

Possible Violet Widowfinch in Botswana?

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Loon (1998) reported on the occurrence of a widowfinch associated with Brown Firefinches *Lagonosticta nitidula* in the interior of the Okavango Delta (northern Botswana), and tentatively identified it as a Violet Widowfinch *Vidua incognita/wilsoni*; also because the bird fitted the pale bill/red leg morphology attributed to that species in its original description (i.e. Nicolai 1972: type from unknown locality in Angola, paratype from Katanga). Loon (1998) caught a single adult in a mistnet on 29/07/1997, which during a four week period yielded four times more Brown Firefinches than Redbilled Firefinches *L. senegalensis* (24 to 6).

While we have no problem with the generally cautious tone of Loon's comprehensive note on the existence and taxonomic mystery that the Violet Widowfinch still poses, and on the need for further study of the widowfinches in the Okavango, we would like to comment on the tentative evidence proposed for the occurrence of this taxon in Botswana.

Brown Firefinches are generally more common in the riparian vegetation in the Okavango Delta than Redbilled Firefinches. Thus, any widowfinch in this habitat is statistically more likely to be found 'associated' at some stage with the former. The widowfinch was caught at the end of July, which is after the breeding season of firefinches in the region (Harrison *et al.* 1997). It was an adult female or non-breeding male, and no male bird in breeding plumage was recorded, let alone one defending a territory with the appropriate Brown Firefinch song imitation. Outside the breeding season, seed-eating passerines tend to flock to suitable patches of food, which are frequented by several species of firefinches, waxbills, widowfinches and

canaries, sometimes in mixed flocks. Such opportunistic associations are not necessarily enlightening for the breeding ecology of the species.

Brewster (1989) reported on widowfinches near Gumare (western Okavango), and found that all had pale bill/pink legs, imitated Redbilled Firefinches (except for one unidentified), and were therefore Steelblue Widowfinches *Vidua chalybeata*. Traylor (1965) collected three males in breeding plumage with pale bill/pink legs at Sepupa and Nokaneng (western Okavango); he considered them to be Steelblue Widowfinches (however, the Violet Widowfinch had not yet been described). Near Maun, pink-billed Steelblue Widowfinches predominate, but pale-billed also occur (Brewster 1988; Payne 1996; pers. obs.). Similarly, near Livingstone (Zambia) Steelblue Widowfinches with pale and pink bill coloration co-occur (Stjernstedt 1998). The pale-billed birds (*centralis*) generally have a northerly range in Africa, though they occupy the western regions at the edge of their range in southern Africa, from the Okavango northwards to Uganda, while pink-billed birds (*amauropteryx*) occur more to the east and south in southern Africa (Payne 1996; Stjernstedt 1998).

A few widowfinches imitating Brown Firefinches have been found in Zambia and Zimbabwe (Stjernstedt 1998); but these had pink bills (Stjernstedt *in litt.*) and do therefore not fit the original species concept of the Violet Widowfinch (Payne 1996). One of the possible explanations is that these are the result of an incidental host switch (Stjernstedt 1998) by Steelblue Widowfinches. Apparent incidental switches have also been reported in

the Green Widowfinch *V. codringtoni* (Payne *et al.* 1992).

In conclusion, we do not want to dismiss the possible occurrence of the Violet Widowfinch or another parasite of the Brown Firefinch in Botswana, neither do we dismiss the need for further study of the widowfinches in the Okavango. However, we find the evidence presented by Loon (1998) too weak, even for a tentative identification of the birds as Violet Widowfinches. In the light of existing knowledge Loon's description fits the pale-billed form of Steelblue Widowfinch acceptably well.

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This table is a summary compiled from Maclean 1993 (*Roberts' birds of southern Africa*, Cape Town: John Voelcker Bird Books) and Payne 1996 (see above) for easy reference. *Ed.*

Vidua species of southern and central Africa

<i>Vidua</i> (Widowfinch)	Host	Bill	Legs
<i>V. chalybeata</i> Steelblue	<i>Lagonosticta senegala</i> Redbilled Firefinch	Red	Red
<i>V. purpurascens</i> Purple	<i>L. rhodopareia</i> Jameson's Firefinch	Whitish	Whitish
<i>V. funerea</i> Black	<i>L. rubricata</i> Bluebilled Firefinch	White	Red
<i>V. codringtoni</i> Green/Twinspace	<i>Hypargos niveoguttatus</i> Redthroated Twinspace	White	Red
<i>V. wilsoni</i> Violet	<i>L. nitidula</i> Brown Firefinch	White	Pinkish