

Little-known African bird: Mali Firefinch *Lagonosticta virata*

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Un oiseau africain peu connu: l'Amarante de Kulikoro *Lagonosticta virata*. Bien que l'Amarante de Kulikoro *Lagonosticta virata* se trouve principalement au Mali, son aire de répartition connue s'étend jusqu'à l'est du Sénégal et pourrait également comprendre le nord-est de la Guinée. L'espèce est très semblable à la sous-espèce ouest-africaine de l'Amarante foncé *L. rubricata* mais en diffère par l'absence de nuance rosâtre à la calotte gris-brun, le bec droit et étroit, certaines vocalisations (notamment le long sifflement *fee*, le *kyah* nasal et descendant, et le cri d'excitation *churrr*) et l'habitat rocheux et semi-aride. Les vocalisations sont imitées par le Combassou de Barka *Vidua larvaticola*, qui parasite le nid de l'amarante.

When Bates, in 1932, described Mali Firefinch *Lagonosticta virata*, also named Kulikoro Firefinch, as a new subspecies of African Firefinch *L. rubricata*, he noted that males have plumage like male *L. r. polionota* elsewhere in West Africa, and female plumage is almost identical to that of the male. Goodwin (1982), based on its calls and broad outer primary, considered *virata* a race of Jameson's Firefinch *L. rhodopareia*. Recent field observations and molecular analysis reveal that *L. virata* is more closely related to Rock Firefinch *L. sanguinodorsalis* and *L. rhodopareia* than to *L. rubricata*, but by its plumage, songs and molecular genetic distance from these congeners, Mali Firefinch should be treated as specifically distinct (Payne 1998, Barlow *et al.* 2001, Sorenson *et al.* 2003, Payne 2004, Payne & Barlow 2004).

Based on specimens, Mali Firefinch occurs in Mali at Bamako, Tienfala, Koulikoro, and Fiko near the Bandiagara escarpment, and in Bamako a bird dealer had Mali Firefinches caught close to the Niger River near San (Payne & Barlow 2004). These few records suggest a limited distribution. Earlier observations of '*L. rubricata*' in Mali (Lamarche 1981) probably refer to Mali Firefinch; the two species are very similar in appearance. Mali Firefinch also occurs in eastern Senegal (Payne 1997), and based on our knowledge of habitat preferences might also occur in south-west Mali and north-east Guinea.

Males have the crown brownish grey, back grey-brown, rump red, tail black with outer feather fringes red; the lores are red, the cheeks, chin, throat to belly deep pinkish red, breast-sides and upper flanks marked with small white spots, cen-

tral belly grey, lower belly and undertail-coverts black; the bill is blackish, base of lower mandible pale blue, and the eye-ring is pink (all as in *L. rubricata polionota*) and the outer primaries are broad, not emarginated (Fig. 1). Females are slightly paler below. Male Mali Firefinch differs from African Firefinch in West Africa in lacking a pink wash to the grey-brown crown, in bill shape, straight and narrow (the culmen is deep and curved in African Firefinch), and in the hand by a broad outer primary. Distinctive field marks are the bill shape and churring calls, and in West Africa the rocky and semi-arid habitat is characteristic.

In voice, the contact call, a wheeze *kyah*, rises rapidly in pitch then falls and lasts 0.2 second; it has a nasal tone. The long-distance call *feeee* is a whistle, maintained for *c.* 1 second, sometimes rising or falling in pitch, or with an overtone. The alarm or excitement note is a rattle *churrrrr*, consisting of 20–22 notes per second, loud and mellow, often given in series of three, *churrrrr*, *churr*, *churr*. Their whistled trills are much as in African Firefinch. The *churrrrr*, *churr*, *churr*, wheeze *kyah* and whistle *feeee* are all distinctive.

Habitat change is the main threat to the species' populations. Mali Firefinches were observed in September 1996 and 2000 in Mali, at Tienfala Forest Reserve (12°55'N 07°42'W) (not in September 1999 and October 2000, as mentioned in error in Payne & Barlow 2004), where Nicolai (1982) had also observed them. The reserve was being cut and the wood sold by the bundle on the roadside, although the rocky hillsides with grass and shrubs were still intact, as in



Figure 1. Mali Firefinch / Amarante de Kulikoro *Lagonosticta virata*, Tienfala, Mali, 29 September 2000 (Robert B. Payne)

Nicolai's (1982) photograph. This habitat may persist for many years: photographs taken elsewhere show scrubby rocky hillsides to survive near human occupation over nearly a century (Schantz & Turner 1958, Turner *et al.* 1998). Mali Firefinch also appears in the bird trade (Payne & Barlow 2004). Although Mali Firefinch is host to the brood parasitic Barka Indigobird *Vidua larvaticola*, which mimics its calls and songs (Payne & Barlow 2004), the effects of indigobirds on firefinches are negligible in other populations (Morel 1973).

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