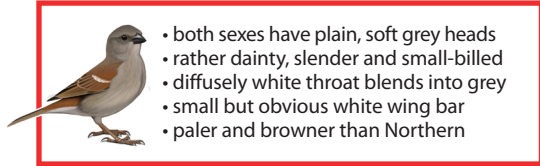


Southern Grey-headed Sparrow

Passer diffusus (Gryskopmossie)

ALT NAME(S): Grey-headed Sparrow (split)



- both sexes have plain, soft grey heads
- rather dainty, slender and small-billed
- diffusely white throat blends into grey
- small but obvious white wing bar
- paler and browner than Northern

This modest, dull species is the 6th most common LBJ.

HABITAT Versatile; occurs in most open habitats with some trees. Mostly found in woodlands (e.g. thornveld, miombo and mopane) but benefits from cultivation and spread of alien trees, and now also occurs in parks and gardens, at lodges, around cattle pens, farms and villages, at edges of plantations, etc.

STATUS Fairly common to common (but generally less numerous than other sparrows in urban areas). Has expanded its range into W Cape in recent years. Mostly resident. Singly or in pairs but more sociable in winter, when small flocks (rarely >100) coalesce.

IDENTIFICATION A fairly abundant and widespread but rather unobtrusive, quiet and reserved LBJ; due to dull plumage unfamiliar to non-birders. May be seen flying overhead, inspecting potential nest cavities or walking or hopping on the ground, often with other sparrows and assorted seed-eaters. Paradoxically, **dull plumage** is diagnostic, with **plain, smooth, soft grey head** the most obvious feature. Below, subtly different shades of grey (palest on throat and undertail) with a slight buffy wash. Above, grey nape **blends into unstreaked grey-brown mantle**. Rump and shoulder **rufous**, the latter with a small but **usually obvious white bar** (formed by white tips of inner median coverts). Bill black when breeding, pinkish horn with a dull yellow base in winter. — Sexes: Alike. — Juv: Duller with a brown wash and lightly mottled mantle. — Var: Minor.

CONFUSION RISKS See *Northern* for comparison to that species. Easily told from other *sparrows* by unadorned grey head. In size, shape and colours quite like *Lesser Honeyguide* (p. 41) but lacks white outer tail and green hue. Compare *juv. whydahs* (p. 322-325).

BEHAVIOUR Hops or walks with small shuffling steps. Usually close to water and drinks and bathes often (alternatively uses dew on leaves). Feeds on open ground e.g. trampled or overgrazed plains, lawns, recently burnt grass, road verges, cement and even inside buildings. Flies high and fast when flushed, while giving nasal calls. Spends much time in trees, or checking holes in dead wood or under roofs.

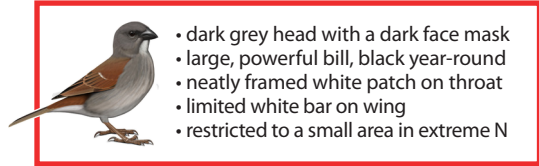
BIOLOGY Food seed, small fruits, nectar and insects. Lays 3-4 speckled eggs on a bed of grass, feathers, hair, etc. placed in a cavity, such as a tree crevice, barbet hole, swallow or swift nest, pipe, post, nest box or roof.

VOICE Song is a slow, irregular series of simple, typical sparrow chirps e.g. *chirp*, *cheer'ip*, *chreeu*... Often located by flight call when passing overhead: a nasal *zeeec* or *zeeut*. Also listen for short alarm rattle: an excited 0.5 s burst of chattering e.g. *churrit'ti'tit*.

Northern Grey-headed Sparrow

Passer griseus (Witkeelmossie)

ALT NAME(S): Somali/Sudan/Uganda Grey-headed Sparrow



- dark grey head with a dark face mask
- large, powerful bill, black year-round
- neatly framed white patch on throat
- limited white bar on wing
- restricted to a small area in extreme N

The standard grey-headed sparrow in W and C Africa but its range extends only marginally across the Zambezi.

HABITAT Woodland and savanna, but in Southern Africa mostly recorded near humans: around villages and towns, in cultivated areas and at safari lodges.

STATUS Fairly common but localised. Mostly resident. In pairs or small groups, but forms flocks of >50 in winter, often with Southern and other seed-eaters.

IDENTIFICATION Despite many claimed records from elsewhere, the best bet for seeing this species is a visit to the N borders of the region, especially the small zone between Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe and Kasane in Botswana. Here this species is common, conspicuous and tame at camp sites, lodges and villages. Very close to Southern in appearance and behaviour. Looks formidable with a **powerful black bill**, **'mean' expression**, **dark grey head** and **rich chestnut mantle**. Note **neat rectangular white throat patch** and **limited white wing bar**. — Sexes: Alike. — Juv: Paler and browner; mantle faintly mottled. — Var: Minor.

CONFUSION RISKS *Southern* very similar; separation at times very difficult and no infallible distinctions are known. Surest way is direct comparison in mixed flocks when size and mass difference is noticeable: Northern is a touch bigger (though often looks more streamlined and muscular, less 'soft' and fat, partly due to somewhat flatter crown). Northern also has a slightly longer tail and obviously stronger bill. Bill said to be black year-round (yellow-horn in Southern in winter). Above richer, darker chestnut than Southern, mantle contrasting more strongly with grey head. Northern's head is on average darker grey, with a dark mask giving it a 'meaner' look. Below darker grey and less uniform with a crisp white rectangle on throat neatly framed by darker sides and contrasting strongly with breast (transition more subtle in Southern, but a few very similar). White bar on wing averages smaller than Southern's, and is sometimes absent or obscured.

BEHAVIOUR As for Southern. Becomes tame around human habitation. Roost communally. Rests in a shady tree when hot. Forages on the ground, in bushes or in trees, often alongside other small granivores.

BIOLOGY Food seeds, flowers, small fruits, bread and miscellaneous other scraps. Nest an untidy grass dome placed in a hollow in thatch, among roof beams, in a pipe or in tangled branches; rarely openly in a tree. Also uses nests of kingfishers, swallows and barbets.

VOICE Song is a halting series of simple chirps; like Southern's but said to be more variable and includes higher notes. Alarm call a harsh scolding churring.

GREY-HEADED SPARROWS: Members of a complex of African sparrows often treated as 1 species. Southern widespread in diverse habitats: mainly savanna and woodland, but also around humans e.g. gardens, farms, cultivation, villages, plantation edges. Northern only in far N, mostly near settlements.

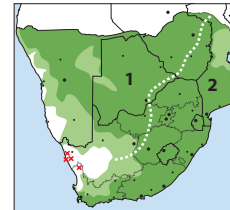
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow

Passer diffusus (Gryskopmossie)

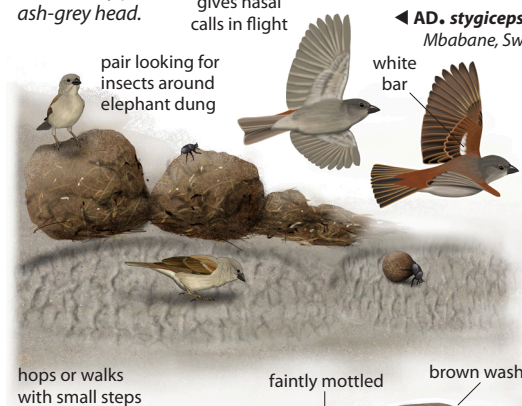
L: 15-16 cm M: 20-(25)-30 g

[1: *P. d. diffusus*; 2: *P. d. stygiiceps*].

Common but unimposing sparrow; easily overlooked due to dull colours, or when in a flock with other seed-eaters (e.g. less boisterous than urban sparrows, p. 269). Hops quietly on the ground, or walks with small steps. Told from all except Northern by plain, ash-grey head.



J F M A M J J A S O N D



hops or walks with small steps faintly mottled brown wash

JUV. *stygiiceps* ▶
Rust de Winter, Lim

very difficult to tell from Northern: smaller with shorter tail and less robust bill

AD. non-br. *diffusus* ▶
Maun, Bot

AD. br. *stygiiceps* ▶
Shingwedzi, Lim

small but obvious wing bar (variable)

AD. br. *stygiiceps* ▶
Shingwedzi, Lim

in virtually any habitat with trees including gardens and farmyards

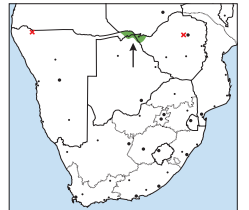
Northern Grey-headed Sparrow

Passer griseus (Witkeelmossie)

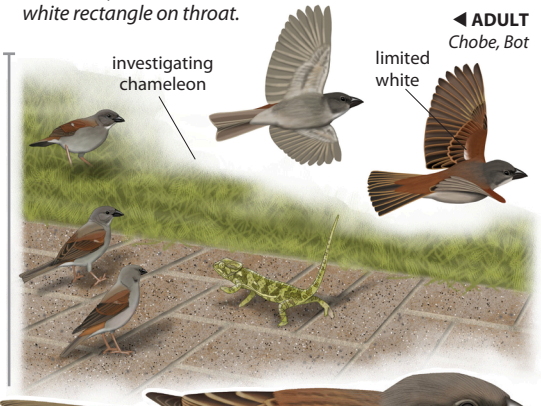
L: 15-16 cm M: 34-(39)-43 g

[*P. g. ugandae*].

Large African distribution barely extends into far N of Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Fairly easy to see at safari lodges and around villages; Southern usually stays in natural woodland but some overlap (sometimes in mixed flocks facilitating comparison). Note heavy black bill and neat white rectangle on throat.



J F M A M J J A S O N D



investigating chameleon limited white

JUVENILE ▶
Kazungula, Zim

mixes with very similar Southern: a little bigger with longer tail and heavier bill

ADULT non-br. ▶
Victoria Falls, Zim

ADULT br. ▶
Kasane, Bot

white wing bar on average smaller than Southern's

ADULT br. ▶
Kasane, Bot

usually near man but habitat overlaps with Southern in far N