

# Juvenile plumage of the Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*

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The Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana* is a poorly known species confined to the island of Socotra. It is listed as Vulnerable due to its small range, low density, and patchy distribution within apparently suitable habitat (BirdLife International 2004). The total population is estimated to be c300 pairs or 1400 individuals (Porter & Suleiman in prep). No nests have been found, but it is thought to breed from 600 to over 1200 m elevation (Byers *et al* 1995, Morton 1996, Fry & Keith 2004, Porter & Suleiman in prep), although Alex Forbes-Watson collected more birds at lower elevations (Ripley & Bond 1966). Males have been recorded singing in the highlands from December–February, and a female collected in mid-February had a brood patch (Byers *et al* 1995, Kirwan *et al* 1996). Adults observed moulting in early April (see below) suggest that breeding is completed by then. These observations and those below confirm a winter breeding season for Socotra Buntings.

Adults are readily separated from Cinnamon-breasted Rock Buntings *E. tahapisi*, the only other bunting on Socotra, by their rich chestnut wing coverts, whitish (not cinnamon-washed) belly and whitish lower back/rump, noticeable in flight (Byers *et al* 1995). Adults have a striking black-and-white striped head, a grey-brown mantle streaked blackish brown, a pale grey back with bold blackish chevrons, and a pale grey rump with diffuse dark streaks (Plate 1). The wing coverts are chestnut brown, with dark brown inner webs to the greater coverts. The throat is whitish, contrasting with a rich cinnamon breast, which grades into a whitish belly (Plate 2). Outside of the breeding season the



Plate 1. Back view of an adult Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*, Skand protected area, 5 April 2007 © PG Ryan



**Plate 2.** Frontal view of an adult Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*, Skand protected area, 5 April 2007 © PG Ryan



**Plate 3.** (left) Juvenile Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*, Mahlih plateau, 10 February 2004 © RF Porter



**Plate 4.** (right) Juvenile Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*, Mahlih plateau, 10 February 2004 © RF Porter

rich colouration on the breast is greatly reduced. Adult females are slightly duller, with brownish-black head stripes, but the juvenile plumage has not been described (Byers *et al* 1995, Fry & Keith 2004).

On 10 February 2004, RFP and ASS, together with Simon Aspinall, watched and photographed a pair of Socotra Buntings with at least two fledged young on the limestone slopes of the Mahlih plateau. This area appears to hold a good population of Socotra Buntings. Subsequently, on 3 and 5 April 2007, PGR, BR and ASS visited the Skand protected area in the Hajhir (Hagghier) range, where ASS knew that Socotra Buntings were relatively common. At least 5 adults (5 together at one stage, but probably more) and 1–2 juveniles were observed in an area of a few hectares of rocky hill-slopes, feeding on the ground in



**Plate 5.** Juvenile Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*, Skand protected area, 5 April 2007 © PG Ryan



**Plate 6.** Juvenile Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*, Skand protected area, 5 April 2007 © PG Ryan

an area of relatively lush vegetation close to a stock post. No singing was heard, and at least some adults were moulting rectrices. The juvenile(s) were loosely associated with adult birds, and were also photographed. They occasionally gave a high-pitched ‘tseep’ call, possibly in an attempt to solicit food from their parents, although feeding of juveniles was not observed.

The juvenile plumage (Plates 3–6) is quite distinct, much duller than adult plumage, with somewhat indistinct grey-brown head stripes with darker streaks. The median crown stripe is reduced or absent, and the supercilium is off-white with a few darker feathers. The whitish cheek stripe is much less well-defined, with a greyish patch almost connecting the moustachial and eye-stripes beneath the eye. The mantle is slightly paler than in the adult, and the wing coverts have dark brown central streaks. The remiges and rectrices are blackish brown with chestnut outer margins. The throat is off-white, merging into a warm buff-brown breast with noticeable brown streaking on the upper breast. The belly is creamy, with a buff wash on the flanks. The eyes are dark brown, similar to the adults, but the bill is duller, with a pale horn (not yellowish) lower mandible. The legs are pink developing into flesh or pinkish-brown, not yellowish-horn as in adults.

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