

## SPECKLE-FRONTED WEAVER (*Sporopipes frontalis*)

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### OTHER NAMES

 Scaly-fronted Weaver;  Sporopipe quadrillé ;  Schuppenköpfchen;

 Tejedorcito punteado;  Fjällhuvad skäggfink;  Schubkopweve

 Diamante africano

### DISTRIBUTION

This species has a large range, with an estimated global extent of occurrence of 3,000,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The global population trends have not been quantified, but are believed to be large, as the species is described as '*frequent*' in at least parts of its range. It is believed that this species has not reached the threshold criteria for the population decline of the IUCN Red List (i.e. declining more than 30% in 10 years or three generations). For these reasons, the species is evaluated as *Least Concern*.

It is only found in Africa and occurs in a band across the northern tropics, from the east to the west. It is found in Benin (south to 9°10'N), Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad (11°N and 16°50'N), Eritrea (very common in SW, below 1,800 m), Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Mali (between 13° and 17°N), Mauritania (south of 17°N), Niger, Nigeria, Senegal (north of 15°30'N), Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. It occurs in bush and open savanna in semi-arid regions.

### DESCRIPTION

The Speckle-fronted weaver (*Sporopipes frontalis*) is a species of bird in the *Ploceidae* family, with a short stubby bill; the head pattern is distinctive (black crown with white speckles), the nape is chestnut with a black moustache streak surrounding the broad pale grey face.

**ADULT:** It is a small and sparrow-like bird. The sexes are alike, and can only be determined by surgical or DNA sexing. There are no similar species with which it can be confused, although it is in the same family as the Scaly-feathered Finch (*Sporopipes squamifrons*). The forehead and crown are speckled, the feathers are black with white tips; the cheeks and ear-coverts are pale grey; the nape is chestnut-brown and extends forward into the crescent behind the ear-coverts. The mantle and rump are pale grey-brown; the tail is brown with paler margins to feathers; the remiges are plain brown, and the wing coverts are brown with paler margins. The chin and throat are white, the moustachial stripe feathers are black

with white tips, while the breast, flanks, belly, thighs and undertail-coverts are white. The bill and feet are pale yellowish horn-colour with the irides deep brown. **Size** (8 cm♂, 7 cm♀); **Wing:** ♂ 62-69 mm (64.9), ♀ 63-69 mm (66.4); **Tail:** ♂ 44-47 mm (45.4), ♀ 42-49 mm (45.7); **Bill:** ♂ 11.3-13.0 mm (12.2), ♀ 11.5-13.0 (12.3); **Tarsus:** ♂ 16.6-17.6 mm (17.1), ♀ 16.9-17.7 mm (17.2). **Weight:** ♂ 14-19.5 g; (17.1) without significant seasonal variation (Fry 1971). **Immature:** Like adult birds, but paler, especially on the nape, which is tawny, and not chestnut.

## GENERAL HABITS

Speckle-fronted weavers inhabit dry bush, thickets and open thorn-scrub savanna, are often found around villages, between 400 and 2,000 m in the Sahel (the ecoclimatic and biogeographic zone of transition between the Sahara desert in the north and the Sudanian Savannas in the south), and associated especially with *Acacia* and *Salvadora persica* or *Butyrispernum* tree savanna (South Mali). They feed mainly on the ground in open gravelly patches, often alongside estrildids; and move by hopping. They roost in groups in old nests when not breeding, and then generally gregarious. They allopreen, mainly the head, move locally during rains (Mauritania) and are apparently present only during the wet season in the Sahel zone of Nigeria. Post-breeding wing-moult starts in mid-March and it lasts for at least five to six months in Nigeria. They stay in pairs during the breeding season, but normally in flocks of five to ten birds, but sometimes 20 or more. They do not tolerate cold and damp conditions.

## FOOD

This is a ground-feeding species. In nature it eats predominantly seeds, while some small insects, like termite alates (a winged reproductive of a social insect), are picked up from the ground. In captivity, their staple diet is a dry seed mix of red and yellow manna. In winter, the ratio is 2 red : 1 yellow, but in summer it is 1 red : 2 yellow.. An indigenous grain mixture, consisting mostly of different grass seeds obtained from local farmers, is also fed to the birds. The following seed mix is added to this wild grass seed: wildseed from *Verselaga* (30 garden and weed seeds), canary seed, white millet, babala, and Japanese millet in the ratio of 5:1:1:1:1. This mixture is given to the birds every day on the ground. At the beginning of the breeding season Guinea Grass (*Panicum maximum*), that was stored in a freezer, is given to the birds and it acts as a stimulant at the beginning of the breeding season. English cucumber is given every second day. The birds are fed termites twice a day, as without live food they will not rear their young. Once or twice a week they are fed their favourite mini-mealworms. In a mixed collection, the Speckle-fronted weavers will first go down to the live food and they are dominant at the termite bowl, therefore they cannot be kept with "softer" species like fire finches, bichinos, and quail finches. Rock salt, oyster shell grit, cuttlefish bone and pigeon grit (black charcoal) are always available. Once a day (in the morning) they receive a soft food mix. Avi-Plus (Finch mix – 500 g) is used as base, and to this 5 g of diatomaceous earth, 5 g of Hi-Energy spirulina, 5 g of Herbs for Birds, 5 g of Zink Bacitracin (15% granulated),

shredded vegetables (carrots, green beans, sweet potatoes, broccoli, spinach, lettuce) and crushed egg shell are added. Lastly, sprouted seed (Japanese millet) is added to this mixture.

### **BREEDING HABITS**

In nature, they are solitary nesters, but they sometimes form small colonies. Speckle-fronted weavers are monogamous (only one mate at any one time). During the breeding season they live in pairs, and frequent the open country where there are trees for them to nest in, but as autumn sets in they assemble in large flocks, which alight like Sparrows on the roofs of houses or in the stubble-fields and pasture-land, and retire to roost in the high trees near water. Their call-note is a chirp, but their song, though weak, resembles that of a Goldfinch. In captivity I had my best breeding results when I kept a small colony of these birds, always three pairs or more. The size of the aviary is 6.5 m x 4.5 m x 2.2 m. As a group, they like to roost in the same nest. The ♀ was dominant at the nest and the ♂ entered only in her absence. The ♂ is very aggressive at the time of pair formation and will attack its rival ♂, pecking particularly at its nape and moustachial stripes. In a threat posture, the body is upright, the bill is directed forwards, the tail depressed to touch the ground, while the breast and belly feathers are partly erected. In courtship, the ♂ approaches the ♀ by making snapping sounds with his bill, raises and quivers his wing closest to ♀ and then raises both his wings. The ♀ solicits by drooping and quivering her wings, vibrates her tail vertically and gives a high-pitched call. During copulation, the ♂ grasps the nape of the ♀ once, then he mounts the ♀ while holding nesting material in his bill, which he then drops.

### **NEST**

In nature, the nest is built in a *Ziziphus* shrub, or in branches of acacia trees, 2-6 m above the ground. The nest is a large, untidy ball of dry grass and is oval in shape, generally placed in the centre of a mostly impenetrable thorn-bush. It is constructed of mainly dry grass, with a long entrance tunnel at the side, and a small centre chamber well lined with a few seed heads, feathers, hair, roots and wool. In captivity, they always build their nests in salt-bushes (*Atriplex spp.*) and in my experience they have never used finch boxes. They use a lot of poultry feathers to line the nest, and the nest chamber is moulded by trampling the material. In an aviary they usually build their nest in the highest area, therefore a salt bush or branch of a shrub must be placed as high as possible. They lay two to four eggs. The eggs are pale grey, thickly mottled with darker markings, so that the overall impression is dark brown. The size is 17-18 mm x 12-13 mm.

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