

AGEING & SEXING

AGEING AND SEXING OF THE AFRICAN CITRIL

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The African Citril *Serinus citrinelloides*, particularly the southernmost race *S. c. hypostictus*, is a little-known bird, although quite common in its rather restricted range from Ethiopia through Kenya and Tanzania to Malawi.

The descriptions and illustrations, for instance, in Mackworth-Praed and Grant, *Birds of the southern third of Africa*, the same authors' *Birds of East Africa*, and Newman *et al.*, *Birds of Malawi*, bear little resemblance to each other, as do their descriptions of habits, calls and breeding schedules.

This study, based on the examination of 261 birds in the hand, with 52 re-examinations of 37 individuals, hopes to clear up at least some of the confusion. All the birds examined were trapped in the Southern (248) and Central (13) Regions of Malawi between September 1987 and September 1995.

The confusion over the African Citril's appearance is partly understandable as it is a very variable bird. There is considerable difference not only between different individuals, but between the same individual at different times. One would expect such a wide variation to be linked to sex, breeding or age, but aside from an identifiable first plumage, I was unable to establish any such linkages. The only significant factor I was able to isolate is the age of the plumage. The African Citril shares this variability with other related birds, particularly *Serinus serinus* (*cf.* Svensson, *Identification guide to European passerines*) and *Serinus mozambicus* (*pers. obs.*).

Serinus citrinelloides hypostictus in new plumage usually has the upperparts (crown, nape, scapulars, mantle, back, rump and upper tail-coverts) citron or lime green with the feathers having black to brownish centres, giving a streaked effect. The rump feathers and upper tail-coverts are much less prominently streaked or unstreaked and have grey bases. Occasionally these upperparts are mustard or olivaceous yellow.



African Citril *Serinus citrinelloides*: adult female.

New primaries and secondaries are blackish or darkish brown with narrow lime green or yellow margins on the outer web. The tertials have wide green or yellow margins. Wing coverts are blackish or dark brown with rather wide (2 mm–3 mm) lime green or yellow margins, though some adult birds have scattered coverts with buff margins instead. The retrices are blackish or dark brown with very thin lime green margins on the outer edges, with the outermost pair sometimes lacking the margin.

In new plumage, the lores and area just behind the eye are black to light grey. This 'mask' may include the chin and/or the front of the forehead, but often does not. Occasionally it is minutely streaked with light grey giving the appearance of heavy moult. The ear-coverts are grey with a variable amount of lime green on the fringes of the feathers. There is a supercilium which is variable in length and colour, being yellow, buff or a combination of the two, sometimes interrupted or irregular.

In new plumage, the chin is black, dark grey, grey or whitish. The throat and chest and flanks are lemon yellow, sometimes with scattered black to dusky centres. There is often an olivaceous wash, faint to quite bright, on the fringes of the throat and chest feathers.

The feathers of the chest and flanks have grey bases, giving a mottled appearance when they are ruffled. The feathers of the belly are black at the base, white in the middle and bright sulphur yellow at the tips. The under tail-coverts are yellow or whitish.

All feathers become noticeably lighter as the plumage ages. Blackish ones become brownish (wings and tail) or grey (face), citron becomes lime green or olivaceous yellow. The olive wash on the throat and chest disappears.

The upper mandible is medium horn, darker at culmen and tip; the lower mandible is light horn, becoming slightly pinkish at the base. Occasionally the entire bill is very faintly pinkish. The eye ring is medium to dark horn and the iris brown or dark brown. The legs and feet are light brown to pinkish horn.

The juvenile is usually browner than the adult, with supercilium and the edges of the flight feathers usually buff or cream, but sometimes mustard or lime green. The throat, chest and flanks are copiously streaked. The gape continues noticeably yellowish and swollen through the first year or longer. There is a partial post-fledging moult of primaries and sometimes secondaries; and occasionally, a more general one.



African Citril *Serinus citrinelloides*: adults, female left, male right.

Breeding takes place mainly from December to March. I also have one record from May and two from September. Several females with well-developed brood patches appeared to be in partial juvenile plumage with yellow and swollen gapes, apparently breeding in their first year. One captured male (sex confirmed by dissection) had a very well-developed active brood patch suggesting that both sexes incubate – a trait known in at least one other Serine, *S. albogularis*.

Moult, with exception of the partial moult of juveniles, takes place from September to December, exceptionally continuing into January. It proceeds in the usual passerine order, with the tail being dropped piecemeal and body moult beginning when the moult of the flight feathers and coverts is about two-thirds complete. The juvenile partial moult is usually in June through

August. Products of a September breeding carry out a partial moult the following January.

The song is a variable very high-pitched penetrating whistle with tunes reminiscent of the Blackcapped Tchagra. Citrils are generally seen in Malawi in pairs or small family parties, but larger flocks gather at food sources, and up to 20 have been netted simultaneously.

Mensural data (min-mean-max):

Wing: 60-62-67 mm; Culmen: 9,5-11,1-12,5; Tarsus: 11,5-14,5-16; Tail: 37-47-56; Mass: 10,6-13,3-16,2 g.

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AGEING AND SEXING OF EUROPEAN SWALLOW *HIRUNDO RUSTICA*

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The following guidelines for attempting to age and sex European (Barn) Swallows *Hirundo rustica* were supplied by Professor Anders Møller and I trust this information will encourage ringers to record more details on Schedule 1 forms. Please note that the sexing criteria apply only to adult birds. Other constraints are listed with the relevant criteria.

AGEING

Colouration of back and top of head

Adult: blue/black.

Juvenile: dull brown.

Forehead and chin badge

Adult: chestnut as per field guides.

Juvenile: white to dirty white, gets darker towards end of summer as bird matures.

SEXING

Tail length of outer retrices

Female: 75 mm – 104 mm.

Male: 95 mm – 150 mm.

Due to moult, this will only apply after arrival on old feather and before departure when new outer retrices are fully developed.

Tail markings

White patch length on underside of outer retrices.

Female: 12 mm – 25 mm, tends to be shorter and broader.

Male: 28 mm – 45 mm, tends to be elongated and thinner.

Feather needs to be approximately 60% developed to show full length of patch.

Belly colouration

Female: white to cream.

Male: often darker with rust-coloured colouration.

NB. This method cannot be used in isolation as many males do not have a darker belly.