

The taxonomic status of the Italian Sparrow — *Passer italiae* (Vieillot 1817): Speciation by stabilised hybridisation? A critical analysis

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Abstract

Since its description the taxonomic status of the Italian Sparrow *Passer italiae* (Vieillot 1817) has changed repeatedly according to the speciation concepts applied. Due to external similarities with hybrid sparrow individuals the hypothesis that *italiae* is a stabilised hybrid form between *Passer domesticus* (L. 1758) and *P. hispaniolensis* (Temm. 1820) has deeply influenced the discussion although some authors do not even accept hybrid forms as taxa. Based upon a comprehensive review of the literature it is shown that the postulation of a hybrid origin of *italiae* is inadmissible, being based on a methodologically circular argument. There is no convincing proof of stabilised hybridisation. Therefore *Passer italiae* is a real taxon and not a hybrid form. Applying the Biospecies Concept according to current knowledge of distributional facts and the lack of reproductive isolation between *italiae* and *hispaniolensis* I argue that these two forms are conspecific. *Passer domesticus* is not conspecific with them. According to the rules of zoological nomenclature the taxa have to be designated as *Passer italiae italiae* (Vieillot 1817) and *Passer italiae hispaniolensis* (Temminck 1820).

Key words: Species concept, subspecies, biospecies, *Passer domesticus*, *Passer hispaniolensis*

Introduction

The taxonomic status of the Italian Sparrow has been subject to scientific debate for nearly 200 years without a satisfactory clarification of its position. Originally described as a species (*Fringilla italiae* Vieillot 1817) its affiliation has changed constantly with the alteration of viewpoints and methods of systematics. This is all the more remarkable because work on the obviously close relationship between the House [*Passer domesticus* (L. 1758)], Willow or Spanish [*P. hispaniolensis* (Temminck 1820)] and Italian Sparrow