
The immature plumages of the Slender-billed Finch *Xenospingus concolor*

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Describimos los diferentes plumajes de *Xenospingus concolor* en base a observaciones en el campo y capturas. En la literatura ornitológica poco se describe a los juveniles de esta especie; y por ello puede ser difícil su identificación en el campo. Los juveniles son de color olivo en la espalda y el pico oscuro, la nuca y la corona son grises y los lados de la cara de color café. Este plumaje va cambiando a un color más gris y el pico cambia a amarillo antes de llegar a adulto.

Introduction

Slender-billed Finch *Xenospingus concolor* is found from sea-level to 2,300 m along coastal rivers between Lima, Peru, and northern Chile¹, where it inhabits shrubs and riparian vegetation. It is shy, inconspicuous and generally scarce, but locally fairly common⁴.

During a monitoring study³, we noticed a number of different plumages in the species. Although no sexual dimorphism is evident, it is possible to differentiate juveniles from adults. As there are no photographs or other depictions of non-adult plumages in the literature, these can pose some identification problems in the field: some resemble thornbirds *Phacelodomus* spp. or, as Ridgely & Tudor⁵ state, a large female Blue-black Grassquit *Volatinia jacarina*.

Juvenile plumage

We have seen a number of young birds in Tacna (the southernmost department of Peru) where the species is common in riparian thickets (the predominant trees being *Tessaria integrifolia* and *Baccharis salicifolia*) at Boca del Rio (at sea-level) and Calientes (at 1,280 m), and at Ocucaje (central Peru). The youngest individual seen was in a *Croton* bush, at Boca del Rio. It was smaller than other juveniles we have seen, and had a comparatively slow flight. The body was greyish with some olive on the back, and it possessed two buffish wingbars and an orbital ring. Another very young individual was mist-netted in June 1998 at Ocucaje, in the same area where the first nest discovered². This bird was browner than the first.

Sub-adult

Sub-adults have olive backs and are greyer on the nape and crown than juveniles (Fig. 2), with the chin browner than the rest of the head. Wings are olive-brown with two buffish wingbars; in many individuals these are more obvious than in the photo. Underparts are buffish white with brownish stripes. The orbital ring is buffish to white, and the iris brown. Juvenile bills are often described as brownish or dark brown⁵, but in the field they appear even darker, and the legs are pinkish flesh.

Second-year

We have also observed another plumage phase prior to full adult (see Fig. 3), which may be a second-year bird. We presume that birds in this plumage are capable of breeding, as we have observed such individuals singing and apparently paired. The mantle is olive but variably mixed with grey. The upper-breast stripe is usually less visible than in the sub-adult stage described above. The head also appears greyer than in sub-adult plumage and the chin is almost grey. Wings have some grey and no wingbars are present. The bill is yellow, but on some individuals it has a dark tip; the legs are dark. The white orbital ring is normally less obvious than in younger birds with browner heads and brown irides.

Adults and confusion species

Adults are quite different, being uniform grey above with a black loreal area; slightly paler grey below, with a whitish belly; the bill and legs are bright yellow, the orbital ring is white but the iris is reddish brown (Fig. 4). It is possible to confuse it with two species: Plumbeous Sierra-finch *Phrygilus unicolor* (which lacks the bright yellow bill and legs of *X. concolor*) and a female or immature Great Inca-finch *Incaeziza pulchra* (note the slender bill and black loreal area, which does not extend below the bill in *X. concolor*).

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