

Homosexual mounting of Iago Sparrows after ship-assisted arrival in the Netherlands

On 19 May 2013, four Iago Sparrows *Passer iagoensis* (two males and two females) aboard the MV *Plancius* arrived ship-assisted in the Netherlands from the Cape Verde Islands (Ebels et al 2014). They are the first known wild individuals of the species to have reached Europe. In the late afternoon of the same day, I was aboard the *Plancius*, docked in the harbour of Hansweert, Zeeland, to observe the sparrows. Although new land was open to them for colonization, the sparrows had remained on deck all day. Two females were sitting on a gangway, sheltered from the

wind, with their heads tucked away in the feathers of their backs. One male still resided inside the ship, on the bridge, where he had become friends with the captain. This bird was breathing heavily through his slightly opened bill and appeared a bit wobbly (plate 205). I could easily take him in my hand. Because I suspected the sparrow had unsuccessfully attempted to leave the ship and collided with the glass windows, I released him from his confinement. He did not fly from my hand, so I placed him on the ship's deck. Immediately, the other male showed up (plate 206) and attacked the 'captain's sparrow'. I observed this aggressive behaviour from close quarters. Apparently alerted by the *tschurr-tschurr-tschurr* calls of the males, both females joined the scene but kept a distance of c 3 m from the fighting cocks. The fight lasted

205 Iago Sparrow / Kaapverdische Mus *Passer iagoensis*, male, on board of MV *Plancius*, Hansweert, Zeeland, Netherlands, 19 May 2013 (Kees Moeliker). On bridge. **206-208** Iago Sparrows / Kaapverdische Mussen *Passer iagoensis*, males, on board of MV *Plancius*, Hansweert, Zeeland, Netherlands, 19 May 2013 (Kees Moeliker). Males fighting (plate 207) and mounting (plate 208).



for c. 50 sec, during which time the 'captain's sparrow' was bitten vigorously and both birds tumbled over each other (plate 207). The moment the aggressive display ended, one of the males (I lost track of the individual sparrows) assumed a crouched position with his wings slightly drooped. Then the other male mounted the crouched male, pecked him in the neck and crown, and tried to copulate. I could not see if cloacal contact was established. The mounting and pecking took c. 15 sec; halfway through that time, the soliciting male left the submissive position but the copulation attempt continued (plate 208). Then, all four sparrows calmed down and started to feed on bread-crumbs.

Discussion

Homosexual mounting was unknown in Iago Sparrow. What is known of the sexual behaviour of the species is summarized in Cramp & Perrins (1994) by Denis Summers-Smith: 'Copulation occurs in vicinity of nest. Female becomes dominant at this stage. Male invites copulation by hopping around female in similar position (wings drooped, not held out or shivered and slightly rotated [...]) but with wing-feathers and rump ruffled. Unresponsive female pecks at male, but when ready invites copulation by crouching.' Besides the homosexual nature of the display, it is remarkable that the mounting took place outside the breeding season (August-March, according to Summers-

Smith 1988), far away from their natural range and not near a nest. Homosexual behaviour (same-sex mounting, courtship and/or pair bonding) is well known in birds. Bagemihl (1999) documents over 130 species as engaging in same-sex sexual behaviour and MacFarlane et al (2010) amassed a list of 93 species from the published literature where homosexual behaviour has been observed under non-captive conditions. In this list, birds range from as large as ostrich *Struthio* to as small as Anna's Hummingbird *Calypte anna* but, remarkably, sparrows are lacking. What is described here, is therefore the first documented case of male-male mounting in any sparrow of the genus *Passer*.

References

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