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CONFIRMATION: VILLAGE INDIGOBIRD PARASITIZING RED-BILLED FIREFINCH IN CENTRAL NAMIBIA

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Red-billed Firefinch *Lagonosticta senegala* have been observed in Windhoek, central Namibia, since 1995 (Brown 1997) with juveniles being captured serendipitously in mist nets since 2009 (Cunningham and Thomson 2011). Confirmation of nests, however, has only been documented since 2010 (Cunningham and Thomson 2011). Initially it was thought to be a population established from escapees (Brown 1997; Cunningham and Cunningham 2009; Thomson 2009). The confirmed sighting of Village Indigobird *Vidua chalybeata okavangoensis* during 2009 (N Thomson pers. comm.) probably indicates natural colonisation by both species of central Namibia. The Village Indigobird is a species primarily known to parasitize nests of Red-billed Firefinch (Tarboton 2001). The closest other confirmed sightings were from the Okavango Delta approximately 600 km northeast of Windhoek. However, no records of Village Indigobird actually parasitizing Red-billed Firefinch have previously been confirmed.

On 2 June 2012 a Village Indigobird juvenile (confirmed as *Vidua chalybeata okavangoensis*) was observed together with 3 juvenile Red-billed Firefinch in a Windhoek garden. The observed chick had the typical swollen white tubercles with blue base at each side of the gape; grey bill; pinkish legs and feet. It was generally similar in size and colouration (slightly darker) to the Red-billed Firefinch chicks. It lacked the typical reddish-brown base at the tail (Fig 1 and 2).



Fig 1 - Village Indigobird chick lacking the reddish-brown base at the tail typical of Red-billed Firefinch chicks.

Although there are advantages to Village Indigobird chick mimicry to their hosts, this is not essential for survival (Payne et al. 2001).

The juvenile birds usually perched together in a row, 1 m above the ground in lower branches of trees and bushes. Parents fed juveniles



Fig 2 - Village Indigobird chick (left) and two typical Red-billed Firefinch chicks (right).

in turn, often on the ground with juveniles begging with their chest on the ground and heads bent upwards, getting food in turn. The Village Indigobird chick did not dominate during feeding and it seemed like it was accepted by the adults and sibling Red-billed Firefinches.

Red-billed Firefinch are known to mainly breed between December and April (December to August – occasionally other months) (Tarboton 2001) or September to March in the Caprivi (Koen 1988) with Village Indigobird typically copying their hosts (Hockey et al. 2005). Red-billed Firefinch nesting (i.e. juveniles observed) has been confirmed from Windhoek for January, March and May (Cunningham and Thomson 2011) and June, September and October (this study – unpublished records) potentially indicating breeding throughout the year.

Although this parasitizing was expected once Village Indigobird individuals were confirmed to also occur in Windhoek, this is the first record confirming this parasitism as far as we could determine.

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