

Waxbills and Their Allies

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Part V

The Grey-crowned Negrofinch

Nigrita canicapilla

The seven subspecies follow, accompanied by explanations of their scientific names:

- *Nigrita canicapilla canicapilla* - generic name L. *nigritia*, black; specific/subspecific name L. *canus*, grey; - *capillus*, crowned, capped.
- *N. c. emiliae* - after Emilia Snethlage (1868-1929) a German Ornithologist and author.
- *N. c. angolensis* - after Angola.
- *N. c. sparsimguttata* - L. *sparsus*, (spargere), scattered; *guttatus*, spotted, spots.
- *N. c. schistacea* - Late L. *schistaceus*, slate grey, slate-colored.
- *N. c. diabolica* - L. *diabolicus*, devilish (ref. unknown).
- *N. c. candida* - L. *candidus*, white.

Description

Length 15 cm (6 in). The sexes are alike. *N. c. canicapilla* has the forehead, face, sides of the neck and the entire underparts dense black. A white line forms a border between the black forehead, face and neck and the slightly silvery grey crown, nape and hind neck. The mantle and back are of a similar grey to the crown. The lower back and rump are greyish white with most of the feathers having greyish subterminal bars. The longest upper tail coverts are dark grey with whitish tips, the others are as the rump. The tail is black. The wings are black with conspicuous white spotting. The under wing coverts are mainly silvery white. The irides are orange-red or red. The bill is black (females average smaller bills). The legs and feet are dark grey, dark brown or blackish.

The juvenile is a general dark

smoky or brownish grey to sooty black, paler on the rump and with blackish wings which show only faint spotting. The irides are greyish to bluish and the bill is dark grey or dark horn (Goodwin, 1982, Restall 1975).

N. c. emiliae is smaller than *canicapilla* and has the rump only a slightly paler grey than the back and the white line dividing the black and grey parts is only slightly indicated. The spots on the lesser wing coverts are smaller and silvery grey, not white. The spots on the median and greater coverts and inner secondaries are greatly reduced, the wings appearing only lightly spotted and laced with silvery grey. The juvenile is like that of *canicapilla* but has only a faint brownish lacing on the wing coverts.

N. c. angolensis is much like *canicapilla* and has equally boldly spotted wings but its upperparts are a darker grey.

N. c. schistacea is also of the same size of the nominate *canicapilla* but is darker grey on the hind crown, mantle and back and normally has smaller and less numerous wing spots.

N. c. diabolica is similar to *schistacea* but is smaller and has sooty grey upperparts and dull black underparts.

N. c. candida is also like *schistacea* but its crown and nape are whitish grey like its rump.

N. c. sparsimguttata is listed by Howard & Moore (1994) but may (or may not) be an intergrade. No details.

Field Guide

It is a small black bird with grey upperparts and a conspicuous whitish rump. Close up the white spots on its black wings are striking (unless it is the western most race *emiliae*). It can be distinguished from the smaller Pale-fronted Negro-finch *N. luteifrons* by its black, not whitish, forehead and the white spots on its wings.

Voice

The far-carrying song is short, persistent, perennial and very distinctive. It consists of half a dozen clear whistling notes (Serle, et al., 1977). Clement, et al. (1993) report the call to be "an unmistakable, clear and far-reaching plaintive three-note whistle, hooeee, hooeoooo, hooo or tyea-tyea-tyea, usually delivered from a series of preferred songposts within the bird's territory all year round." Zimmerman et al. (1996) say the bird is largely silent in the Kenyan/northern Tanzanian region compared to West African races (possible racial variation or birds undergoing molt at time of study?) otherwise a sweet, plaintive three- or four-note whistle, eeee-ti-WEE tew or eee-teuWEEE-weu is given.

Distribution

N. c. emiliae: Guinea and Sierra Leone to Ghana and Togo.

N. c. canicapilla: southern Benin, southern and eastern Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea (Fernando Po) east through Cameroon to the Central African Republic, western Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. It has also been recorded on the borders of extreme southern Sudan.

N. c. angolensis: southwest Democratic Republic of Congo to northwest Angola.

N. c. sparsimguttata: (?) southern Sudan, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and northwest Tanzania (Howard & Moore, 1994).

N. c. schistacea: southeast Sudan (Imatong Mountains), south and west Uganda, northern Democratic Republic of Congo, western Kenya (from Mt. Elgon and the Cherangani, south through the Nandi, Kakamega, Mau and Trans-Mara Forests to Kilgoris and Lolgorien) and northern Tanzania.

N. c. diabolica: Kenya (from Mount Kenya, the Nyambenis and Aberdares south to Nairobi) and northern Tanzania (Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Meru, in Arusha NP and in the Crater

and Mbulu Highlands).

N. c. candida: Kungwe-Mahari Mountains, western Tanzania.

Status

Locally Common.

Habitat, General Behavior, and Feeding

It is found at 1500-3500 m inhabiting open forest, forest edge, secondary growth, gallery forest and also plantations and other tree-grown cultivated areas and gardens; often near water. It has a preference for tall trees, including those in cocoa plantations and oil palms. It tends to be solitary but may also be seen in pairs or small parties and often searches for food in mixed-species parties. It is occasionally tame or approachable. Feeding is done amongst treetops, creepers and shrubs, rarely on the ground. The diet is mainly small fruits, including figs, and vegetable matter, insects, caterpillars and small seeds. In West Africa it has also been seen eating the fleshy pericarp of the oil palm nut *Elaeis guineensis* (Clement, et al., 1993, Colston & Curry-Lindahl 1986, Fry 1968, Goodwin 1982, van Perlo 1995)

Courtship Display

Not known.

Nesting

The nest is usually sited in a tree, sometimes at the end of a branch, about 3 to 15 meters above the ground. It is large, roundish and untidy, about the size of a football, and built out of leaves and leaf strips, moss, fibers, grasses or similar materials and lined with grass panicles or other soft materials. It has a side entrance, usually near the top of one side. Eggs number 4-6.

It has been recorded breeding in September in Liberia; November in Fernando Po; September to December and in February and August in Nigeria; March, April, June and July in Cameroon; May in Gabon; March in Angola; March to November in the Democratic Republic of Congo and from March to July and also in October in Uganda (Goodwin, 1982).

Captive Observations

This is the only Negro-finch likely to be encountered in captivity. It was first bred in the UK in 1974 by Peter Paris (Coles, 1986), but hasn't been available for many years now. In Germany captive birds ate a softfood made from artificial nectar, grape sugar, ant pupae, and egg yolk, and also soft freshly-molted mealworms, waxworms, and fruit-flies. Two individuals took no seed at all, two others ate small amounts of maw seed and soaked millet but fed mostly on other foods.

It is quite possible this species will be imported again, albeit in small numbers and then only to quickly disappear. If, or when, it does become available it makes sense for it to be kept by only the most accomplished aviculturists and particularly those who have great experience with frugivorous and insectivorous species, such as Zosterops and Tanagers. In all respects Negro-finches should be treated as softbills.

Other Names

Grey-headed Negro-finch, Grey-crowned Blackfinch.

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Key to Abbreviations

L. = Latin; Late L. = Late Latin; Med. L. = Medieval Latin; Mod. L. = Modern Latin; Gr. = Greek 