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FEATURED PHOTO

FIELD SEPARATION OF BISHOPS (*EUPLECTES*) FROM NORTH AMERICAN EMBERIZIDS

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Any puzzlement readers might feel over the identity of the bird on the back cover only serves to strengthen the point I have chosen to illustrate. This species' nondescript sparrowlike appearance has caused field identification problems through much of California in recent years. Its unfamiliarity stems from its absence from North American field guides and avifaunal works and is symbolic of the increasing naturalized populations of non-native bird species that now thrive in many human-altered habitats in California.

Bishops and widowbirds of the genus *Euplectes* are native to sub-Saharan Africa but have been introduced into several other regions of the world (Long 1981). Little is known of the history of establishment of the Orange Bishop (*Euplectes franciscanus*, also known as the Northern Red Bishop) in California; individuals or small groups were noted in urban and suburban habitats of coastal southern California by the late 1970s (pers. obs.). High rates of importation, along with ongoing modifications of lowland habitats, have promoted a burgeoning population of this species in coastal California. Flocks of 50 to 100 bishops are now routinely noted in some flood-control basins near Los Angeles (W. S. Smithson pers. comm.). The female or basic-plumaged male Orange Bishop shown here was photographed at the Sepulveda Wildlife Area, Los Angeles Co., California, on 9 December 1995.

The male Orange Bishop in alternate plumage can be confused only with the closely related Red Bishop (*E. orix*), but females and basic-plumaged males are much trickier. Johnson and Horner (1986), Craig (1992), and Zimmerman et al. (1996) treated the identification of this species, but only with respect to similar bishop species. In North America there is a simpler hurdle to overcome: distinguishing bishops from native granivores. The streaked upperparts, lateral crown stripes, and finely streaked buff-washed breast bring to mind certain of our *Ammodramus* sparrows and even the much larger Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*). Although none of these species closely resembles a bishop, birders may be tempted to seek a "default" identification from the collection of species illustrated in their field guides.

North American birders encountering a dull, streaky bishop should take note of several characters. First, the tail is short and the rectrices are rather broad and blunt, unlike the narrower, "spiked" rectrices of *Ammodramus* sparrows and the Bobolink. The short tail is often flicked open—occasionally when the bird is at rest and frequently if agitated. The bill is rather heavy and wholly pinkish (unlike *Ammodramus* sparrows). Finally, the tertials, wing coverts, scapulars and back feathers have simple dark centers and narrow pale fringes, lacking the complex internal and subterminal markings found on many of these feathers in our grassland sparrows and Bobolinks. Male bishops are larger than females (Craig and Manson 1981). The identification references noted above provide details on distinguishing several similar small species of *Euplectes*.

In the increasingly human-dominated landscapes of much of North America, birders will need to be aware of identification pitfalls posed by exotics; mastering the bishops is a good place to start!

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