

THE REDISCOVERY OF THE ST. LUCIAN BLACK
FINCH (*MELANOSPIZA RICHARDSONI*).

BY JAMES BOND.

FEW birds have had such a remarkable history and have remained for years so utterly mysterious as the St. Lucian Black Finch (*Melanospiza richardsoni*), representative of a monotypic genus known only from St. Lucia, the largest of the "Windward Islands" of the British West Indies. The many collectors who have visited St. Lucia have so habitually overlooked this interesting Finch, that it began to be doubted if it really had been collected on St. Lucia. The writer himself spent six weeks on the island in 1927 and three more weeks during the present year before finally locating it.

Until the present year, apparently only two specimens, both males, had ever been collected. The bird was described by Cory in 1886, from a specimen purchased by Mr. W. E. Richardson together with the skins of many other St. Lucian birds, from a native living in the interior of the island, who declared that the bird was found "in the mountains." Mr. Richardson himself claimed to have seen the Finch in life but unfortunately was unable to obtain further specimens, since during his visit to the island all shooting was prohibited by the authorities. The second specimen was collected together with a few other St. Lucian birds in December 1888, when the U. S. Fisheries' steamer "Albatross" visited the island.

Then, in May 1929, while collecting in the interests of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, I rediscovered *Melanospiza* and secured specimens of both sexes.

The St. Lucian Black Finch was first described by Cory as *Loxigilla richardsoni*, and then transferred to the Galapagoan genus *Geospiza* to which the male bears a remarkable, though superficial, resemblance. It was later placed among the Grassquits, *Tiaris*, and was finally elevated to the rank of a monotypic genus, *Melanospiza*, the relatively much larger bill being the principal character separating the bird from the Grassquits.

Though structurally close to *Tiaris* the bird in life acts in a man-

ner very different from that of a Grassquit and resembles both in appearance and in habits the "Grosbeaks" (an absurd name at least for the Lesser Antillean birds) of the genus *Loxigilla*. This resemblance is indeed remarkable and the confusion of the two birds is no doubt the reason why *Melanospiza* has for so long remained little known.

It is interesting to note, for the sake of comparison, that on the islands of St. Vincent and Grenada, two Flycatchers *Elaenia martinica* and *Elaenia flavogaster* occur practically side by side and when seen as skins can only with some difficulty be distinguished, yet when observed in the field they appear so distinct as to be recognizable at a glance. On the other hand *Melanospiza richardsoni* and *Loxigilla noctis*, so different when seen in the hand, can with difficulty be distinguished in the field. *Loxigilla noctis* has a smaller bill, black instead of pink legs, and a less robust appearance than *Melanospiza*, while the plumage of the male is more glossy and of course the throat is chestnut-rufous, not black, while the gray head of the female *Melanospiza*, at times, shows up in sharp contrast with the brownish upper parts. Moreover the flight of *Loxigilla* is more undulating, less direct, than that of *Melanospiza*, the flight of the latter being more like that of its relatives the Grassquits. But all these differences I would regard as purely secondary field characters, which can only be noted under favorable circumstances. It should be of value, therefore, to ornithologists visiting St. Lucia in the future, to state the primary characters by which these two birds may be distinguished in the field.

a. *Song.* The song of *Melanospiza* is utterly different from that of *Loxigilla*. When heard from a distance it might be mistaken for an aberrant song of a *Coereba* but is really unlike that of any other St. Lucian bird. My field notes describe the song as "Tick-zwee-swisiwis-you" the accent on the second and last notes. The first note resembles the introductory note of the song of *Tiaris bicolor* which to my ear resembles a harsh emphatic "tick-zweee." The second note of the song of *Melanospiza* has a curious buzzing quality, reminding me of the song of the Blue-winged Warbler (*Vermivora pinus*). The last part of the song is shriller. There is little variation.

The birds are apparently in song only during the breeding season, i. e., the late Spring and Summer months.

b. *Twitching of the tail.* Except for its song the habit of constantly twitching its tail *independently* of any other movement of its body is the best field character distinguishing *Melanoospiza* from *Loxigilla*. Moreover though the tails of the two birds are of about equal length, that of *Melanoospiza* is relatively shorter and appears decidedly so in life.

Both birds are remarkably tame and both may be found feeding on the fruits or berries of trees at some distance from the ground. Both species are, however, largely terrestrial in habits.

Though far from common, *Melanoospiza* is widely distributed on St. Lucia and is found from sea level, Anse le Raye, to at least 1500 feet in the mountains. Its favorite haunts are the dense second growth thickets about the borders of the virgin forest, though in the wild unsettled country about Anse le Raye, a locality where the St. Lucian Whip-poor-will (*Antrostomus rufus otiosus*) and the Fer de Lance (*Craspedocephalus lanceolatus*) still occur in some numbers, I found *Melanoospiza* frequenting the thick arid scrub country at sea level.

Though most of my specimens of *Melanoospiza richardsoni* were collected in the mountains of northern St. Lucia in the neighborhood of the Piton Flore, the bird was unknown to the native hunters in that section. In the southern mountains, in the vicinity of the Piton Canaries and in the hills behind Micoud, the bird seems to be well known to the natives under the name of "Moisson Pied Blanc." In this part of the island the natives assert that it is found only in the mountains at high elevations and I believe they are correct.

Previous to my rediscovery of this bird, it was my belief that the St. Lucian Black Finch was an ancient form slowly dying out under present conditions, but it now seems that it is well established on St. Lucia and far from becoming rarer should increase in numbers with the opening up of the country. Moreover, it seems to the writer quite possible that it, or some allied form, may be found on certain other of the Lesser Antilles, Martinique and Barbuda being the most likely.

Altogether seven specimens of this rare finch were collected, including four males and two females, the first being taken on May 18, and the last on May 31. I was unable to determine the sex

of one specimen which is probably an immature male. The testes of three of the males were much enlarged indicating proximity of the nesting season.

A description of the birds follows:

Adult Male: Uniform deep black, including under wing coverts, without gloss. Legs and feet in life pale pink, in skins buffish brown, iris hazel, bill black.

Measurements: (Four specimens) Wing 60.9–70.9 (72.75), Tail 48.3–48.5 (48.43), Exposed culmen 13.7–14 (13.87), Tarsus 20.6–21.8 (21.).

Adult Female: Crown feathers dark mouse gray, margined with brownish olive. Sides of head chaetura-drab. Back and interscapular region sepia brown shading to Dresden brown on rump and upper tail coverts. Rectrices bister. Primaries dark sooty brown, outer webs edged with tawny olive. Wing coverts and secondaries sepia brown. Under wing coverts white slightly tinged with buffish. Throat and underparts light mouse gray, the feathers margined with ochraceous tawny. Abdomen a clear light buff, sides, flanks, and undertail coverts ochraceous tawny.

Measurements: (2 specimens) Wing 65.1–65.65. Tail 45.75–46.65. Exposed culmen 13.8–14. Tarsus 20.1–20.2 mm.

Immature Male? Resembles ♀ but upper parts darker, nearer umber brown, upper tail coverts more rusty and rectrices more rufescent, scapulars and outer web of secondaries widely margined with a rich rusty brown. Chin and throat mouse gray margined with buffish brown. Rest of underparts pinkish buff, darker, more honey yellow, on the sides. Bill horn color.

Measurements: Wing 64.; Tail 44.5; Tarsus 20.5; Exposed culmen 13.1 mm.

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