

BREEDING THE GREY SEEDEATER *Sporophila intermedia*

by Robin Restall

There are several species of grey-coloured seedeaters within the genus *Sporophila* from South America, and between them they range from the Atlantic forest of southern Brazil, northwards, east of the Andes, to Colombia. One species continues into Central America. The Grey Seedeater *S. intermedia* ranges across northern South America, from Guyana in the east to western Colombia. It is primarily a bird of grasslands, and I have found it in savannah, meadows and pastures. I have also found it in rice fields, especially in the tall banks of *Panicum maximum* that can be found on either side of the ditches that run between the rice fields and the roads. Thus, as one drives through the countryside it is fairly commonly seen clinging to tall seeding heads of the grass. The Grey Seedeater also occurs in parks and gardens, usually in untended areas where *P. maximum* grows freely.

It is an accomplished songster, with a loud and attractive roll of warbles and whistles that are expanded into a rich vocabulary as the bird gets older and copies familiar sounds in its environment. It is easy to maintain in captivity, and thus is a favourite for the local bird trade. However, it is too common, and thus low in price, for it to provide a big business opportunity and so it tends to be ignored by the professional trappers.

The male Grey Seedeater is about 11cm (approx. 4¹/₄in) in length and is uniform grey above and below to the breast, with the belly and under tail-coverts white. The feathers of the wings and tail are blackish with grey edges and there is a white patch at the base of the middle primaries. The pale, yellowish bill is a heavy, finch-type bill, with a well-curved culmen. The female is buffy above and cinnamon on the breast, and is pale creamy-whitish on the belly and under tail-coverts. Her bill is very dark brown and is on average slightly larger than that of the male. The legs, toes and nails of both sexes are dark greyish.

It may perhaps be helpful at this point to clarify the characteristics of the various other males in the grey seedeater group, for there are no satisfactory comprehensive colour plates illustrating them in the field guides and handbooks. The Plumbeous Seedeater *S. plumbea* is a pure French grey, with a black bill and a white crescent beneath the eyes. The legs, toes and nails are dark olive. The Slate-coloured Seedeater *S. schistacea* is very similar to the Grey Seedeater, but has an orange bill with a very narrow, scimitar-like upper mandible. It generally has olive-green legs and toes, with pale straw-coloured nails. Some males are almost identical to the male Grey Seedeater, and can only be separated by the bill. The species which is

very easy indeed to confuse with the Grey Seedeater, is the Ring-necked Seedeater *S. insularis*. It was described originally from Trinidad as a subspecies of the Grey Seedeater (Gilliard, 1946), but was subsequently synonymized under it by Meyer de Schauensee (1952). With the increasing scarcity of finches on Trinidad, the only people who knew the Ring-necked Seedeater was a distinct species were the Trinidadian birdkeepers. Very soon all seedeaters disappeared from Trinidad and field observers and ornithologists never had the chance to study it. I recently discovered that it exists happily here in Venezuela and found that it is a distinct species in its own right (Restall, 2002). The key difference is that the male has a whitish band across its rump, which the Grey Seedeater never does. Other differences, like a larger bill, with that of the female on average being smaller than that of the male, and a longer tarsus, are only meaningful in the context of a large series of birds being compared in detail.

We used to live in a house that lay within a golf course in Caracas, and the garden, which was not very large, benefited from the presence of the fairways and woodland copses, and was a haven for birds. In one year I logged 98 species in the garden, including 13 species of hummingbird. Among the seed-eating species that were seen fairly regularly were the Blue-black Grassquit *Volatinia jacarina*, Yellow-bellied Seedeater *S. nigricollis*, Grey Seedeater, Saffron Finch *Sicalis flaveola* and Black-faced Grassquit *Tiaris bicolor*. I built a small birdroom at the back of the house, and in the garden had a large steel-framed aviary built. This covered a walk-around area that was paved with flagstones and had small trees in tubs, and a sloping garden in which grasses and flowering shrubs grew in profusion. There was a small pond about 1.5m (approx. 5ft) square, as well as an old washing sink with a sloping scrubbing ramp that contained water. The enclosure was irregular in shape, with a floor area of about 5m x 7m (approx. 16ft x 22ft) and was 5m (approx. 16ft) high. Big baskets, planted with ferns, hung from the roof. The entrance had a large safety porch and feeding area, which also served as a trap to catch birds when necessary.

Various finches, in the broadest sense of the word, were kept in this idyllic aviary, including two pairs of Grey Seedeaters. One male was richer in coloration than the other. I subsequently learned that *Sporophila* seedeaters generally become richer and more intense in colour as they get older. The older bird moulted into an intense blue-grey and as the rainy season began, it soon came into breeding condition, and chased the other male relentlessly, singing passionately all the while. I knew there was a risk of aggression between them, but thought that the size of the aviary would give both birds enough cover and room to be able to cohabit. Not so. Before I was able to trap the less dominant male, it had been harried to death by the other.

Sporophila seedeaters build a small, compact nest of fibres and fine

straws. It invariably appears to be weak and very fragile, with light showing through at any angle. The Grey Seedeater builds a nest of fine root fibres, and will search for these in an aviary. If provided with coconut fibre it will also use this in the inner lining. The nest site is selected by the female, who carries a fibre to the site and attempts to tie it to part of a fork of small branches. She will make cup-moulding movements on the spot and if satisfied, will bring further fibres and attempt to get the nest started. The male will excitedly bring fibres as well and also attempt to get the nest started, but it is the female that drives things along, and may switch to another site very quickly.

I found the nest in my aviary after it was finished and contained two eggs. The nest was about 5cm (approx. 2in) across the top and 4cm (approx. 1½in) deep. It was bound to a set of slender stems forking into the canopy of a *Ficus benjamina* that was growing in a tub, and was level with the top of my head. It was so close to the top of the *Ficus*, which was well rounded and had been trimmed regularly to form dense cover, that the leaves were only a few centimetres (1in or so) above the top of the nest.

The eggs were pale greyish, spotted and blotched with various browns and umbers. I have no record of the incubation period, but guess it to have been relatively short. Two nestlings fledged after about 10 days. They thrived, being fed by both parents, but a few days later, escaped through the wire mesh. This had been specially made to order, and I had specified 2cm (¾in) including the width of the wire, but this proved to be too generous. The parent birds were retained however.

The feeding station was like a big bird table and held bowls of various seeds and seed mixtures. In addition I usually offer a bowl of softbill mix and another with fruit. However, the *Sporophila* seedeaters were invariably seen feeding only on the seed. They also ate any growing seeds and fed on the plants in the aviary. They nipped and ate the emerging buds on the bamboos and many of the shrubs.

The species adapts well to life under controlled conditions and can be kept fit and in good feather on an all-dry seed diet. The birds usually welcome lettuce and may also take apple. I have never managed to interest them in livefood, however, since then, when I have been able to study other species of *Sporophila* I have seen them continually hunting insects. Also, Grey Seedeaters have been observed catching flying termites. Birds taken as juveniles adapt to a wider variety of foods much better than do wild-caught adults. My birds were in their natural climate and kept under near-natural conditions. I believe they have bred in aviaries in Germany (Sabel, 1990), and possibly in Denmark. I am not aware of any cage breedings.

References

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PLANTING TREES FOR PARROTS

Indaba Inyoni Newsletter of BirdLife South Africa, Vol.7, No.4, 2004, included a report (p.6) about a tree planting scheme aimed at increasing the habitat of the Critically Endangered Cape Parrot *Poicephalus robustus*. In August, to kick start the scheme, some 600 *Podocarpus henkelii* seeds, which had been donated, were planted in a nursery in KwaZulu-Natal. Further seeds of yellowwood trees *Podocarpus* spp. are being collected from various forests in which this parrot occurs.

Seedlings grown from these seeds will later be planted on the peripheries of the forests. Seedlings will also be planted on private land to form a series of corridors linking patches of forest. Several landowners, especially in the Karkloof area, have expressed support for the scheme. Seeds are also being collected from forests in the Eastern Cape in order to establish a similar scheme there.

As a further source of food, pecan nut trees will be planted where forest destruction has forced parrots to move into built-up areas to feed. The group behind the scheme is trying to source a quick growing hybrid pecan nut tree for the scheme and has appealed for pecan nut growers and nurseries to donate trees.

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