the White-collared Seedeater

(*Sporophila torqueola*)

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Photos by Jack Clinton Eitniear

Common throughout Central America in areas containing high weeds, grasses and sedges, the seed-eaters contrasting coloration makes its presence obvious even when feeding deep in a grassy thicket.

Although a great diversity of finches can be found in captivity most of the species commonly encountered are from Asian or African regions. A few, such as the Red Siskin, Saffron Finch, or the Black-headed Siskin remind us that additionally attractive finches can be found in tropical America.

One such finch, not found in our aviaries, is the White-collared Seedeater. Inhabiting weedy fields from southern Texas south to Panama, the 4½ inch bird is an excellent example of the beauty that can be achieved with contrasting black and white coloration. Identified by its broad white collar or half collar, the small finch has a tawny or whitish rump and a black or blackish hood. The female has a stubby bill and is brown with white wingbars. Variations can be found in coloration and song between the more southerly individuals and those common in south Texas.

A bird thriving in weedy fields, thickets and tall sedges, I found it very abundant in tall grasses near ponds and waterways throughout Central America. Many times feeding with other seedeaters it was most frequently observed with Blue-black Grassquits and Variable Seed-eaters. Its contrasting coloration revealed its presence many times when the other dark finches remained concealed.

*Male White-collared Seedeater (*Sporophila torqueola*) photographed while sitting atop a tall sedge near a pond in Belize, Central America.*

Nesting in a variety of tall weeds, it prefers the giant ragweed (*Ambrosia aptera*) where, from 3 to 5 feet above the ground, it builds a 2 x 1½ inch deep nest of fine grasses. Some build a fine framework of cobwebs prior to the main body of the nest, others use fine grasses. One nest found in Texas was lined with the spike of Rhodes grass (*Chloris gayana*). Other nests have been found to have an inner lining of horsehair. The female builds the nest and sits on the four eggs that require thirteen days for incubation. Both adults attend to the nestlings which leave the nest after approximately two weeks.

Accounts of the finch in southern Texas are gradually diminishing as the area along the border is developed agriculturally. Suitable habitat exists along the numerous irrigation canals but such areas generally parallel citrus orchards that are heavily applied with pesticides. Confined largely to weedy fields near the city of San Ignacio, the largest number sighted in recent years was a flock of 25-30 birds. Typically, individuals are seen rather than flocks. This is atypical behavior as the birds I observed in Central America were always in flocks. A social bird, it maintained a small territory while breeding but fed in small flocks.

Undoubtedly a victim of pesticides and habitat destruction, the United States has done little to assure the future survival of this colorful species. Within the next few years it will no longer be found in Texas as a diminishing trend is evident in the data from the notes published by the National Audubon Society in *American Birds*. Once it is no longer found in the border areas its future survival will be dependent upon the conservation programs of the Central American countries within the remainder of its range.

What an excellent opportunity to show the rest of the Americas' that we are concerned for the survival of even the smallest avian forms. What a black mark to add to our reputation if we lose this species. How can we advise other countries that they must leave room for wildlife, as they develop, when we are still casting species aside for the sake of human progress and accommodation?

"The basic question is whether a hawkless, owl-less countryside is a livable countryside for Americans with eyes to see and ears to hear . . . Is a wolfless northwoods a northwoods at all?"

Aldo Leopold, Sand County Almanac ●