

Tiaris bicolor (Black-faced Grassquit)

Family: Emberizidae (Buntings and American Sparrows)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Black-faced grassquit, *Tiaris bicolor*.

[<http://www.hbw.com/ibc/photo/black-faced-grassquit-tiaris-bicolor/pair-wire>, downloaded 5 March 2017]

TRAITS. The black-faced grassquit *Tiaris bicolor* is a small species of bird related to Darwin's finches. The males and females are similar in size (Fig. 1), both being approximately 10-11cm in length and weighing around 10g, with an average wingspan of approximately 17cm (Sdakotabirds, 2017). The male's face, throat, breast and belly are all shiny black, with the back being olive-green and the underparts are pale greyish olive. The females are light brown, with the underparts being paler (Neotropical Birds, 2017). The black-faced grassquit has a short, sharp, sturdy beak that is suited to its diet, and tail is approximately 25% of its entire length. The feet facilitate perching, with three toes pointing forward and one pointing backward; it does not walk but hops while on a flat surface.

DISTRIBUTION. *Tiaris bicolor* is found mainly in the Caribbean region, north to the Bahamas (rarely in Cuba), and south to northern South America (Fig. 2). It is also found in Tobago, but not Trinidad (Neotropical Birds, 2017).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. *Tiaris bicolor* is found in various open habitats such as grassy fields and savannas, agricultural areas, roadsides, edges of forests and clearings, in addition to suburban areas (Sdakotabirds, 2017). It is typically seen on the ground to a few metres above ground level, and is diurnal in activity. In display flight, males fly slowly with quick vibrating wing beats, and uttering its characteristic buzzing call (ffrench, 1973). Males usually sing from a semi-open perch a few metres above the ground, as well as hopping boldly on open ground while foraging.

FOOD AND FEEDING. Feeds primarily on grass and weed seeds, occasionally on fruits and berries. Seen foraging on the ground or within low vegetation during the daytime. It also feeds on small insects, mainly during the breeding season (Sdakotabirds, 2017). Can be found foraging for food singly, in twos or in groups, but roosts singly (ffrench, 1973).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. The black-faced grassquit is not a solitary bird, as it will gather in pairs, or small to large groups to feed and forage, depending on the food source size. The male becomes very territorial at the start of the mating season when the rains come, chasing off rival adult males with full adult coloration (Oiseaux-Birds, 2017). Juvenile males that lack black coloration on the face and are duller and less olive green are tolerated, as they are no threat to the male's territory and mating chances (Fig. 3). They are a monogamous species and will be found breeding in small colonies. Their density in an area is largely dependent on the availability of food to supply group feeding, otherwise they feed in smaller groups, pairs or singly.

REPRODUCTION. The breeding season of this species varies according to the range (Oiseaux-Birds, 2017). In Tobago, breeding begins at the start of the rainy season from June to November, as well as in January (ffrench, 1973). In the rest of the West Indies, it can breed all year round. At the start of the rainy season, the males become territorial, chasing away other fully adult males. Males perform display flights, flying slowly with short, rapid wing beats, with momentary gliding periods, followed by explosive whistles (Restall et al., 2007). The nest is constructed by both male and female, domed shaped, built loosely with grass, lined with finer grass, with a small entrance at the top (ffrench, 1973), situated 2-5m above ground in low vegetation. Clutch size is 2-3 eggs, white marked with pale brown. Incubation time is 12 days, done only by the female, but both parents feed the hatchlings. The pair will nest immediately again if their brood is lost.

BEHAVIOUR. The hatchlings are tiny, featherless and defenceless, but growth rate is rapid, fledging 9-12 days later (Fig. 4). This early fledging is most likely an adaptation to counteract probable nest disturbance (Avicultural Society, 2017). Young males only develop the black coloration and olive-green sheen when fully adult.

APPLIED ECOLOGY. This species is listed as Least Concern because it is common through much of its very large range, it is also able to thrive in areas modified by human activity, and feeds opportunistically from bird feeders, crop gardens etc. (Oiseaux-Birds, 2017). The population is said to be on the rise with the making of new viable habitats by humans, even though human activity reduces their natural habitats. There are no major natural threats to the species.

REFERENCES

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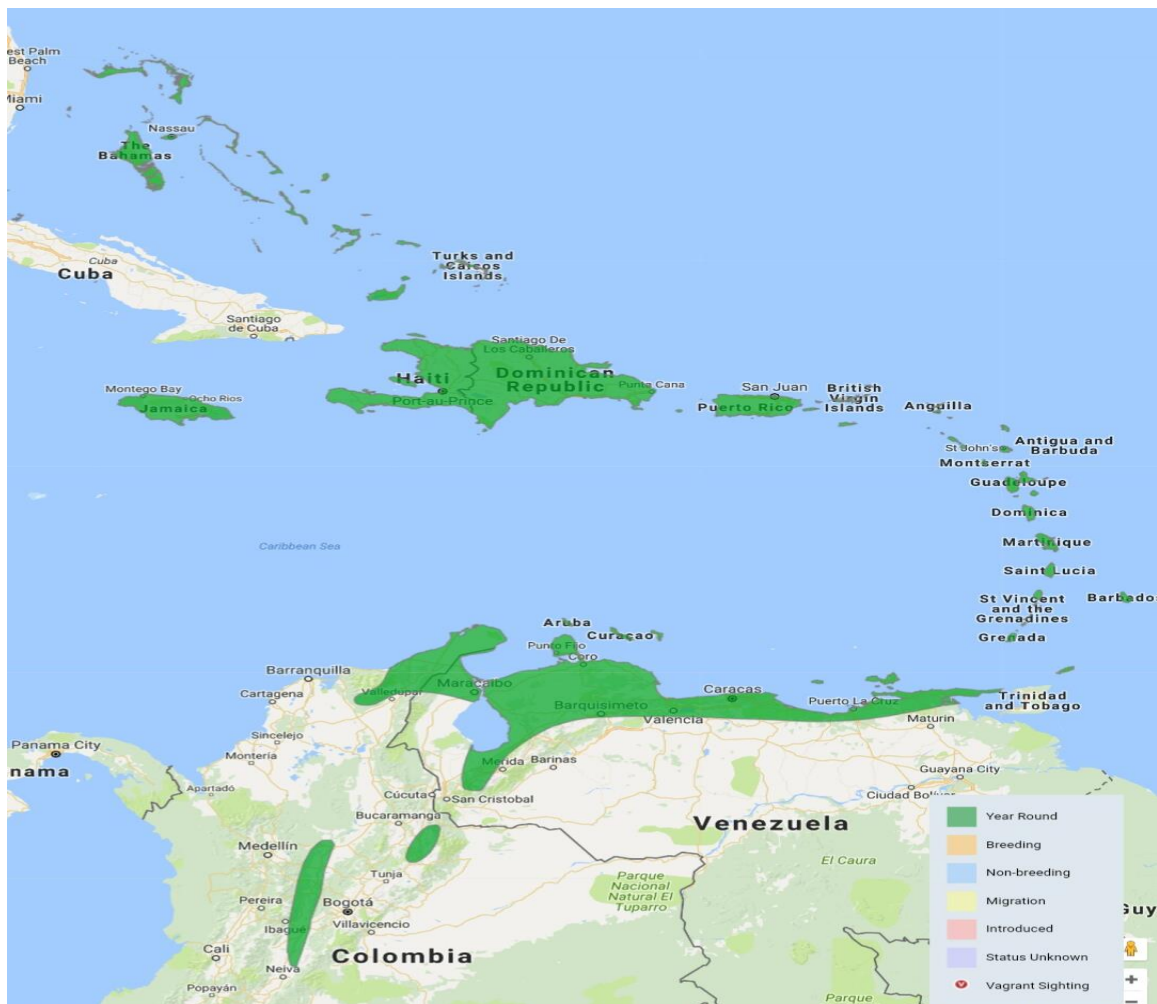


Fig. 2. Distribution of black-faced grassquit, *Tiaris bicolor*.

[<http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/map/?cn=Black-faced%20Grassquit&sn=Tiaris%20bicolor&sc=bkfga&species=630636>, downloaded 5 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Juvenile male black-faced grassquit.

[<http://www.hbw.com/ibc/photo/black-faced-grassquit-tiaris-bicolor/male-juvenile-perched-and-singing-voice-recorded>, downloaded 5 March 2017]



Fig. 4. *Tiaris bicolor* fledgling perched at nest entrance.

[<http://www.hbw.com/ibc/photo/black-faced-grassquit-tiaris-bicolor/juvenil-two-weeks-old-ready-fly>, downloaded 5 March 2017]

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