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Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
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Erratum

Birds of the Korup National Park, Cameroon

In my paper with the above title (1991, *Malimbus* 13: 11-23) there was an error in the identification of the Pale-breasted Akalat *Trichastoma rufipennis*. The species actually observed and photographed was the Brown Akalat *T. rufescens*. An S should be added at the end of this species account to indicate that it was also recorded by Stuart (ed., 1986, *Conservation of Cameroon Montane Forests*, ICBP, Cambridge).

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Book Reviews

The Rainforests of West Africa. By Claude Martin, 1991. 235 pp. + numerous colour plates. Birkhäuser, Basel. ISBN 3-7643-2380-9. SFr72/DM86 hardback.

This looks rather like a too-small coffee-table book. Its near-landscape format, glossy paper, American spelling, odd punctuation, large print and a font style that makes full stops almost disappear (especially when read by hurricane lamp in a rainforest) gave me the feeling that I was about to be disappointed. First impressions have rarely been so wrong. This is an excellent book which should be read by everyone with any interest in or influence on West African forests. It is packed with evocative photographs that, for those who know the rainforest, will recall images from their own slide collections. The book is a celebration of rainforest biology and a plea for conservation, and admirably succeeds in conveying the enormity of the destruction of West Africa's forests.

A condemnatory preface and first chapter document the history of forest exploitation in the region, especially destructive logging and failed attempts at protection by Forest Reserves. The figures are unimaginable; even in the past decade some 7200 km² of primary forest have been lost per year. Nigeria's forests were classified into types in the 1970s based on information collected in the 1930s, because there was simply not enough forest left to do it on contemporary data.

The author goes on to a wide-ranging discussion of rainforest biology, beginning with present and Quaternary distribution of forests, through the influence of climate and soils on the forest and *vice versa*, moving from rare animal distributions to competition as illustrated by primates, from plant-animal coevolution to forest elephant biology. The breadth of coverage is phenomenal. It is well-referenced to key works and gives a lead into an enormous range of topics, without burdening the text with long lists of authors.

It is attractively written and makes an excellent introduction to the subject for a layman, while every chapter will produce something new even for those with professional experience in the field.

There are small errors, including one of my bugbears: Nimba is described as the only mountain in the region (west of Cameroon) rising to 1700 m. Too many authors remain ignorant of the higher mountains in Sierra Leone and more extensive ones in Guinea, both of which carry important forests. As is inevitable in such a broad review, the author makes some slips in areas which are not his speciality (*e.g.* that all extant scaly-tails can glide). However, one becomes willing to overlook such quibbles as one realises what an achievement this book represents. The same applies to the occasionally odd English; the book was written in German and, I guess, translated by a non-native English-speaker.

The latter part of the book returns to conservation. Martin's major theme is that traditional forest cultures do (or rather did) little damage to their environment; problems arose when selective logging allowed immigration along logging roads, by peoples who did not possess the appropriate forest traditions. The last two chapters describe in shocking detail the extent of the resultant loss. It is impossible to foresee the biological consequences of removing what is now probably over 90% of West Africa's primary rainforests. It seems inevitable that large numbers of organisms will eventually become extinct. Humanity will have lost more besides. The rainforest inspires wonder at its complexity and awe at its grandeur. The same awe and wonder are not generated by a small, sad patch of Forest Reserve in the midst of degraded farmland. The aesthetic argument is not all, however. Martin makes the important point that so-called "minor" forest products (such as honey, fibre, medicines and meat) are often of greater economic value than the "primary" timber products. This has universally been ignored. Despite this and although their interest was timber alone, Forest Departments aimed to manage the forests sustainably. But they could not fight the financial muscle of timber companies, whose operations were followed almost everywhere by the immigrant farmers who finished the job. Ironically, this does not produce farmland where once was forest; rather the result after a few harvests is a mosaic of exhausted soil and poor farm patches. Everyone loses: the timber companies lose their source and the farmers gain nothing in the long term. "The costs to the national economy caused by forest loss are well above the profits": the words, quoted in the book, of an experienced forester, not a dedicated conservationist.

Martin recommends some practical measures which, if taken immediately might save the remnants of the primary forests while providing timber and sustainable agriculture. However, it seems unlikely that such action will be taken. The book ends with a grim recommendation to the countries of central Africa, to take a good look at the mistakes made further west as their forests begin to disappear down the same road.

Alan Tye