

Additions to the avifauna of Eritrea and further records of rare species

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Additions à l'avifaune de l'Érythrée et autres mentions d'espèces rares. Les premières mentions pour l'Érythrée de cinq espèces d'oiseaux sont présentées. Quatre de ces espèces, le Fou à pieds rouges *Sula sula*, le Grand Cormoran *Phalacrocorax carbo*, le Jacana à poitrine dorée *Actophilornis africanus* et le Goéland des steppes *Larus (fuscus) barabensis*, ont été observées sur les îles au large de l'Érythrée et le long de la côte. En outre, un spécimen du Pririt à collier *Platysteira cyanea*, collecté à Ghinda en 1890 par Vittorio Bottego, a été retrouvé au Musée d'Histoire Naturelle de l'Université de Parme, en Italie. La présence est confirmée du Pélican blanc *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, une espèce précédemment observée seulement une fois en Érythrée.

Summary. Five species new for Eritrea are documented. Four of these, Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*, Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, African Jacana *Actophilornis africanus* and Steppe Gull *Larus (fuscus) barabensis*, were observed during surveys of offshore islands and the coast of Eritrea. A fifth record concerns a specimen of Brown-throated Wattle-eye *Platysteira cyanea* collected in Ghinda in 1890 by Vittorio Bottego and held at the Natural History Museum of the University of Parma, Italy. We also confirm the presence of Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, a species historically recorded just once in Eritrea.

Ornithological research in Eritrea is still recovering from the effects of the 1961–91 war of independence and the 1998–2000 conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which made most Important Bird Areas (IBAs; Coulthard 2001) inaccessible to researchers. Due to the relative lack of opportunities for new field work, knowledge of the Eritrean avifauna has relied on the accounts and collections of 19th century and 20th century European visitors, on which two important recent publications, *Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea* (Ash & Atkins 2009) and *Birds of the Horn of Africa* (Redman *et al.* 2009), were largely forced to rely.

Due to available research opportunities, travel difficulties in certain parts of the country and the small number of Eritrean ornithologists, information collected about the country's birds during the last decade is highly biased towards the northern and southern Red Sea and Debub regions.

Among the principal modern sources of information, Azeria (2004) studied terrestrial bird communities on 26 islands in the Dahlak archipelago, whilst 15 bird surveys were undertaken between January 2005 and October 2007 by DS, as part of the Eritrean Coastal Marine Island Biodiversity Project (ECMIB) Bird Team, on islands and the coast of Eritrea (Semere *et al.* 2008). Moreover, 90 Eritrean islands and c.500 km of coastline, between Massawa to Assab,

were visited by GDM, GC and staff of the Dept. of Animal Biology at the University of Pavia in 2002–06 to study the breeding and winter distribution of Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* (De Marchi *et al.* 2006). One island in particular, Dahret (15°54'13.00"N 39°34'43.00"E) in the Dahlak archipelago was visited almost weekly between July 2001 and August 2010, and in June 2011, to study this shorebird's ecology and breeding biology (Chiozzi & De Marchi 2003, De Marchi *et al.* 2008, Chiozzi *et al.* 2011). Our knowledge of the avifauna of the Eritrean islands was also reviewed by De Marchi *et al.* (2009). Finally, Anderson (2010) documented eight additions to Eritrea's bird list (made between October 2007 and April 2009) and Anderson & Berhane (2011) conducted observations on 15 Abyssinian endemic bird species between 2002 and 2009 in Eritrea.

Field records of five species (four new and one rarely observed in Eritrea) are reported here, while re-evaluation of a historical ornithological collection at the Natural History Museum at the University of Parma (Italy) led to the discovery of another species new to Eritrea. This last finding emphasises the importance of critically reviewing collections held in natural history museums, especially smaller and potentially less well-known holdings.

Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*

First record for the Red Sea. On 18 June 2011, approximately halfway between Massawa and Dahret Island (15°54'13.00"N 39°34'43.00"E) in the Dahlak archipelago, GC & GDM noticed a different booby within a flock of Brown Boobies *Sula leucogaster* flying low over the water. Neither observer had binoculars or camera to hand, because of the saltwater spray, but fortunately the bird approached the boat to within c.10–20 m permitting several diagnostic features to be seen. Obviously a sulid by its general shape, the bird appeared entirely dark brown on both ventral and dorsal surfaces, with a clearly contrasting greyish bill. The unusual pattern, visibly different from that of the similar-sized Brown Boobies, was indicative of an adult brown-morph Red-footed Booby. The closest records from the Horn of Africa involve one observed in Djibouti in September 1985 (Redman *et al.* 2009), three definite records (two dead and one alive, in May, October and November) and five individuals probably of this species in June and November in south-east Somalia (Ash & Miskell 1998).

Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

Second record for Eritrea. GDM photographed (Fig. 1) an adult *P. onocrotalus* within a flock of Pink-backed Pelicans *P. rufescens* at the Desset River estuary, 10 km north of Massawa, on 5 January 2009 (De Marchi *et al.* 2009). J.



Figure 1. Adult Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, Desset River estuary, 10 km north of Massawa, 5 January 2009 (Giuseppe De Marchi)
Pélican blanc *Pelecanus onocrotalus* adulte, estuaire du Desset, 10 km au nord de Massawa, 5 janvier 2009 (Giuseppe De Marchi)

Anderson (*in litt.* 2012) also photographed what was presumably the same overwintering bird on 29 January 2009. Ash & Atkins (2009) report a record from Taulud Island, Massawa, citing Moltoni & Gneccchi Ruscone (1942) who give no further details in their account. While the large African population (75,000 pairs) of Great White Pelican is resident, those breeding in the Palearctic are migrants (Izhaki *et al.* 2002). Newton & Symens (1996) reviewed the species' status in the Saudi Arabian Red Sea, recording very small numbers mostly of immatures, and concluded that this pelican is clearly a scarce and erratic winter visitor to the area. European populations migrate through Turkey and the Middle East to winter in East Africa, possibly in Kenya and / or Sudan, making it possible that birds observed in Eritrea were of Palearctic origin.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

First and second records for Eritrea. GC & GDM found a dead individual on island NN045 (15°00'09"N 40°29'57.00"E) in Howakil Bay on 30 December 2002 (De Marchi *et al.* 2009). GC & GDM observed another individual (third record for Eritrea) in Zula Bay on 7 January 2006 (De Marchi *et al.* 2009). While the species is a common breeding resident in Ethiopia at alkaline and freshwater lakes and, marginally, rivers in Ethiopia and Somalia (Ash & Miskell 1998, Ash & Atkins 2009), our observations support the suggestion that the species might be an uncommon, irregular winter visitor to coastal Eritrea. Great Cormorant is temporarily given a vagrant status inland due to the scarcity of suitable habitat (Redman *et al.* 2009), but two inland records have already been reported: one, photographed by S. Abraha, represents the second sighting for the country (October 2005, Elabered agricultural estate, 64 km north of Asmara; http://birdquest.net/afbid/birdspecies.php?func=view&slideno=1&af_bs_id=93&country=21), and the other (and fourth record for Eritrea) on 3 February 2009 (Anderson 2010).

African Jacana *Actophilornis africanus*

First record for Eritrea. DS found a freshly dead bird at low tide on 8 October 2006 (an adult, based on plumage and the pale blue bill and frontal shield) on Harat (16°5'29.00"N 39°28'3.00"E), a flat and arid island of the Dahlak archipelago with

ample mudflats, in the mangrove belt around the inner lagoon. Curiously, it was found in a very different ecological situation to those typical of the species, i.e. freshwater habitats. African Jacana, usually a sedentary species, is nonetheless capable of wide-ranging dispersal or nomadic movements from its breeding grounds, especially in response to drought. The species has even been recorded in temporary pools or waterless parts of Namibia, hundreds of km from their usual habitat (Urban *et al.* 1986).

Steppe Gull *Larus (fuscus) barabensis*

First three records of this gull in Eritrea. Singles in third-year plumage were photographed (Figs. 2–3) by GDM on Dahret Island, Dahlak archipelago (15°54'13.00"N 39°34'43.00"E) on 25 October 2008 and at Massawa on 7 February 2009, while an adult was photographed on Dahret Island on 25 January 2009 (Fig. 4).

Identification of large white-headed gulls is, in general, problematic and is particularly controversial in East Africa due to the probable mixing of different taxa and populations migrating from Central Asia following the East African flyway. Ash & Atkins (2009) reviewed all records in Ethiopia and Eritrea of large white-headed gulls including the forms *argentatus*, *heuglini*, *armenicus*, *cachinnans* and *taimyrensis*, and concluded that *barabensis* could also occur. Following recent molecular work, the British Ornithologists' Union Taxonomic Sub-committee suggests the forms *heuglini*, *taimyrensis* and *barabensis* be included in Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus* (Sangster *et*

al. 2007) and this policy has also been followed by the BirdLife Taxonomic Working Group (BirdLife International 2012).

The adult's identification was reviewed by eight experts, the majority of whom concluded that it was a Steppe Gull, and not an Armenian Gull *L. (michahellis) armenicus* as we originally



Figure 3. Third calendar-year Steppe Gull *Larus (fuscus) barabensis*, Massawa, 7 February 2009 (Giuseppe De Marchi)

Goéland des steppes *Larus (fuscus) barabensis* de 3e année, Massawa, 7 février 2009 (Giuseppe De Marchi)



Figure 2. Third calendar-year Steppe Gull *Larus (fuscus) barabensis*, Dahret Island, 25 October 2008 (Giuseppe De Marchi)

Goéland des steppes *Larus (fuscus) barabensis* de 3e année, île de Dahret, 25 octobre 2008 (Giuseppe De Marchi)



Figure 4. Adult Steppe Gull *Larus (fuscus) barabensis*, Dahret Island, 25 January 2009 (Giuseppe De Marchi)

Goéland des steppes *Larus (fuscus) barabensis* adulte, île de Dahret, 25 janvier 2009 (Giuseppe De Marchi)

hypothesised, principally because of the rather pointed bill shape and elongated nostrils (additional diagnostic characters could not be elucidated from the photographs). Furthermore, *L. (m.) armenicus* tends to migrate over shorter distances and is therefore less likely to reach Eritrea. The photographs of the subadults were compared with images on the Gull Research Organization website (www.gull-research.org) and their identity confirmed by N. Redman (pers. comm.). Steppe Gull could prove to be more numerous than previously considered on the coast and islands of Eritrea.

Brown-throated Wattle-eye *Platysteira cyanea*

First record for Eritrea. A male specimen (Fig. 5) collected at Ghinda in 1890 by Capt. Vittorio Bottego (1860–97) was identified by GC, and forms part of a larger zoological collection (Csermely & Bulla 2007) prepared by the Italian explorer in 1889–90 during his first visit to Eritrea with the purpose of enhancing the collection of the Natural History Museum of the University of Parma, Italy. The specimen, like the rest of the collection, was catalogued in 1891 by Alberto Del Prato (1854–1918) who classified the bird as *Platistira (sic) orientalis* (Del Prato 1891), a

synonym of Grey-headed Batis *Batis orientalis* (Heuglin 1868, Sharpe 1879), which is common in Eritrea. The presence of this forest canopy species in the surroundings of Ghinda, a village situated at c.900 m, and the contemporary collection by Bottego of a Narina Trogon *Apaloderma narina*, another species of dense forest, in the same area also in 1890, suggests to us the presence of a much richer habitat in this area than exists today. This is confirmed by a 1938 tourist guide published by the Consociazione Turistica Italiana (now Touring Club Italiano) where the environs of Ghinda are depicted as possessing luxuriant vegetation and plenty of water. Dramatic habitat loss over the last 100 years would explain the presumed loss of this species in the area.

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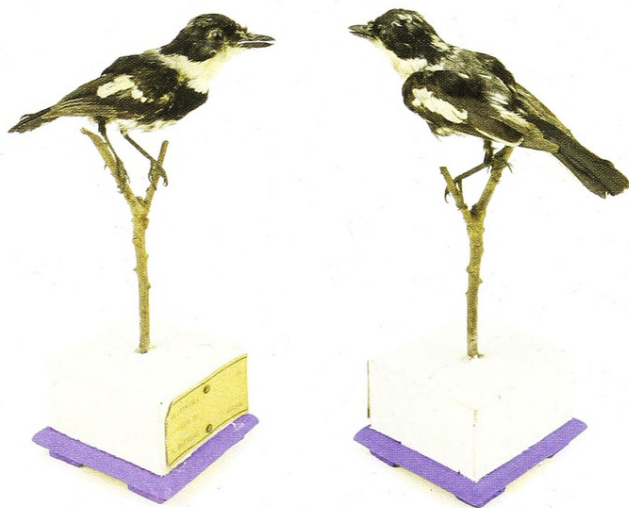


Figure 5. Male Brown-throated Wattle-eye *Platysteira cyanea* collected at Ghinda in 1890 by Capt. Vittorio Bottego, Natural History Museum of the University of Parma, Italy (Nicola Franchini)

Pririt à collier *Platysteira cyanea* mâle, collecté à Ghinda en 1890 par le Capt. Vittorio Bottego, Musée d'Histoire Naturelle de l'Université de Parme, Italie (Nicola Franchini)

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