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Abstracts

FEATURE ARTICLES

GEOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN COLOR, MEASUREMENTS, AND MOLT OF THE LESSER GOLDFINCH IN NORTH AMERICA DOES NOT SUPPORT SUBSPECIFIC DESIGNATION

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Abstract. I examined 963 study skins of Lesser Goldfinches (*Carduelis psaltria*) from the United States to central Mexico, for color, measurements, molt, and plumage wear. These specimens had been previously assigned to as many as three subspecies. Females did not vary geographically in color. Green-backed, green-eared males predominated in the Pacific coastal United States and northern Mexico. Black-backed, black-eared males predominated in the interior, east of 106° West longitude. This west to east color difference varied clinally, and may be a simple genetic polymorphism, so subspecific distinctions cannot be justified by coloration alone. Measurements of bill, tail, and wing, but not tarsus, varied slightly but significantly from smallest along the Pacific coast to largest in south-central Mexico. Since measurements varied clinally, and overlapped extensively, subspecific separation based on size is not practical. Pacific coastal birds subjected to winter rainfall maxima had a complete postbreeding molt, with a sparse prebreeding body molt only in females, and a postjuvenile molt that replaced significantly more flight feathers in males. Interior birds subjected to summer precipitation maxima had a nearly complete or complete prebreeding molt and a usually less complete postbreeding molt. The postjuvenile and postbreeding molts of interior birds were very similar and did not differ between the sexes. Although these sexual and geographic variations of molt are striking, they may reflect phenotypic plasticity in response to environmental contingencies, rather than genetic differences. These variations in one intergrading population support doubts that the Humphrey-Parkes terminology for molts and plumages can reflect phylogenetic homologies among species.

Key words: *Carduelis psaltria*, *color*, *Lesser Goldfinch*, *measurements*, *molt*, *plumage*, *wear*.