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The Status of Larks in The Gambia, including First Records of Sun Lark *Galerida modesta*

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Summary

The Sun Lark *Galerida modesta* is added to the Gambian list. Its eastern race, *G. m. giffardi*, is a locally common breeder. The status of the Singing Bush-Lark *Mirafra cantillans* is revised from vagrant to localised dry season visitor. These changes suggest an extension of the range to the south and the west for two dry savanna larks. The Chestnut-backed Finch-Lark *Eremopterix leucotis* is a dry season visitor, not resident, as previously thought.

Résumé

L'Alouette modeste *Galerida modesta* s'ajoute à la liste de la Gambie. Sa race orientale, *G. m. giffardi*, est commune localement, nicheuse. Le statut de l'Alouette chanteuse *Mirafra cantillans* est modifié: il passe de celui d'espèce occasionnelle à celui de visiteur de saison sèche. Ces changements suggèrent une extension d'habitat vers le sud et l'ouest de deux alouettes de savane sèche. L'Alouette-moineau à oreillons blancs *Eremopterix leucotis* est visiteur de saison sèche, et non pas résident, comme on le croyait auparavant.

Introduction

Gore (1990) admits five species of lark to the Gambian list (Singing Bush-Lark *Mirafra cantillans*, Flappet Lark *M. rufocinnamomea*, Rufous-rumped Bush-Lark *M. nigricans*, Chestnut-backed Finch-Lark *Eremopterix leucotis*, Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*) and rejects records of two (Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* and White-fronted Finch-Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps*). Of the five species accepted two are described as vagrants, one as rare and the remaining two are residents. Their respective status, as described by Gore, is as follows; Divisions of The Gambia are shown in Fig. 1. Singing Bush-Lark, a single record, December 1986, Keneba, Lower River Division (LRD); Flappet Lark rare but widely distributed and presumably resident (apparently only five records); Rufous-rumped Bush-Lark, a single record near Banjul, Dec-Jan 1960-61; Chestnut-backed Finch-Lark, locally resident and not uncommon in dry open country

and grassland on the north bank in Middle and Upper River, scarce on the south bank, occasionally occurring near the coast, breeding suspected but not proven; Crested Lark, resident breeder, confined to the littoral and locally common.

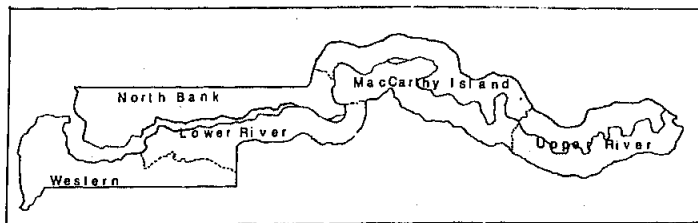


Figure 1. The Gambia showing Divisions.

In this paper, I comment on the status of each species (except for the Rufous-rumped Bush-Lark for which we have no further observations). Included are extensive field notes for the Singing Bush-Lark and for the Sun Lark *Galerida modesta*, an addition to the Gambian list. Quantitative data are drawn from a database of about 40,000 records (at least one individual of a species recorded at a given location on any one day) covering the period 1987-91, with most records for 1990. The database was established by T.J. Wachter and, in addition to his and my data, includes extensive contributions by: J.R. Alder, M. Chable, R. Webzell and D. Wheeler.

Singing Bush-Lark *Mirafra cantillans*

This species was recently discovered in Prufu Swamp in Upper River Division (URD). Excellent views were obtained by a number of observers (including JRA, RMJ and TJW) in the first quarter of 1991. A pair was watched by the author in the early evening of 11 Mar 1991. They were flushed from dry, knee-high grass on the edge of Prufu Swamp (which was almost dry by March) and were observed from close quarters walking on dry soil with scattered clumps of grass. In the vicinity were flocks of Chestnut-backed Finch-Lark and Quail-Finch *Ortygospiza atricollis*. The white outer tail feathers were conspicuous in flight, the central tail feathers rufous edged, and there was a bit of cinnamon on the flight feathers. The mantle was generally sandy coloured with dark centres to the feathers, but showing less contrast than the Sun Lark. The breast was faintly streaked, and slightly washed with brown.

Apart from Prufu Swamp, this species has been observed in the North Bank Division (NBD) east of Essau and on the north bank of URD east of Basse, so it occurs throughout the length of the country. It seems that the status of this species should be revised to localised, possibly common, certainly widespread in suitable habitat (short grass in dry swamps). However, it has not been observed since the beginning (May/June) of the 1991 rains (J.R. Alder pers. comm.), which suggests that it only occurs in The Gambia as part of a post-breeding dispersal.

It breeds to the north in Senegal during the rains (Morel & Morel 1990), when it is said to become more conspicuous as a result of its display flight (Serle & Morel 1977). Recent evidence from Senegal suggests that at least part of the Senegalese population may be migratory (Mullié & Keith 1991). It has also been noticed that the first significant rains appear to trigger nuptial displays, nest building and egg laying in this species; a clutch of three eggs was laid on 30 June in northern Senegal within six days of the first significant rain (Morel 1981). The first nest-building noted by Mullié & Keith (1991) was 11 July in 1989, while the first significant rains recorded in that year at Richard-Toll were on 27 June and 11 July, although local variation was considerable and the observers may have missed the onset of breeding in the study area. By October the number of birds in their study area had declined considerably, the remaining population having concentrated in the apparently most favourable habitat in the area. Ringers operating in the Djoudj National Park in the 1990/91 dry season did not record this species (G. Barnes pers. comm.). Unfortunately the arrival date of this species in The Gambia is not yet known. However, a departure date from The Gambia at the beginning of the rains would be consistent with the onset of breeding in northern Senegal, as the onset of the rains is later further north.

Flappet Lark *Mirafra rufocinnamomea*

Only three records, in addition to those cited in Gore (1990), are known. Ericsson (1989) records flushing "about five several times on dry sandy ground in the NW part of Prufu Swamp" on 22 Nov 1984. It is in this area and habitat that the Singing Bush-Lark was recently recorded. The two species should be readily distinguishable by the colour of the outer tail feathers. Flappet Lark has been recorded once displaying in Kudang, MacCarthy Island Division (MID) by TJW, and more recently several were displaying at Kaur (MID north bank), July 1991 (JRA and others, pers. comm.). Gore's statement that it is "rare" would appear to be correct as its display should make it one of the most conspicuous species of lark.

Chestnut-backed Finch-Lark *Eremopterix leucotis*

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 support Gore's comment, except that this species appears not to be resident. It is better described as a dry season visitor, when it is extremely common in suitable habitat (short grass or bare soil often in desiccated

swamps) often inland and mainly on the north bank (Prufu Swamp on the south bank in URD is an exception). The north bank of the river accounts for 28 of the 58 observations, although observations recorded in the database are heavily weighted in favour of the south bank. It may be lack of suitable habitat which restricts this species on the south bank. Two records in May and June are of single individuals (the number involved in the third case is unknown to the author).

Table 1. Number of days on which at least one Chestnut-backed Finch-Lark was recorded, for the years from 1987 - 1991 inclusive, by month.

J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
10	6	4	5	2	1	-	-	-	1	10	19	58

Table 2. As Table 1, by Division (see Fig. 1).

WD	LRD	MID	URD	NBD	Total
5	11	25	12	5	58

Both Bannerman (1936) and Serle & Morel (1977) describe this species as shifting north during the rains, which may explain its absence from The Gambia at that season. The first record for the 1990/91 dry season in Prufu Swamp was 29 Oct (JRA).

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Gore's statement that this species is confined to the littoral is confirmed by the records in Table 3, all of which, except for one in NBD, were in WD. The farthest inland it has been recorded in The Gambia is only 30 km. This site, where the species is regularly recorded, is on flats behind mangroves on the edge of the river. This association with coast seems to be peculiar to The Gambia and Senegal, although it is also found in the Senegal Valley (Morel & Morel 1990), as the species has a fairly continuous range across West Africa at least to the Niger inundation zone (Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1970). Gore's supposition that this species must also occur on the north bank littoral is confirmed by one record from NBD. Surprisingly there are few records for May-Sept inclusive. This would be expected if most of these birds are Palaearctic migrants, however Gore records this species as breeding "Nov-May, most Dec-Feb". The species

is also recorded breeding further north (Morel & Morel 1990). Local movements may be a possible explanation, alternatively this apparent wet-season absence may be a result of distortions in coverage, especially as coastal birdwatching tends to be less popular during this period as a result of the absence of migrants.

Table 3. Number of days on which at least one Crested Lark was recorded, for the years 1987 - 1991 inclusive, by month.

J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
5	4	4	5	2	1	-	1	2	5	4	6	46

Sun Lark *Galerida modesta*

This species was first sighted on the north bank of URD on 3 Nov 1990. It was on an open area of short grass dotted with widely scattered trees. The poor vegetation appeared to be the consequence of extremely thin soil on laterite, which accounted for the land being uncultivated. Once the site was located the larks were very easy to find, as there was a pair in the shade of almost every tree. Subsequently this lark has been found in similar habitat elsewhere on the north bank in URD (JRA) and has continued to be recorded at four separate locations into the rainy season of 1991 (TJW). The birds I saw were identified by pale edges to the feathers of the upperparts; on the primaries this had the effect of creating a paler patch on the closed wing. The birds were heavily streaked dark brown (the wing coverts appearing almost spotted as a consequence), with a strong pale supercilium, dark eye-stripe extending back to the ear coverts, buffy outer edges to dark tail feathers, belly and undertail coverts white, throat but not breast streaked, and a crest which could be raised and lowered. It made a small three note rattling call from the ground. On 10 Dec 1990 a juvenile, only just fledged (it could fly a few feet with difficulty), was also present.

As a result of comparison of photographs (taken by JRA) with skins at the British Museum (Natural History) these birds were identified as Sun Larks, a new species for The Gambia. This species has been previously recorded from Casamance in Senegal as *Galerida modesta nigrita*, the same subspecies as occurs in Guinea (Walsh 1987). However, this is not the subspecies occurring in The Gambia, which has very pale, rather than brown, edgings to its feathers. The Gambian bird seems most likely to be *G. m. giffardi* which Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1970) do not record west of Mali. Morel & Morel (1990) record this species in Senegal both due east of the Gambian sightings and also in the south-east close to the Guinea border. There is also an isolated record east of Dakar. The subspecies of these Senegalese records is not stated.

Discussion

The above records suggest that the regular range of one species and one subspecies of lark, *Mirafra cantillans* and *Galerida modesta giffardi*, which inhabit the dry bush south of the desert and north of the forest zones, should be extended to the south and west. The Singing Bush-Lark has previously been recorded in southern Mauritania and Senegal to the north and Mali and Senegal to the east. Serle & Morel (1977) also state that this species occurs in Guinea, although the source for this statement is unclear since it is not recorded there in Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1970), nor in Richards (1982), Browne (1984), Walsh (1987) and Morel & Morel (1988). There is, however, one record from south-east Senegal close to the borders of both Guinea and Mali (Morel & Morel 1990).

G. m. giffardi has been recorded to the east in Mali, and this is possibly the subspecies which occurs to the north and east in Senegal. A different subspecies, not so far recorded in The Gambia, occurs in Guinea to the south. It is surprising that the Rufous-rumped Bush-Lark, also an inhabitant of the dry bush, has not been sighted since it was first recorded in 1960-61.

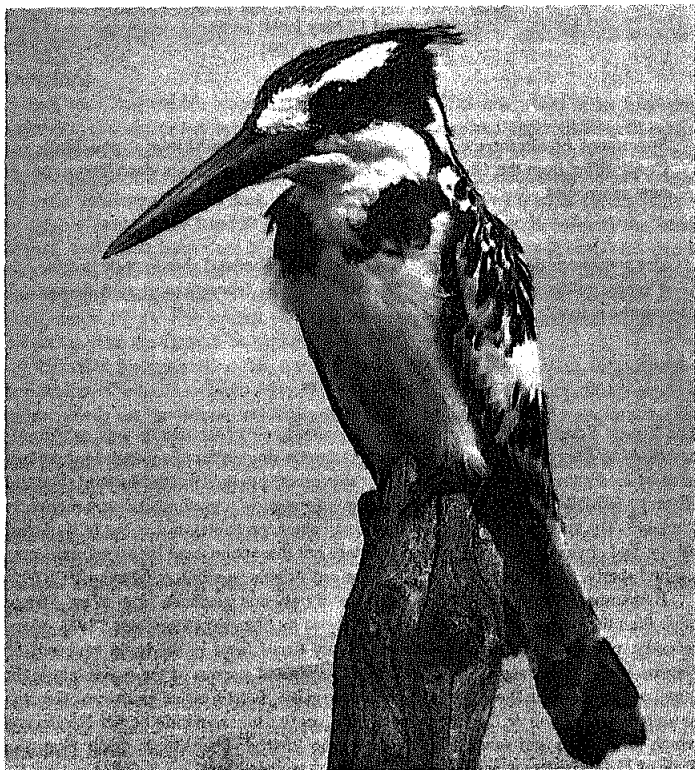
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Pied Kingfisher - Martin-Pêcheur pie - *Ceryle rudis*
(Photo: Philip Blasdale)