

Sporophila intermedia (Grey Seedeater or Picoplat)

Family: Emberizidae (Buntings and American Sparrows)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Grey seedeater, *Sporophila intermedia*.

[http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/portal/species/overview?p_p_spp=623596, downloaded 7 March 2017]

TRAITS. The physical appearance of adult male *Sporophila intermedia* differs from that of females and immatures. Adult males are mainly grey in colour with conspicuous white moustachial streaks a thick, yellowish-pink bill with a distinctly curved culmen (upper edge) and blackish legs (Fig. 1) (Ffrench, 2012). They resemble the male slate-coloured seedeater (*Sporophila schistacea*) which is slight darker in colour with a white wing bar (Fig. 2) (Neotropical Birds, 2010). Males have an attractive song delivered from a prominent perch. It includes a series of trills, whistles and chirps as well as mimicry of songs of many other passerine birds. Females and immatures have dark brown upperparts, yellowish brown underparts and a blackish bill (Fig. 3). Grey seedeaters grow to 11cm in length and weigh 11-16g (Ffrench, 2012).

DISTRIBUTION. The grey seedeater is native to Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana (Fig. 4) and Trinidad, and ranges up to 1200m in tropical and subtropical regions (Thomas, 1996).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Resides in a wide variety of partly open habitats such as gallery forest borders, bushy pastures, parks, gardens and open grasslands. Primarily seen in small flocks in grassland and open shrubby clearings. The grey seedeater is considered a resident species as it is not nomadic or migratory (Hilty, 2002); most movements are due to dispersal of young birds,

habitat disturbance or extreme weather conditions. Like most species of *Sporophila*, the grey seedeater is a stem gleaner as it mainly feeds on seeds found on grasses and forbs on stems. However, it has also been observed hunting termites and other succulent insects (Hayes and Temple, 2002).

FOOD AND FEEDING. Its main source of food is small dry seeds of the common grass *Panicum*. However, when grass and forb seeds are out of season, grey seedeaters seek alternative foods to supplement their diet. They hawk for small, slow-moving insects in small trees and sometimes forage in the air like flycatchers. Additionally, they have been observed drinking nectar from small, sweet smelling flowers such as Rubiaceae shrubs, by pinching the small blossoms at the base (Thomas, 1996).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. Grey seedeaters are normally seen in small flocks comprising 3-5 birds. Flocks may not only include grey seedeaters but also other *Sporophila* species. This once abundant species is close to extinction in Trinidad as a result of the unregulated trapping of birds for the caged-bird trade. Much interesting research remains to be done in studying the life history of the grey seedeater and its relationship with its congeners (Thomas, 1996).

REPRODUCTION. Breeding has been recorded mainly from June to September. This breeding period is longer than most *Sporophila* species (Hilty, 2002). The nest is a flimsy cup of rootlets and tendrils lined with fibres and usually contains 2 or 3 creamy eggs irregularly marked with dark brown. These nests are often built by females in small trees or bushes 2-6m above ground. However, both sexes feed the young after they have hatched (Ffrench, 2012).

BEHAVIOUR. An accomplished songster, the grey seedeater sings a spirited series of musical twitters and chirps, generally beginning “chu chu chu wee...” and then getting richer. Most incorporate mimetic phrases and songs of many other birds into their own rambling songs. When breeding, they form territories and sing from prominent perches atop shrubs or trees. At other times, they gather in small flocks with other seedeaters and are seen feeding in grassland and semi-open areas (Hilty, 2002). Unlike other *Sporophila* species, they also eat insects by foraging on large trees or by fluttering for flying insects. Furthermore, some have been spotted drink nectar from small, sweet smelling plants. Its catholic diet and long breeding period permits year-round residency and makes it unique among *Sporophila* (Thomas, 1996).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. The grey seedeater is probably the most popular of the small finches that are commonly trapped as caged birds in Trinidad. The constant encroachment of habitat and unchecked trapping of adult males has led to near extinction of this species in Trinidad (Ffrench, 2012). However, the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists the grey seedeater as Least Concern since its population size seems stable for its wide range (IUCN, 2017).

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Fig. 2. The similar slate-coloured seedeater (*Sporophila schistacea*).

[https://c1.staticflickr.com/3/2927/13986911980_7653205a90_b.jpg, downloaded 7 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Female or immature grey seedeater.

[http://animalia-life.club/data_images/variable-seedeater/variable-seedeater5.jpg, downloaded 7 March 2017]



Fig. 4. Geographic distribution of grey seedeater.

[<http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/map/?cn=Gray%20Seedeater&sn=Sporophila%20intermedia&sc=graysee1&species=623596>, downloaded 8 March 2017]

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