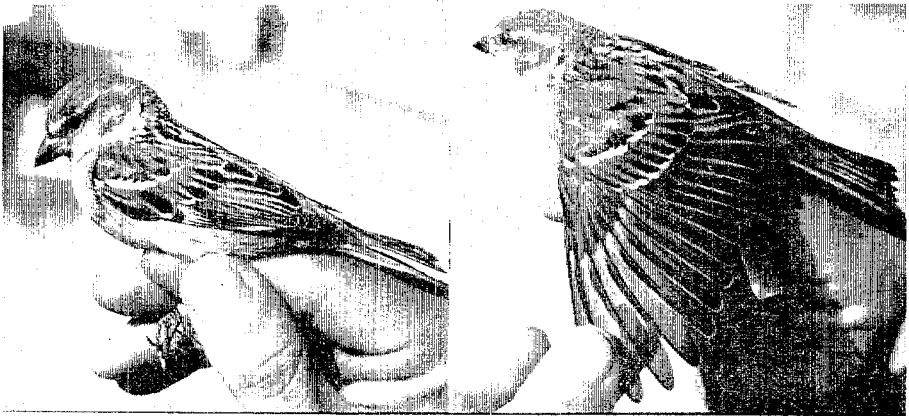
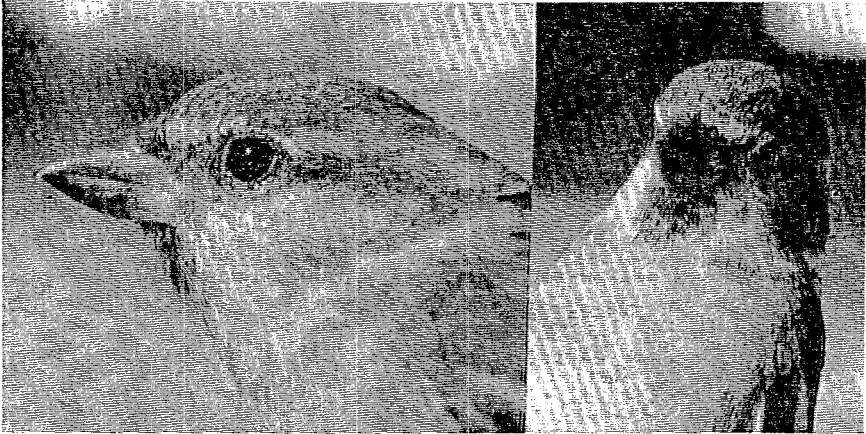


NEW HYBRID *Passer montanus* X *Passer hispaniolensis*

Frank Smith & Sammy Borg

December has always proved to be one of the least exciting months of the year with regard to bird ringing. Ringers may relax and enjoy the festive season before the spring brings forth resurgent bird-life to the Maltese Islands.

On 7th December 1975 we decided to go bat-netting sparrows at Hal Far during the late evening. The catch was a satisfactory one and thirty-seven sparrows were netted in all. One of the birds in particular showed quite different characteristic features than the rest of the birds. Its devious attempts to escape, its "slippery" smooth feathers and its over all appearance and smaller size were those of a Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*. However, its pugnacious attitude and



Four different views of the hybrid *P. hispaniolensis* X *P. montanus* taken before release. (photos by J. Sultana)

conspicuous whitish eye stripe (supercilium) which passed through, as well as above the eye were indicative of the Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*.

It had a mainly light reddish-brown head with the crown feathers greyish brown to grey forming a cap. These grey crown feathers were of even colour from tip to root unlike those of the similar winter head plumage of the Spanish Sparrow. The latter's crown feathers of the winter plumage are still brown though they have broad greyish edges and tips thus concealing the overall brownish appearance. The bill which was of medium size was tipped black with a yellow base. The iris was dark brown while the cheeks were light grey to white with grey ear coverts. It had a greyish black bib similar in width but longer than that of the Tree Sparrow, which reached just to the upper breast. There was a complete absence of any black streaks on the lowerbreast and flanks. A faint buff to whitish collar was visible. The upper parts and tail were brown with pronounced black markings on the former. The wings had a well defined double white wing bar, while the under-wing coverts were silver grey with dark grey edges on primaries, as found in the Tree Sparrow. The breast and belly were light grey while the flanks were light brown.

The measurements (in mm.) were: length -- 123; wings -- 68.5; tail -- 51; tarsus -- 23; bill -- 12. The weight was 20.5 gms.

The 1st primary (outermost) was 5.5 less than the primary coverts. Wing-point was 2nd + 3rd + 4th with a notch on the 2nd being 17.0 less than wing-point. 3rd, 4th and 5th were emarginated.

Being a hybrid with an inclination towards the Tree Sparrow, this bird could not be sexed with any certainty. However, after hearing its call on release and observing its behaviour we came to the conclusion that it was more likely to be a male. When released it flew low above the ground continuously calling in what can only be described as a 'soft' Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* like call.

~~INTERESTING OCCURRENCES (MARCH 1976)~~

~~Frank Smith~~

~~A prevailing NE wind (frequently over 10 knots) and overcast days in late March 1976 produced a number of interesting occurrences to the Maltese Islands. These included the first recorded occurrence of a Collared Flycatcher's race -- *Ficedula albicollis semitorquata*, mist netted and ringed by the writer at Salina on 25th March. It was a male in beautiful condition lacking the complete white collar of the nominate race -- *F. a. albicollis*. However, there was more white on the sides of the neck. The extremities of primaries had a slight brownish tinge; otherwise the complete plumage was pure black and white. The median coverts were tipped pure white.~~

~~The nominate race's breeding range extends from south of the Baltic and Moscow to the Balkans, while that of the *semitorquata* is from the Balkans to Transcaспia (Moreau -- *The Palaearctic-African Bird Migration Systems* -- 1972).~~

~~Another interesting occurrence was that of a male Ruppell's Warbler *Sylvia ruppelli* at Hal Far on 27th March, seen feeding amongst the foliage of a carob~~