

## Buffalo weavers *Bubalornis* in eastern Africa

The genus *Bubalornis* comprises birds with whitish, yellow-brown, black and reddish bills, and in his *Systema* Sclater (1930) treated all forms as geographical races of *Bubalornis albirostris*, whose range stretched across the Northern Tropics of Africa from Senegal to Ethiopia, meeting with *intermedius*-type birds in South Sudan, northeastern Uganda and southern Ethiopia. Later, van Someren (1922) and Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1955) recognized two species, the White-billed *B. albirostris* and the Red-billed *B. niger*, with two subspecies, nominate in southern Africa and *intermedius* from eastern Ethiopia and Somaliland south through eastern Kenya to northeastern Tanzania.

As mentioned by Archer & Godman (1961), there can be no difficulty in recognizing *B. niger intermedius* when seen. The plumage of the male is black with white bases to the feathers often showing through as white patches when disarranged. There are also white margins to the primaries, the basal third of the wing-lining being white. Archer & Godman (*op. cit.*) further commented that a very confusing feature was that despite its original name "*albirostris*" the bill of *intermedius* may be any colour from black to white, coral-red, crimson or yellow-brown.

In the lower Omo River region of southern Ethiopia, both white-billed and red-billed birds are reported to occur together but whether they breed together is not known. A parallel situation also occurs along the South Sudan / northeastern Uganda border where again the two forms overlap, with white-billed birds the more common variety; these come south to Moroto and close to 35°E. Generally, most birds west of 34°E appear to be largely white-billed, while those to the east of that longitude are largely all red-billed. Meanwhile, Granvik (1934) found buffalo weavers common in the acacia country of South Turkana around Lotonok (1°44'N, 35°38'E) in northern Kenya, attributing all to *Bubalornis albirostris intermedius*, at the same time commenting that he never saw a red-billed specimen and that all adult birds had pure black bills with a yellowish-white base.

Recently, Panzera & Boano (2015) gave details of what appeared to be a remark-

able range extension of the White-billed Buffalo Weaver *B. albirostris* to Naabi Hill in northern Tanzania. Photographs clearly showed three male birds with ivory-coloured bills, but also the very plumage characteristics of *B. n. intermedius*, with prominent white margins to the primaries. Naabi Hill lies in the eastern Serengeti at the boundary with the Ngorongoro Conservation Area at 2°55'S, 35°02'E, and only 100 km south of South Nyanza in southwestern Kenya where *intermedius* is resident.

In view of this extraordinary record, it would seem that a full molecular analysis of all *Bubalornis* forms is urgently required. Certainly the original binomial name *Textor intermedius* Cabanis had much to commend it (Archer & Godman *op. cit.*).

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### Donald A. Turner

*P.O. Box 1651, Naivasha 20117, Kenya*

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