

SOME NOTES ON THE WINTER DIET  
AND FEEDING BEHAVIOUR OF THE  
ROCK BUNTING *Emberiza cia* IN  
SOUTHERN MONTENEGRO

**Nekaj opazovanj skalnega strnada  
*Emberiza cia* pri prehranjevanju v  
zimskem času v južni Črni gori**

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The summer diet of Rock Buntings *Emberiza cia* consists of adult and larval invertebrates, while the species moves to almost exclusively plant food in late summer. According to studies in continental Europe and Asia the birds feed during winter mainly on the seeds (caryopsis) and leaves of grasses and low herbs, including the grains of wheat *Triticum* sp. (CRAMP & PERRINS 1994, GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM & BAUER 1997). Although Rock Bunting is a widespread resident in mountainous Mediterranean climates and a common winter visitor to coastal lowlands (KRISTIN & MOSIMANN 1997), aside of stomach contents analysed by RUCNER (1971) and a summer study from Spain cited by CRAMP & PERRINS (1994), there is very little information on the winter diet and feeding habits of the species in the Mediterranean region.

According to bird surveys which we conducted for Euronatur (Radolfzell, Germany) in 2003 and annual visits since November 2004, the species is an irregular winter visitor to the alluvial floodplains of the Bojana/Buna Delta at the east coast of the Adriatic Sea in Albania and Montenegro. Although we noted a number of singing males in the mountainous hinterlands of the delta around Ulcinj, Saško Jezero, on Mount Vidikovac and the old castle of Shkodra in spring and summer, between October — January we saw only solitary birds and a small flock in Ulcinj in Montenegro (SCHNEIDER-JACOBY *et al.* 2006).

Together with Jakob Smole and Borut Stumberger we observed solitary Rock Buntings at Mala Plaža in the centre of the city on 14 Nov 2003 and in the rocks below the old town (Stari Grad / Kajala) on 30 Jan 2004.



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**Figure 1:** Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* in winter plumage feeding on the caryopsis of Arrow Reed *Arundo plinii* while perched on the erect culm; Velika Plaža, Ulcinj, Montenegro, 15 Nov 2006 (photo: P. Sackl)

**Slika 1:** Skalni strnad *Emberiza cia* v zimskem perju med hranjenjem z golimi zrni plinijeve trstenike *Arundo plinii*, sedeč na pokončnem stebelu; Velika Plaža, Ulcinj, Crna gora (foto: P. Sackl)

Both records are < 1 km from the nesting sites of > 3 singing males in the outskirts of the city. In November 2003 the bird was feeding on the ground below a Fig *Ficus carica* in a narrow green space between the steep rock face of the old town and the quay of the modern city. The latter is heavily used by traffic. On the ground below the Fig which was sparsely covered with low grasses (Poaceae), we noted scattered pieces of bread and the rotten leaves of discarded salad. Before it was disturbed by traffic, the bird was obviously feeding on the salad.

In addition, in the late morning of 15 Nov 2006 we encountered a mixed flock of 6 Rock, 3 Reed *E. schoenichus* and a female Cirl Bunting *E. cirlus* on the sandy track which runs along the inland side of the coastal sand dunes of Velika Plaža outside of Ulcinj (VASIC 1979, SCHNEIDER-JACOBY *et al.* 2006). The birds were feeding on the bare sand close to the edge of the track, which is covered on both sides with low herbs, grasses, blackberries *Rubus* sp., sedges, and taller reeds. The reed we later identified as *Arundo plinii*, a relative of the better known Giant Reed *A. donax*. After a few minutes, while we observed the flock from the car, a Rock Bunting flew up to the reeds and started to feed on the lower part of a seed-head by sitting on the erect culm below the panicle (Figure 1). The genus *Arundo* is not listed as food for the Rock Bunting in either English or German handbooks (CRAMP & PERRINS 1994, GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM & BAUER 1997).

A few seconds later three more Rock Buntings started to feed in the same way in nearby tussocks of

*A. plinii* by working up the panicle till the culms bent down and they were sitting horizontally above ground while feeding (Figure 2). We later measured their perching height to 1.8 — 2 m above ground. Rock Buntings are known to take seeds and other plant materials mostly from the ground, and from stems, leaves and seed-heads, which they reach from ground, neighbouring perches or by pulling them down while standing on ground (CRAMP & PERRINS 1994). In contrast to the Reed Bunting which according to GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM & BAUER (1997) prefers to sit horizontally on reeds and seed-heads while singing or feeding, to our knowledge a similar feeding behaviour



**Figure 2:** Feeding Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* by sitting on the panicle of the Arrow Reed *Arundo plinii*; Velika Plaža, Ulcinj, Montenegro, 15 Nov 2006 (photo: P. Sackl)

**Slika 2:** Skalni strnad *Emberiza cia* med hranjenjem na plinijeve trstenike *Arundo plinii*, sedeč na latu; Velika Plaža, Ulcinj, Črna gora (foto: P. Sackl)

and perching height for *E. cia* is mentioned only by SCHWABE & MANN (1990) for southern Germany, while feeding on the panicles of *Calamagrostis arundinacea* grasses. The central European forms of this grass, whose scientific name derives from the similarity of its habitus to giant reeds of the genus *Arundo*, reach maximum heights of 0.6 — 1.2 m (HEGI 1935).

### Povzetek

V prispevkusodokumentirana opažanja skalnega strnada *Emberiza cia* v zimskem času med prehranjevanjem. Novembra 2003 je bil opažen en osebek, ki se je hranil z gnilimi listi odvržene solate na Mali plaži v središču Ulcinja v Crni gori. Novembra 2006 sva opazovala na peščenih sipinah Velike plaže manjšo jato skalnih strnadov. Ta je sedela na pokončnem stebelu ter na upognjenem latu plinijeve trstenike *Arundo plinii*. Strnadi so sedeli na rastlini 1.8 — 2 m visoko (slika 1

& 2). Po znanih podatkih je to prvi primer opažanja skalnih strnadov pri prehranjevanju s trsteniko in prvi primer opisane načina prehranjevanja.

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