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**A Yellow-faced Grassquit in Florida, With Comments on
Importation of This and Related Species**

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On the morning of 7 July 1990, the Smiths were driving on an unimproved section of Biscayne Drive (SW 288th Street) through a citrus grove west of 207th Avenue in unincorporated Dade County, Florida (25°30'N, 80°32'W), about 5 km northwest of Homestead. As they approached, a tiny bird flew along the adjacent telephone line and stopped to sing a simple, single-pitched, insect-like trill. From their travels in the Caribbean region they recognized the bird as a male Yellow-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris olivacea*). Eventually they studied the grassquit leisurely through a 40x Questar, both on the wire and ground. The small finch was about 10 cm in length. Its upperparts, including most of the crown and forehead, were olive. Its eye-line was a bright orange-yellow, heavy in front of the eye, arching over and becoming thinner and whiter behind the eye. There was a thin black line above the eye-line, meeting over the bill, and a black loreal stripe through the eye. The dark eye itself had a whitish partial eye-ring below. The grassquit's throat was bright orange-yellow, framed in dull black; the black extended in a line up to the base of the bill. Its cheeks were largely olive, concolor with the crown and back, and showed a few black flecks. The breast was dull blackish, slightly pale-flecked, and stood out against its grayish olive flanks and belly. Its underparts became still paler toward the vent. The tail was essentially concolor with the adjacent body, but was slightly browner. Its legs were blackish, with paler toes. The bill was blackish and relatively large and conical, giving the bird a somewhat flat-headed appearance. No abnormal wear was evident either on the plumage or the toes.

After its initial discovery, the Yellow-faced Grassquit sang repeatedly for several minutes, and then flew into the adjacent citrus grove for a short period before it returned to sing from a section of wire about 100 m farther west. This behavior continued regularly for the first two days and ultimately covered a span of about 300 m along the telephone line. As more birders arrived, the bird became increasingly shy. The grassquit first moved its primary singing post to a sprinkler head within the citrus grove, about 100 m south of the road, and later sang from bare, low branches in an adjoining avocado grove. We observed the bird to feed in the weedy grasses between the rows of trees and also at grassy spots on unpaved roads around the grove, sometimes singing directly from the ground. By 11 July the frequency of song had decreased and the bird had become increasingly difficult to locate. We are not aware of any sightings after 12 July.

The Yellow-faced Grassquit resides throughout the Greater Antilles and in Latin America from northeastern Mexico south to Colombia and northwestern Venezuela (AOU 1983). The species shows a fair amount of geographic variation, particularly between the West Indies and Latin America (Ridgway 1901). An examination by the Smiths of an extensive series at the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge, Massachusetts (MCZ), showed that populations from Central America typically have more extensively black breasts, cheeks, and crowns, unlike the olive crown, cheeks and upper flanks typical of West Indian populations. Those from Cozumel are intermediate in blackness, whereas those from Puerto Rico, at the east end of the species' range, are brighter and show a somewhat sharper contrast between the black breast and yellow underparts. Although variation in Central and particularly South American specimens (Hellmayr 1938; pers. obs.) makes absolute subspecific identification of some less-black individuals impossible, this Yellow-faced Grassquit's plumage was entirely consistent with the nominate race found on Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, and the Caymans. Cuba, about 250 km south of Homestead, is the nearest site within its normal range. There, it is common in cleared areas, even on cays off the northern coast (Garrido and Garcia 1975).

The Yellow-faced Grassquit is uncommon but not unknown as a cagebird in the United States. It has been specifically protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act since at least 1977 (Title 50, Code Federal Regulations, Part 10.13). There were 196 birds imported between 1968 and 1972 (Banks 1970; Banks and Clapp 1972; Clapp and Banks 1973a, 1973b; Clapp 1975), compared with about a million canaries (*Serinus* sp.) over the same period (Banks 1976). Where stated, all imported Yellow-faced Grassquits came from Central America or via Europe. A small population of the species, evidently also from Central American stock, became established in Hawaii around 1974 (Pratt et al. 1987, R. Pyle *in litt.*). Since 1984, only six Yellow-faced Grassquits were imported legally through Miami, all from Costa Rica and destined for the San Diego Zoo (USDA unpublished data, *vide* C. Miles). In September 1989 an illegal shipment of birds from Mexico, confiscated in south Florida, included a number of Yellow-faced Grassquits. In July 1990 the survivors were still being held as evidence and were all accounted for (C. Miles, pers. comm.). These grassquits were inspected by the Smiths and all were of the black-cheeked, black-crowned Central American race (*T. o. pusilla*).

The Smiths located two pairs of Yellow-faced Grassquits, clearly also from Central American stock, for sale at \$150/pair at a major south Florida bird retailer about 15 km from the Biscayne Drive site. This is several times the cost of most finch species, but Latin American expatriates occasionally request them and are willing to pay their going price (L. Ward, pers. comm.). The dealer had recently acquired these birds, the first available for sale in several months, from a breeder in Hialeah, the only known commercial aviculturist for this species nearby. The breeder was contacted to see whether he knew of any escapes. The breeder said that he never had lost any himself and suggested that anyone owning the species would be inclined to take special care of them, because of their value.

Although there has been no legal bird trade between Cuba or any other Greater Antillean country and the United States for many years, there is always the possibility of escape or release from an illegal shipment. The smuggling of birds into southern Florida, including finches from Cuba, is known to occur (e.g. Miami *Herald*, 20 July 1988). The particular shipment cited by the *Herald* contained many Cuban Grassquits (*T. canora*), a species supposedly popular among Cuban refugees because of its melodious song, but no adult male Yellow-faced Grassquits, whose song is notably unspectacular. The shipment actually did contain at least three juvenile male Yellow-faced Grassquits, but this fact did not become apparent until the birds subsequently molted (C. Burch, pers. comm.). The smugglers were convicted and sentenced to up to two years in federal prison (Miami *Herald*, 29 Nov. 1988). According to Brudenell-Bruce (1975), a few Yellow-faced Grassquits, being shipped to Europe in 1963 along with several hundred Cuban Grassquits, were released accidentally

in Nassau, Bahamas and became established on New Providence. Whereas the latter species remains common there even now, the Yellow-faced Grassquits died out very quickly (Green 1977). Thus, Yellow-faced Grassquits occasionally are shipped from the Greater Antilles, and may even reach the United States, but apparently only accidentally and in very small numbers.

Although the Yellow-faced Grassquit apparently has not been previously documented in the wild in Florida, there seems no *a priori* reason why the species could not occur naturally. Its wing-to-length ratio is 0.51, compared to 0.49 for the Black-faced Grassquit (*T. bicolor*) (Ridgway 1901), suggesting equivalent flight capability. The Black-faced, which occurs widely in the Bahamas but not in Cuba, has been found in Florida on several occasions since 1871 (Howell 1932, AOU 1983). The historical record of vagrancy by West Indian birds to southern Florida suggests that species found in the Bahamas, including others which have no significant Cuban populations such as the Bahama Mockingbird (*Mimus gundlachii*) and the Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*), occur more regularly than those absent from the Bahamas. This phenomenon may simply reflect the region's prevailing easterly winds; however, the winds are not perpetually easterly and often are southerly. Thus, species found in Cuba but not the Bahamas, including the Scaly-naped Pigeon (*Columba squamosa*), Ruddy Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon montana*), Antillean Palm Swift (*Tachornis phoenicobia*), Cuban Martin (*Progne cryptoleuca*), and Tawny-shouldered Blackbird (*Agelaius humeralis*), have all been found in southern Florida, albeit rarely (AOU 1983). Moreover, within the last decade, both the Cave Swallow (*Hirundo fulva*) and Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*), neither recorded from the Bahamas but both found in Cuba, have colonized Florida. Thus, avian vagrancy from Cuba, or elsewhere in the Caribbean, is evidently possible. Several records of Cuban Grassquits in Florida between 1951 and 1980, including a breeding pair in North Miami around 1960 (Abramson and Stevenson 1961), were presumed escapees; the species is a popular cagebird and the records occurred somewhat in synchrony with waves of human immigration from Cuba. A 19th century Florida record of this species (Howell 1932) is in error (Austin 1963).

In the final analysis, the provenance of an individual bird such as this Yellow-faced Grassquit can never be determined with absolute certainty. Nevertheless, given its discovery after the species' primary breeding season when birds often wander, its increasing wariness under human pressure, its appearance as probably being a different subspecies from that normally found in captivity in the United States, the nearness of that subspecies' natural range, the species' relative lack of popularity among local bird fanciers, and the absence of any physical evidence suggesting prior captivity, this Yellow-faced Grassquit does seem a plausible natural vagrant to Florida.

We especially thank Cliff Miles of the USDA APHIS-VS Miami Import-Export Center for information concerning recent local bird importation; Bill Zeigler, Ron Johnson and Carl Burch of Metrozoo for information and an opportunity to inspect confiscated grassquits; Robert Pyle for information concerning the Yellow-faced Grassquit's origin and status in Hawaii; Linda Ward for information concerning the species' local status in aviculture and the pet trade; Raymond Paynter for access to the collection at the MCZ; and William B. Robertson, Jr. for suggesting improvements to an earlier draft of this note. Sonny and Jason Bass, Virginia Edens, Roger Hammer, David Lysinger, John Ogden, Bill and Betty Robertson, Kitty Suarez, Mickey Wheeler, and others all hurried to confirm the discovery, while Dan Hodgman, Mike Hunt, and Norman Sutton helped arrange or allowed birders to have limited access to the property. Color slides of the Yellow-faced Grassquit near Homestead taken by the Smiths and by Hoffman have been deposited in the archives of the Florida Ornithological Society at the Florida Museum of Natural History (File no. FOS 78).

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