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February / février 2010

NOTES

VIDUINE FORAGING BEHAVIOUR AND Lonchura COMMENSALISM - It will be known to many ornithologists - although I have failed to find any concise description of the habit in any of the standard texts - that viduine weavers forage on dry, powdery soil in a different way from other ground-feeding weavers and weaver-finches. The behaviour involved is too rapid for reliable visual interpretation, but in the absence of photographic analysis it may be described as follows. With both legs together the bird jumps a few millimetres forwards then backwards to the starting place with such speed that the human eye hardly registers the movement, although a forward-kicked scuff of dust is easily apparent. Instantly the bird prods its beak one or a few times just in front of its feet, i.e. about the place that was kicked, before jump-kicking again. Sometimes there may be two or three kicks in quick succession before beak prodding, while the speed is such that a kick-prod sequence seems to take less than a second. I judge that in the largest Nigerian viduine, the Broad-tailed Paradise Whydah Steganura orientalis, the jump-kick is not more than 10 mm; and in the smallest, the combassous Hypochera (Vidua) spp., it is less than this. Only the legs appear to move forwards and backwards, not the body, although with the neck being retracted and the head bent down immediately after each kick the first impression is that the whole body does oscillate horizontally. The beak-prods are presumably seed-gleaning movements, and according to Bannerman (1953) combassous pick up tiny seeds on sandy ground, "the seeds of Eleusine coracana (being) so minute that it is surprising the birds can detect them". (E. coracana is a grass.) I have often seen this foraging behaviour in both birds mentioned above - including male Paradise Whydahs with full tail trains - and have also recorded it in Pin-tailed Whydahs Vidua macroura. It may be noted that the three viduine groups are usually considered very closely related, if not congeneric (Vidua).

On 15th February 1975 a flock of combassous, Bronze Mannikins Lonchura cucullata and Red-billed Fire-finches Lagonosticta senegala was feeding on dusty earth under a window at Samaru, Zaria, affording me close views. The combassous were foraging by kick-jumping, and the mannikins and fire-finches by hopping and searching. But in addition a mannikin often made a dash at a jump-kicking combassou, which hopped or flew off to continue foraging a half-metre away, leaving the mannikin to search the ground that the combassou had just kicked. This was witnessed about a dozen times, involving several pairs of mannikins and combassous, and the latter never offered any apparent resistance to the former. It appears to be a standard commensal feeding practice on the part of Bronze Mannikins.

GREY CANARY FEEDING TECHNIQUE - Grey Canaries Serinus leucopygius are partial to the 'seeds' of the abundant and widespread composite flower Tridax procumbens. They have a method for obtaining them in situ on a fruiting head well beyond the reach of the standing bird, which in its behavioural complexity is comparable with pulling up strings from which peanuts hang, as is well known in the case of weavers, tits and crows.

In February 1975 I stayed in a house at Samaru, Zaria, which afforded views at only two metres of canaries feeding on the ground. A bird would reach with its beak as high as seemed possible up a Tridax stem (peduncle), bend the stem down to the ground, tread on it proximal to the place where gripped by the beak, release the grip and rapidly walk crabwise along the prone stem to the fruiting head. It spent a few seconds plucking and eating seeds before moving off (when the stem sprang upright again) and selecting another stem to pull down. Up to three birds at a time were seen feeding in this manner, more or less independently of each other, on several dates. Since Tridax procumbens is exotic, introduced into West Africa about 1930, either the canary has acquired the technique since that time, the habit spreading culturally, or it has adapted to this flower a pre-existing method of foraging on other flower species - a behaviour which could be cultural or innate. A native composite with a similar fruiting habit, Vernonia sp., was ignored by the canaries.

I am grateful to Professor B.J.Harris for his botanical help. C.H.Fry

ADDITIONS TO LOCAL AVIFAUNAS

ZARIA. I stayed at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, from January to March 1975 inclusive, and during this period with Mr and Mrs M. Dyer and with Mr D.Johnson I encountered the following new species for the district as defined by Fry (1965), i.e. within 35 miles (55 km) radius of Zaria City (11° 05' N, 07° 43' E).

Peregrine Falco japonensis (F. peregrinus) One, 5 km north-west of Zaria Sabon Gari, 25th January, and probably the same bird there on 24th February. See remark under Lanner F. biarmicus on p.71 of Fry (op. cit).

Red-billed Wood-Dove Turtur afer Three seen separately and clearly in the kurmi (forested watercourse) in Anara Forest Reserve (10° 43' N, 07° 32' E) on 2nd March. Black-billed Wood-Doves T. abyssinica were plentiful elsewhere within the reserve.

Guinea Turaco Tauraco persa One, feeding on small canopy fruits in company with two Violet Turacos Musophaga violacea, Anara Forest Reserve kurmi, on 2nd March.