Madagascar Swamp Warbler Acrocephalus newtoni far from a swamp

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The Madagascar Swamp Warbler Acrocephalus newtoni is widespread on Madagascar and usually found in Cyperus or Phragmites stands, or in trees or scrub near marshes or mangroves (Morris & Hawkins 1998, Sinclair & Langrand 1998). It has relatively large feet which permit the birds to grasp larger reeds or branches. In other Acrocephalus there is a strong correlation between morphology and environment (Leisler et al. 1989). However, a population of A. newtoni is known from low ericoid thicket (a vegetation structure dominated by Asteraceae and Ericaceae: Gautier & Goodman 2003) above the treeline, in the Andringitra Massif, at 2,050 m. The birds at this location are genetically and morphologically very similar to marsh-dwelling birds (Goodman et al. 2000). Nonetheless, occurrence away from swamps is apparently uncommon and thus noteworthy.

On 13 December 2005, I caught two Madagascar Swamp Warblers at the north-west edge of Maromizaha, a private rainforest reserve near Andasibe, Perinet, eastern Madagascar (Fig. 1). The site is usually dry and is within an open, degraded hilltop near a quarry (18°57’S 48°27’E; 1,100 m). Large trees are nowadays absent and introduced grasses, herbs and shrubs, e.g. Lantana camara, Solanum mauritianum, Clidemia hirta and Psidia altissima, prevail. Vegetational structure is relatively open with bare soil in places. The site is surrounded by patches of Eucalyptus of varying age, except for a moderately logged but otherwise intact primary forest that lies c.500 m distant, to the south-east. The birds could only have reached the site through or over the forest (unlikely), along the dirt road or via the Eucalyptus forest.

In December 2005 the site was slightly flooded following heavy rainfall (temporary puddles with c.10 cm of standing water), inducing some frogs to call. In September–November of 2003, 2004 and 2006 we never observed flooding at the site, nor frogs nor A. newtoni. It is very unlikely that we overlooked the species as our surveys were detailed. Morphometrics (Table 1), photographs and a blood sample were taken. Mensural data for the bill (from base of skull to bill tip and from distal end of nostril) and wing (max. chord), were commensurate with those published by Goodman et al. (2000), except for tarsus which was measured differently (here: metatarsal bone or ‘minimum’ tar-

### Table 1. Morphometrics of two Madagascar Swamp Warblers Acrocephalus newtoni caught at Maromizaha, eastern Madagascar, in December 2005.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ring number (SAFRING)</th>
<th>Wing</th>
<th>3rd primary</th>
<th>Tarsus</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Bill Length*</th>
<th>Bill height*</th>
<th>Bill width*</th>
<th>Bill-skull</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FA88162</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA88163</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = taken from distal edge of nostril.
sus, following Redfern & Clarke 2001). With their streaked breast and chestnut iris with a ‘piercing’ look, the captured birds were apparently adult. The inside of the throat was bright orange, and their body-, wing- and tail-feathers very worn. They lacked body fat reserves, indicating they were not undertaking any long-distance migration. Although considered sedentary (‘flies only short distances’: Langrand 1990), A. newtoni appears either (1) to depart swamps temporarily, perhaps only in the wet season when usually dry sites are flooded, or (2) to possess a wider habitat range than previously described. Palearctic Acrocephalus species are well known to winter in dry habitats in Africa and the resident A. baeticatus also may spend the off-season in drier places (Urban et al. 1997). The Seychelles Warbler A. sechellenis occurs in scrub and tall, scrub-like vegetation, Cape Verde Warbler A. brevipes is now found in a broad range of habitats, including gardens and agricultural areas, and Rodrigues Warbler A. rodericanus has adapted to dense thickets in largely exotic vegetation (BirdLife International 2000). Further data on the occurrence of the Madagascar Swamp Warbler away from swamps, especially in the wet season, would assist to clarify its ecological requirements.

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