

# Some interesting bird observations from Northern Kenya

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Kenya is one of the best-known countries in Africa ornithologically, and there is a wealth of information on the distribution, ecology and conservation of its bird fauna, which presently stands at 1080 species (Britton 1980, Brown & Britton 1980, Lewis & Pomeroy 1989, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996, Bennun & Njoroge 1999). However, most of the information comes from the more easily accessible provinces of the central and southern part of the country, while the Northern provinces, where roads and facilities are often lacking or very scarce, have been studied much less thoroughly. For instance, in the Bird Atlas of Kenya (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989) the average coverage was estimated to be less than 30% in only 29% of the squares south of 01°N, but as many as 57% of the squares north of this line. Although some additional information has been added in the 1990s (Oyugi 1994, Ntang'ang'a & Borghesio 1999, Borghesio & Ntang'ang'a 2000 and 2001), the situation has not changed much in recent years, and northern Kenya is still poorly known from the ornithological point of view.

In this paper we report some interesting bird observations that we have gathered during several visits to northern Kenya between 1997 and 2004. These observations serve to clarify the biology, distribution and movements of some poorly-known and rare African and Palearctic birds.

## Study area

The observations reported in this paper were recorded in an area of about 20 000 km<sup>2</sup> in northern Kenya, between the southern end of Lake Turkana (NW), Marsabit National Park (NE) and Leroghi forest (South) (Figure 1). The region is mainly arid, with average rainfall mostly below 500 mm/year (White 1983) and altitude usually below 1000 m. However, most of the observations were made in the "islands" of montane forest habitat that cover less than 2% of the total land surface (Wass 1995). These forests are located on isolated mountain massifs rising sharply from the surrounding plains. These mountains receive substantially higher amounts of rain (in the order of 1000 mm/year, White 1983), allowing the development of dense, mostly continuous canopy, forest, dominated by trees such as *Podocarpus gracilior*, *Juniperus procera*, *Cassipourea malosana* and *Olea africana*. One of the forests



(Marsabit) is noteworthy for having within it a substantial freshwater lake (Lake Paradise) occupying the crater of an extinct volcano. The names and co-ordinates of all localities cited in the text are listed in Table 1. Systematics follow EANHS (1996). Wing measurements were made using method three of Svensson (1992). We also followed this author's instructions for tarsus measurements.

### Species accounts

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*. The only previous reliable record of this species in Kenya dates back to February 1929, when one bird was shot at Lake Paradise, Marsabit (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). There is also another unsubstantiated record from the Kenyan section of Lake Turkana in the mid-1980s (Stevenson & Fanshawe 2002). However, Mallard is a regular visitor to the Ethiopian lakes during winter (Urban & Brown 1971).

We observed a flock of nine individuals of this species at Lake Paradise (the same location as the 1929 record), from 29 November to 3 December 2002. It was not possible to reliably sex the birds, as all males appeared to be in eclipse plumage at the time of the observations. However, the species could be recognised by the combination of dull orange bill, orange legs, dark brown lore, crown and eye-stripe, and lack of white markings on the wing. Although the evidence is still scanty, our observation suggests that Mallard might be a regular, perhaps annual, winter visitor to northern Kenya.

**Booted Eagle** *Hieraaetus pennatus*. This is an uncommon winter visitor to Kenya, mostly between October and April. Very few records are known from the northern part of the country, where it is thought to be only a passage migrant (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989).

During our surveys we made numerous observations of this species detailed as follows: Leroghi, several observations in October 1999 and one on 15 May 1998, the latter one perhaps representing an over-summering individual; Marsabit, observed almost daily in late February and early March 2000; Mt Kulal, numerous observations in December 1997; Mt Nyiru, two observations in November 1998 and two in February 2004. Almost all of these observations were recorded in dense montane forest habitats or along forest edges, suggesting that the forests of northern Kenya may represent a regular wintering habitat for this species.

**Eleonora's Falcon** *Falco eleonora*. This species is an uncommon winter visitor to central and southern Kenya. There is only one record from northern Kenya (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989).

We observed one individual, of the black morph, flying over a large glade in the forest at Marsabit National Park on 9 March 2000. The bird was positively identified by its blackish plumage, with flight feathers



slightly paler than the underwing coverts.

**Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon** *Columba delegorguei*. The presence of this species in the montane forests of Northern Kenya (Mt Kulal, Mathews Range, Mt Nyiru) is already known (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989). Therefore, our observations do not provide much new distributional information, but contribute to the understanding of the migratory movements of the species. We found that Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeons were common during October–February in montane forest habitats on Leroghi (October 1999) and Mt Nyiru (December 2000, February 2004), where we totalled more than 50 observations in eight weeks of fieldwork. However, the species was totally absent in the same areas in March 1999 (Mt Nyiru) and April–May 1998 (Leroghi) with no observation in five weeks of fieldwork. This suggests that the species is a seasonal visitor to northern Kenya during the late dry season and the short rainy season and that it might be involved in longer-range movements than has usually been supposed.

**Masked Lark** *Spizocorys personata*. According to Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) the birds from the southern end of Lake Turkana are not racially assigned. We observed one individual of subspecies *yavelloensis*, (being greyer than the nominate race) at Soitolowarak on 30 November 1998.

**Cabanis's Greenbul** *Phyllastrephus cabanisi*. Two subspecies of Cabanis's Greenbul are found in Kenya: *P. cabanisi sucosus*, and *P. cabanisi placidus*, which are located respectively west and east of the Rift Valley (Britton 1980). The two races intergrade in central Kenya, and, according to Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) the birds from Leroghi are not racially assigned.

During ringing operations in Leroghi in April–May 1998 and October 1999, we captured a total of 27 individuals of this species, which could all be reliably assigned to the race *placidus* by their creamy-white throat and more brownish plumage.

**Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia*. This species has been observed only once in Kenya, on 19 June 1977, when an individual of unknown race was captured and photographed in the Nguruman escarpment (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). The only Ethiopian record is believed to be *L. n. straminea*, the West Asian subspecies (Ash 1978). Although the migratory movements of this species are quite poorly known, the western race (*L. n. naevia*) is believed to winter mostly in western Africa south of the Sahara (Cramp & Brooks 1992).

We ringed one individual of Grasshopper Warbler at Lake Paradise, Marsabit National Park, on 8 March 2000. The bird was mist-netted in a dense bush of *Ocimum suave*, about 70 m from the lake shore. It had an





Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*  
northern Kenya, L. Borghesio.

altogether fresh plumage and no apparent fat reserves. The brownish (not greyish) upperparts and relatively large body size (wing=64 mm; tail=53 mm; bill to rear of nostril=8.9 mm) suggest that the individual we captured was a member of the western group of races (*L. n. naevia* or *L. n. obscura*). If this is the case, this could be an indication that the wintering range of the western sub-species of the Grasshopper Warbler might be much wider than previously

thought. This record is currently under review by the East Africa Rarities Committee.

**African Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus baeticatus*. This species is widely distributed in sub-Saharan Africa, but records north of the equator are patchily distributed. The movements and taxonomic status of the different populations are not well understood, and different authors have treated this species very differently, either splitting it into two species (Clancey 1975) or merging it with either *A. dumetorum* (Fry *et al.* 1974) or *A. scirpaceus* (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1987). In Kenya, the race *cinnamomeus* is distributed around the Lake Victoria area, and is occasionally attracted to lights at Ngulia, which suggests it undertakes migratory movements (Urban *et al.* 1997).

On 7 and 8 March 2000 we captured two individuals of this species at Lake Paradise, in an *Ocimum suave* bush. The habitat where they were caught and the presence of fat reserves (scored as 2 on a 0–8 scale) suggest that the two birds were passage migrants to the site. Measurements and wing formulae (wing length=56 mm; tail length=43–45 mm; wing tip on P4) of the two birds (which had fairly fresh feathers) were within the range of *A. b. cinnamomeus*, but plumage colour was much less rufous above (and almost white below) and not bright buff as in typical *cinnamomeus*.

These data suggest that northern Kenya is frequented by migratory populations (of unknown origin) of *A. baeticatus*, which differ in plumage colour from *A. baeticatus cinnamomeus*, and might even be subspecifically distinct.

**Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita*. Chiffchaff is considered an uncommon winter visitor (less than 50 records, EANHS 1996) to the montane forests



of Kenya. In Northern Kenya, there are old records of this species at Marsabit during the 1920s (Sharpe 1931), but no further data after that.

During our field-work, we mist-netted and ringed a total of 12 individuals: five at Mt Nyiru between 3 and 18 December 2000 and another two on 7 and 9 February 2004, and five at Marsabit National Park between 30 November and 2 December 2002. Numerous additional sight records were also obtained at Mt Kulal (December 1997), Mt Nyiru (December 2000 and first half of February 2004) and Marsabit (December 2002). All the observations and captures were made in deep forest habitats, while forest edges were usually frequented by Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*. The measurements of the individuals caught (wing= $63.1 \pm 2.1$  mm,  $n=12$ ; tarsus= $19.3 \pm 0.5$  mm,  $n=7$ ) were in the range of those of *P. c. abietinus*, which is the only subspecies of Chiffchaff presently known to occur in East Africa (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). Interestingly, Chiffchaffs were apparently completely absent from Marsabit forest in early March 2000. However, on this occasion, Willow Warblers were extremely common (37 individuals mist-netted from 3 to 11 March 2000), not only in edges, but even in dense forest areas, suggesting that the residence period of Chiffchaff in the forests of northern Kenya is quite short.

On the whole, our observations suggest that Chiffchaff might be rather more common and widespread in Kenya than previously thought. The few records obtained in the past are perhaps due to the scarcity of research that has been directed towards montane forest areas in East Africa.

**Sharpe's Starling** *Cinnyricinclus sharpei*. This forest canopy species is distributed from Eastern Zaire to the highlands of central Kenya and northern Tanzania and to southern Ethiopia. In northern Kenya it is considered very rare and is presently known only from Marsabit and the Mathews Range (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996).

We observed this species on several occasions at Mt Kulal (December 1997), Leroghi (April–May 1998 and October 1999), Mt Nyiru (November 1998) and the Ndoto Hills (March 1999). These observations suggest that the species is widespread in the forests of northern Kenya, where it might have been overlooked because of its arboreal habits.

**Abyssinian Black Wheatear** *Oenanthe lugubris*. This species is fairly common in the highlands of central Kenya, where the race *schalowi* occurs. The nominate race is known only from the Ethiopian plateau, but there is one unsubstantiated record from Mt Kulal, August 1985 (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996).

We recorded several individuals of *O. l. lugubris* in open grassland at Arabel, at 2000–2100 m, on the northern end of Mt Kulal, on 23 and 29 October 1998. The birds were assigned to this race on the basis that they



had the basal two-thirds of the outer tail feathers dirty white in the male, and almost white in the female (not orange-buff, as in *O. l. schalowi*).

**Yellow-crowned Canary** *Serinus flavicollis*. Although the Yellow-crowned Canary is widely distributed in the highlands of central Kenya, there are presently no records of this species from northern Kenya. Therefore, up to now, evidence suggests that the Ethiopian population is separated from the Kenyan one by a gap of several hundreds of kilometres, even though they are both ascribed to the same subspecies (*S. f. flavivertex*, Howard & Moore 1991).

During our surveys, this species was observed on various occasions at Mt Kulal (October 1998), Mt Nyiru (February 2004) and Leroghi (October 1999). It always occurred in forest edge habitats, dominated by *Juniperus procera* and *Olea africana*, at altitudes between 2100 and 2500 m.

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