

THE AFRICAN PITTA

Pitta angolensis, Vieillot

by

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This brilliantly coloured bird is rarely seen. Most of the records are made as the result of it flying into a light at night while on local migrations.

As the records are few, the following observation and summary of what Moreau, Praed & Grant have to say may be of interest.

An African Pitta was brought to me by the night watchman of the Mwese Hospital, Tanzania at about 8 o'clock in the evening of the 20th November, 1967. The bird had flown against the window of a lighted room. There was a spot of blood at the base of its beak but it was otherwise unhurt. I kept it in a basket overnight and next morning, placed it on open ground and pointed it due north, believing at the time that this was the way it ought to have been going. The bird paused for a moment as if taking its bearings, leaped into the air, swung round and flew off due south with a low, direct and fast flight.

Mwese lies 6°S of the Equator, about 30 miles east of Lake Tanganyika and midway between Kungwe (or Kungu) Mountain and the township of Mpanda. Mwese is a hill about 200 square miles in area which rises to 6,000 ft. like an island surrounded by *Brachystegia*, *Miombo* bush. The area is burnt annually and the dominant trees are *Combretum* and *Protea* with narrow strips of forest along the rivers. The rainfall probably averages about 40 inches per annum and normally starts in November and ends in March.

In 1967 there had been considerable rain by the 20th November when the bird was found.

Praed & Grant, in *The African Handbook of Birds, Series I.* describe the general distribution of the African Pitta as Central Tanzania to the Transvaal and, in the non-breeding season, to the eastern Congo, Uganda and Kenya. They go on to say that the bird seems to breed from the Transvaal up to central Tanzania from September to March and to migrate in the non-breeding season to northern Tanzania, Uganda and southern Kenya.

One must suppose from this background that the Pitta seen in central Tanzania flying south on the 21st November, 1967 was returning, a little late, to its breeding area from its sojourn in the north.

Moreau, in *The Bird Faunas of Africa and its Islands* uses the Pitta as an example of migration within Africa. He indicates that its breeding range is from Southern Tanzania to Malawi and Rhodesia and that its favourite breeding habitat is dense semi-deciduous thicket at low altitudes.

Most of the records he quotes are of birds flying into lighted windows at night and he describes the occasion, when he captured a Pitta in such circumstances, as "One of the thrills of my ornithological life. . . to put my hands on this gorgeously coloured bird, unhurt as it was".

The records he quotes are all of Pitta found between Abercorn in Zambia and the forests of Uganda, that is from 8°S to about 2°N and as there are no breeding records in this area, it is assumed that these are the limits of the migratory range.

The most western of the records are from Lake Kivu in eastern Congo Republic and the most eastern are from the Tanzania coastal belt.

On the assumption that the migration are on a north-south axis, I have divided these records longitudinally, by the line of latitude of 35°E, i.e. Uganda, Western

Tanzania and Zambia to the west of the line, and Kenya and eastern Tanzania to the east.

To the west of the line, the records, including my own, follow the Western Rift Valley. Abercorn, 8°S, at the south end of Lake Tanganyika, has six records, all in the month of December. My own record from Mwese, 6°S, is for the month of November. There are two dates mentioned for Lake Kivu, 2°S, in April and May. At the northern end of the range in the Uganda forests, say 2°N, Moreau quotes records in May, June and July.

I interpret these records as indicating that breeding is south of 8°S and from December to March, which coincides with the rains in Zambia, Malawi and southern Tanzania; that the birds move north up the line of the Western Rift Valley in April and May and spend June to October in Uganda and return down the same route in November and December.

The records in the eastern half of the area are from four places. The birds are recorded as breeding in the extreme south of Tanzania, 10°S; there is a single record of a bird from the Itigi thicket, 8°S, mid-way between Tabora and Dodoma, in the month of December, but it is not revealed whether the bird was breeding or on migration; there are then 10 records all for May and June from north-eastern Tanzania, 5°S, including 5 of Moreau's own records from Amani; finally there are two records from Nairobi, 1°S, for May and June.

My guess is that the Itigi bird, in December was either going south to breed or actually breeding at Itigi, and that the North-Eastern Tanzania birds and the Nairobi birds were all going south, but where they were going I do not know as there are no records from the Kenya highland forests or from the coast.

It is possible that this beautiful bird is bestowing its delightful compliment of flying through bed-room windows more frequently than is generally known. More records of its movements would be very interesting.

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