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FIRST RECORD OF THE ORCHARD ORIOLE (*ICTERUS SPURIUS*) ON MONTSERRAT

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Abstract: On 12 April 2011 we observed a second-year male Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*) in suburban dry gardens on Mongo Hill, Montserrat, West Indies. To our knowledge, this is the first record of this species on Montserrat.

Key words: Icterus spurius, Lesser Antilles, Montserrat, Orchard Oriole

Resumen: PRIMER REGISTRO DE *ICTERUS SPURIUS* EN MONTSERRAT. El 12 de abril de 2011 observamos un macho del segundo año de *Icterus spurius* en los jardines secos suburbanos de Mongo Hill, Montserrat, Indias Occidentales. Hasta donde conocemos, este es el primer registro de esta especie en Montserrat.

Palabras clave: Antillas Menores, *Icterus spurius*, Montserrat

Résumé : PREMIÈRE MENTION D'ORIOLE DES VERGERS (*ICTERUS SPURIUS*) À MONTSERRAT. Le 12 avril 2011, un Oriole des vergers (*Icterus spurius*) mâle de deuxième année a été observé dans les jardins secs de la banlieue sur Mongo Hill, Montserrat, Antilles. Il semblerait que ce soit la première mention de cette espèce sur Montserrat.

Mots clés : Icterus spurius, Montserrat, Oriole des vergers, Petites Antilles

During the annual forest bird monitoring on Montserrat in April 2011, we observed an unusual bird in dry open habitats on Montserrat that was instantly identified as a species of oriole, but clearly different from the only locally occurring species, the Montserrat Oriole (*Icterus oberi*). The plumage characteristics are consistent with a second-year male Orchard Oriole (*I. spurius*) in its first alternate plumage, which represents the first record of this species from Montserrat.

OBSERVATION

On 12 April 2011, we heard a typical oriole call (a sharp *chuck chuck* note) in a small patch of dry thorny shrubs standing in suburban gardens on Mongo Hill (approximate elevation 350 m), on the northern slopes of the Centre Hills of Montserrat, West Indies. Because the habitat was unusual for the only locally resident oriole species, the critically endangered Montserrat Oriole, which inhabits closed forests and more mesic habitats (Arendt *et al*. 1999, Hilton *et al*. 2003), we closely examined the vocalizing bird. The short calls were not suitable to reliably identify the oriole to species level.

At approximately 1045, the bird flew from the dry shrubs to a solitary standing fruit tree and perched clearly visible on top of the tree (5–6 m above ground) for about 40 sec before it disappeared within the canopy. During this brief period of clear visibility SO was able to record distinguishing field characteristics using 10×40 binoculars from a distance of 15–20 m.

The bird had the same overall appearance as the locally resident Montserrat Oriole, a characteristic triangular bluish-black beak and black legs. Unlike the Montserrat Oriole, the bird had a bright yellow belly and flanks. The lores, throat, and bib were solid black, forming a prominent black tongue-shaped patch extending from the face to the upper breast. There was no indication of any chestnut-colored plumage on either the underside or the ear coverts. The wings were dark brown, with clearly visible whitish edges to the secondaries, and two narrow whitish wing-bars along the margins of the median and greater coverts. The crown, nape, and upper back were olive greenish-yellow, much darker than the belly, and roughly reminiscent of the color of a female Montserrat Oriole. The rump and tail could not be observed in detail. Both of us were familiar with the Montserrat Oriole from repeated observations during surveys, and immediately realized that the bird belonged to a different species. A field guide was consulted after returning from the field to identify the observed bird (Raffaele *et al*. 2003, Arlott 2010).

DISCUSSION

The observed field characteristics do not match any known plumage of the locally resident Montserrat Oriole. Three oriole species are non-resident

migrants or visitors to the West Indies, and only the Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*) and the Orchard Oriole are considered potential visitors to the Antilles and Montserrat in particular (Rising and Flood 1998, Jaramillo and Burke 1999, Garrido *et al*. 2005). The distinct solid black throat and bib of the bird we observed is inconsistent with any known plumage variation of the Baltimore Oriole (Jaramillo and Burke 1999), but is fully consistent with the first alternate plumage of male Orchard Orioles (Scharf and Kren 1996).

The Orchard Oriole breeds in eastern North America and winters from central Mexico south to Venezuela and Colombia (Scharf and Kren 1996, Jaramillo and Burke 1999). During migration the species is considered a transient in Cuba and Jamaica, and a rare vagrant on Hispaniola (Garrido *et al*. 2005). To our knowledge, the Orchard Oriole has never been recorded on Montserrat (Jaramillo and Burke 1999, Raffaele *et al*. 2003, Garrido *et al*. 2005, Lepage 2011). However, in October 2008, an Orchard Oriole was banded on the island of Guadeloupe (Dobson *et al*. 2009), which is only 65 km south-east of Montserrat. On 13 December 2006, one bird was observed and photographed on Trinidad (Kenefick 2008).

The timing of our observation is consistent with the species' known timing of spring migration. Orchard Orioles leave their South American winter quarters around March and pass through Central America between late March and late April (Scharf and Kren 1996, Jaramillo and Burke 1999). They arrive on breeding grounds in eastern North America between early April (Texas) and mid May (Minnesota, Massachusetts). We conclude that the bird we observed was a second-year male Orchard Oriole in its first alternate plumage on northbound spring migration. This observation therefore constitutes the first record of the species on the island of Montserrat, and the first spring migration record in the Lesser Antilles.

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