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THREE SHADES OF BROWN: LARK-LIKE BUNTINGS *EMBERIZA IMPETUANI* WITH COLOUR ABERRATIONS

Ursula Franke-Bryson

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AFRING NEWS

THREE SHADES OF BROWN: LARK-LIKE BUNTINGS *EMBERIZA IMPETUANI* WITH COLOUR ABERRATIONS

Ursula Franke-Bryson

Munich, Germany
Corresponding author: praxis@ursula-franke.de

Figure 1 - Perfect Lark-like Bunting country: a morning on the farm Vredelus, around 22° 24'S 15° 30'E, about 50 km SW of Usakos, Namibia.

Huge numbers of Lark-like Buntings have been ringed in the Namibian semi-arid plains: in 15 years almost 12 000 birds, both juveniles and adults. Almost all of them were healthy and in good condition. Only a very small percentage showed injuries, parasites like mites or feather flies, abnormalities on the beak and the feet (like distortions, growths, missing toes or even one leg, missing or spiraling claws), and just a handful of individuals had a single white feather on head, alula or mantle.

Figure 2 - One day we saw a mysterious bird on the ground in the grass.

But during our bird ringing sessions in December 2014 and January 2015 (Fig. 1) we caught two Lark-like Buntings with unusual colouration (out of more than 3000 individuals of this species in this season), and a pale bird was observed (Fig. 2). Our efforts to catch it over the next days resulted in catching an all whitish Lark-like Bunting (ring number SAFRING AR55955, Fig. 3-5).

Figure 3 - Close-up of leucistic Lark-like Bunting AR55955.

Figure 4 - The wing still showed the rufous panel albeit extraordinarily pale (Lark-like Bunting AR55955).

Figure 5 - The leucistic Lark-like Bunting AR55955 with pink beak (compare Figure 6).

Figure 6 - A normally coloured adult Lark-like Bunting (with a tiny white feather behind the right ear coverts).

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The overall impression was off-white, with only some coverts, and some mantle and head feathers slightly rufous. The beak and legs showed light pink. But the eyes were dark, which indicates rather a leucistic than an albino bird.

About a week before we had caught a Lark-like Bunting in the colour of milk coffee with darker rufous edges on the outer fringes of the flight feathers (ring number SAFRING AR56736, Fig. 7 and Fig. 9).

And, for giving the complete picture of this excursion, we caught a mostly normally coloured individual which had a discoloured, whitish outer edge of the first right wing secondary feather and a white neck (Fig. 10).

Figure 7 – Overall pale coloured Lark-like Bunting (AR56736).

Figure 8 – Normally coloured Lark-like Bunting for comparison.

Figure 9 - The rufous parts of the flight feathers seemed to keep the normal colour while any of the normally blackish contrasting areas were shining in grey-brown (AR56736).

Figure 10 – Individual with white neck and secondary.

It was interesting to see that in a few days we found two such unusual individuals, in an extent we had never seen before. These were just the ones we observed. Maybe there were more out there?

Although this still could be a normal variation, we found two interesting hypotheses for the causes of the colour aberrations.

One strand of actual research is looking for effects of climate change on albinism and leucism, while a possible effect through low-level radioactivity evoked by the increased surface mining activity for uranium in the surroundings of the research area had not been yet taken in consideration.

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