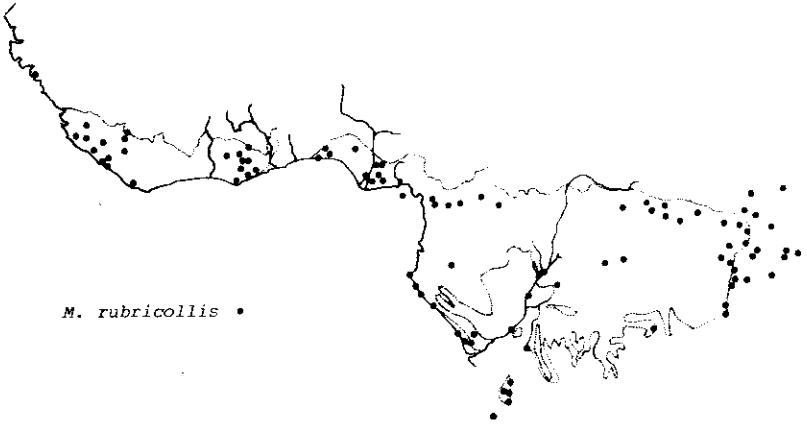


Figure 2 Opposite : *upper M. ibadanensis, male* on left, *female,* and *juvenile; lower M. erythrogaster m, f, juv.* Above : *M. coronatus m, f* and distribution of the three species.







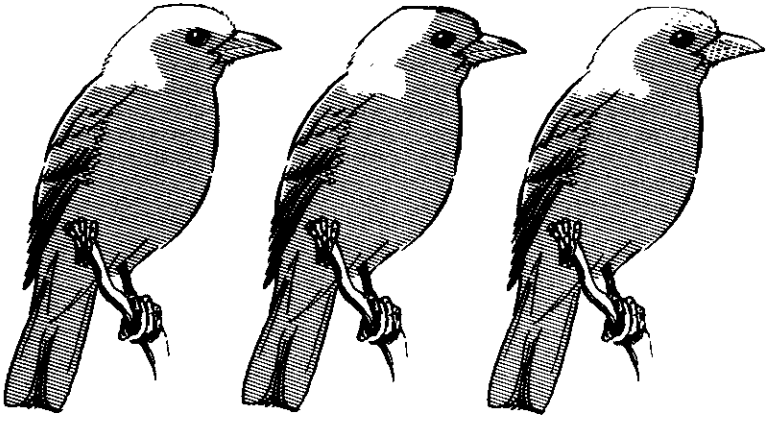


Figure 3 Opposite : *upper M. malimbicus, male* on left, *female, juvenile* on right; *lower M. nitens m, f, juv.* Above : *M. rubricollis m, f, juv.* and its distribution. The distribution of *M. malimbicus* and of *M. nitens* is almost exactly the same as of *M. rubricollis*.

lack of specimens or other proof. Necessarily the account is somewhat anecdotal, but I wish to stress the full circumstances of discovery. I have studied what is a very distinctive species at sufficiently close quarters in the wild to be certain of what I write and I have shown the bird independently to two men with long ornithological experience, D. F. Owen, one time professor of Zoology at Fourah Bay College, and J. B. Smart, forester and keen birdwatcher.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISCOVERY

In 1971/2 I was granted a year off teaching specifically in order to study the bird faunas of the Sierra Leone forests, and during that period I paid periodic visits to the Gola forest in eastern Sierra Leone, the last large area of probably primary forest remaining in the country, now being exploited for timber. Where I was working most of the large commercially important trees were being extracted and logging roads driven through the forest. As far as insectivorous passerines are concerned, such activity causes little lasting inconvenience, while the roads enable birds to be observed much more easily than in undisturbed high forest.

I first saw the species - a female - on 12 December 1971, on the last day of one of my visits. The sighting was brief, the bird working through the trees with a bird army some fifty feet up. It was at once clear that nothing like it was known in the occidental block of West African forest but I suspected that it would prove to be a race of *M. racheliae*, known from Nigeria to Gabon. I returned in February, May and June 1972 and saw the species in total 15 times, always along the same small length of track except for one occasion when it occurred with a large bird army some two miles further along the track. In February 1976 I took J.B.S. to see the bird. By this time the logging road was abandoned and overgrown and we had to walk several miles through the forest. I assured him we would find the bird only on this specific stretch, which we did, exactly where I had predicted.

In these sightings males, females, and juveniles were all seen, and the description that follows is a combination of the notes taken on each occasion.

DESCRIPTION

Adult male Entire head and upperparts black, except for a large nuchal patch of golden yellow, the upper quarter and sides of which have a distinct chestnut tinge. Underparts black with a large yellow breast patch and vent area, corresponding with the similar areas of red on *scutatus*. The vent is a clear daffodil yellow, the breast has the faintest tinge of chestnut visible in some lights. There is only a narrow line of black down the sides of the neck, dividing the

breast and nuchal patches. Beak blackish, eye dark brown, legs grey.

Adult female Similar but lacks entirely the nuchal patch, and the breast is a purer yellow like the vent. The lower part of the breast patch is divided centrally to about half way up by a thin black line.

Juvenile As the adult female with a pale flesh pink bill like the juvenile of *scutatus*.

Size impression : rather larger than *scutatus*, a plumper bird altogether, more approaching the proportions of *nitens*, though with a smaller bill than that species.

Habitat and Behaviour

The new bird seems to occupy a position midway between the canopy species such as *scutatus* and the interior *nitens* and *malimbicus*. Most commonly seen in the middle layer of forest vegetation from twenty to fifty feet above ground, searching the thick tangles of liane-covered branches very much like *nitens* (the two were once seen together in the same tangle). Like *nitens*, normally seen singly or in pairs. Once, however, two males were seen in the highest canopy, flying rapidly from tree to tree in the manner of *scutatus*. The call is rather undistinctive, with none of the loud '*chup chup*' calls of *scutatus*, nor the extremely noisy wheezes of *nitens*, but is a typical *Ploceus*-type '*chch chchchch*', only so far heard uttered low and conversationally while food-hunting. On one occasion a party of three (male, female, juvenile) repeatedly visited a slightly dilapidated malimbe nest of the *malimbicus* type, suspended from a single thread-like liane some forty feet up in dense shade. However, hours of watching over the next few days produced no more visits and I suspect they were searching for insects in an abandoned *malimbicus* nest.

Forest birds can be notoriously conservative as to their distribution, and I know of several species very local in Gola for no apparent reason. Nevertheless, this bird seems exceptional in clinging to such a minute area. Not only is it present only along one stretch of this track, but nowhere else in all the areas of Gola I have visited have I had the slightest suspicion of its presence. Until I know of other populations I do not intend to collect specimens. If any keen and competent photographer, prepared to walk long distances, cares to come to Sierra Leone, it should be possible to get photographs with good equipment even in the gloom of the forest.

TAXONOMIC DISCUSSION

In taxonomic terms the new bird is interesting. In plumage it is closest to *M. racheliae*, particularly the female which (although I am not familiar with *racheliae* in life) appears to differ only in having no red on the breast at all. Behaviourally, little has been

written about *racheliae*, but it seems to be more definitely a canopy species than the new bird. Nevertheless, the new one should probably be grouped with *M. scutatus, cassini, racheliae* on plumage grounds, although until a nest is discovered we cannot be sure how close the relationship is and it seems unlikely to have the communal nest-building techniques of *scutatus/cassini*. Just conceivably it might have links with *coronatus*; behaviourally they seem to have something in common, if *coronatus* really is both a canopy and interior species; and the juvenile *coronatus* also has an orange-brown crown patch and some relict rufous in the breast.

But it will not have escaped readers' notice that it is also a plumage link between typical *Malimbus* and typical *Ploceus*. Gone is the only criterion for separating them: the black and red formula hitherto broken only by *racheliae* with black, red, and yellow. Hitherto, no *Malimbus* has had any tinge of the very common *Ploceus* characteristic, yellow shading into chestnut, a character that can clearly be seen on the nape of the new species. I suggest that here is the link uniting the two genera and that with this intermediate there is no longer any reason for maintaining *Malimbus* at all (except, dreadful thought, that as Moreau (1960) pointed out, "*Malimbus* has date priority over *Ploceus*, so there might be a tendency to supersede the well-known names Ploceinae and Ploceidae").

Though, I suppose, no official name can be bestowed on the new bird without a type specimen, I should like to suggest that eventually it be named *Ploceus* (*Malimbus*) *golensis*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the Trustees of the British Museum (Natural History) for the loan of skins and for permission to reproduce the maps from Hall, B.P. and Moreau, R.E. (1970) *An Atlas of Speciation in African Passerine Birds*; and the editor, Dr C.H. Fry, for his encouragement to produce this paper and, especially, for his drawings of the *Malimbus* species.

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