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UNUSUAL GOLDEN COLOUR VARIATION OF GREEN-WINGED PYTILIA RINGED AT DEDEBEN, TSWALU KALAHARI RESERVE

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The Green-winged Pytilia *Pytilia melba* is a common resident in thickets in dry woodland in Acacia dominated veld and along drainage lines in the savanna areas in north-east South Africa (Dean 2005). This species is also sedentary, with some regular movements, especially during drought conditions. During such times they regularly visit water streams and puddles to drink water. Adult pytilia males are characterized by red plumage on their chin and foreheads and a rare yellow morph has been described and observed in the Kuruman areas of the Northern Cape (Dean 2005; Brickell 1999).

During fieldwork at Dedebeben, Tswalu Kalahari Reserve, Postmansburg (27° 17' 18.6"S 22° 29' 0.5"E) from 20 – 24 October 2013, mist netting was done in the *Acacia mellifera* / *A. erioloba* woodland near one of the hills of the Korannaberg range at Dedebeben. One of the mistnets was set up over a stream which originates from a small spring and several waxbills, buntings, doves and other birds visited the stream throughout the day to drink water. A total of 5 male and 1 female pytilias was ringed during four-day ringing sessions and several other unringed birds (males and females, Figure 1) were also observed near the stream net site. To our surprise

one of these males seemed to be in a transitional plumage with a golden head rather than the red coloration. It was also captured at the net site at the seeping stream on 22 October 2013 (ring no: AP01384, Figure 2). The bill was also horn coloured and not reddish as in "normal" plumage morph. Measurements and mass statistics are given in Table 1.

At first it was thought to be the one of the "yellow morphs" observed previously at Tswalu, but after Dylan Smith (pers comm.) (who has observed yellow morph birds at Tswalu) studied the pictures taken, it was decided that this male pytilia was not a yellow morph, but rather a bird in "transition plumage or with just a slightly paler chest than usual". The late Dr. Richard Liversidge also mentioned the occurrence of this yellow morph in the Postmansburg – Kuruman areas during a SAFRING bird ringing workshop held during March 2000.

Welch & Welch (1988) first described a new subspecies of the Green-winged Pytilia in Djibouti, East Africa where a population with much yellow in the plumage was located and photographed (no specimens were collected) and was considered to be a new subspecies (*race flavicaudata*). Similar birds with golden yellow plumage have also been reported from the Kuruman areas in the Northern Cape (Dean 2005). The yellowish bird from the Northern Cape appears to be a leucistic individual of the nominate race, of which the mitochondrial sequence is similar to other individuals of this species in its distribution range (Payne 2010). Payne (2010) also emphasizes that further studies are needed on the golden yellow morph of this species. Bird ringers in the Kuruman (Tswalu area) and Postmansburg areas are therefore requested to look out for this colour morph of Green-winged Pytilia, and if possible, also collect blood samples for DNA analysis.



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Figure 1: Normal Green-winged Pytilia captured and ringed at Dedebeben, Tswalu Kalahari reserve, Kuruman on 20 October 2013.



Table 1: Biometric data of Green-winged Pytilia *Pytilia melba* at Dedebeben, Tswalu Kalahari Reserve. Golden yellow bird (*)

Ring no	Date	Age	Sex	Culmen	Tarsus	wing	Tail	Mass (g)
AP01375	19/10/2013	adult	male			60	53	16
AP01376	19/10/2013	adult	female			58		
AP04062	19/10/2013	adult	male	13.2	17.1	59	49	14.6
AP34063	19/10/2013	adult	male	11.4	18.4	59	48	14.4
AP34077	20/10/2013	adult	male	13	19	58	49	14
AP01384 *	22/10/2013	adult	male	12.5	16.9	60	48	15



Figure 2: The “orange” colour variation of Green-winged Pytilia captured and ringed at Dedebeben, Tswalu Kalahari reserve, Kuruman on 22 October 2013.