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Kordofan Bush Lark *Mirafra cordofanica* and Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*, additions to the avifauna of Burkina Faso

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Summary

Kordofan Bush Lark *Mirafra cordofanica* and Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* are reported from Burkina Faso for the first time. Kordofan Bush Lark was found in association with the grass *Schoenefeldia gracilis*, and recordings made of its song are, apparently, the first for this species. The Desert Larks differed in coloration from that of the nearest recorded subspecies, while these records are amongst the southernmost for the species in West Africa.

Résumé

L'Alouette du Cordofan *Mirafra cordofanica* et l'Ammomane isabelline *Ammomanes deserti* ont été observées pour la première fois au Burkina Faso. L'Alouette du Cordofan fut trouvée en association avec la graminée *Schoenefeldia gracilis*, et les enregistrements de son chant sont, apparemment, les premiers pour cette espèce. L'Ammomane isabelline différait par sa couleur de la plus proche sous-espèce observée, alors que ces observations sont les plus méridionales pour l'espèce dans l'Ouest africain.

Introduction

During the course of a visit to the *Réserve Partielle du Sahel*, northern Burkina Faso, in June 1999, two lark species were recorded, which appear not to have been previously reported from the country (Dowsett 1993).

Kordofan Bush Lark *Mirafra cordofanica*

On the evening of 16 June 1999 an unfamiliar lark was seen to the north of the village of Déou, some 10 km south of Forage Christine at about 14°52´N, 0°44´W. Initial

impressions were that the bird was larger, longer tailed and more brightly coloured than the Singing Bush Larks *Mirafra cantillans* which had been seen commonly over the course of the preceding few days. The bird was re-located the next morning and the following details noted.

The centres of the feathers of the upperparts were a striking, pale golden-rufous, with paler, sandy-coloured, fairly wide fringes. There appeared to be some darker flecking on the feathers of the back and mantle. The crown was streaked, the ear coverts pale rufous. A narrow, ill-defined darker stripe extended behind the eye but the white supercilium, lores and the area below the eye meant that overall the head was conspicuously pale, especially given that the bill, which was stubby and relatively strong with a decurved culmen, was also whitish. The central tail feathers were concolorous with the back and wings, the adjacent tail feathers were black, or almost so, while the outermost ones were white. Below, the throat was white, there was a gorget of gingerish streaks on the upper breast (which appeared to be more marked on some individuals than others) while the belly and lower breast were pale creamy white. The legs were pale pinkish. Compared with *M. cantillans* it seemed more robust, less neat and compact. From subsequent examination of skins at the Natural History Museum, Tring the birds were identified as Kordofan Bush Larks *Mirafra cordofanica*.

The habitat was an area of gently undulating, reddish-coloured sand, patchily covered with a few low shrubs and dead grasses, in which *Schoenefeldia gracilis* appeared to predominate. All the grasses were dry, with bare seed heads, since they were the remains of the previous year's growth, this year's rains having barely begun. Despite this, all available characters support the determination and collected specimens closely resemble the illustration, in Andrews (1956), of the spikes after the fall of the florets. The overall "quality" of the savanna here, however, appeared to be relatively high since, unlike much of the region, there was little evidence of heavy grazing activity by domestic stock, presumably because of distance from water sources.

The birds were vocally active and what later proved to be this species was heard at first light (around 4h40). It was later seen singing from bare sand patches between dead grasses, from the tops of bushes at 2–3 m (*Maerua* sp.) and from aerial song flights. The song consisted of a sustained series of short, varied, non-repeated phrases, made up of short trills, harsh and mellow chirps and melodious, whistled notes. One bird sang from the top of a bush for some minutes, after which it took off and towered, keeping a more or less constant angle to its point of departure as it extended up and away downwind. It then remained on this station, but for some minor lateral movement, at an altitude of perhaps 100 m, and stayed aloft, head into the wind, on rapid, shallow, fluttery wing beats for fully 35 minutes, singing all the while. After some time it became clear that the song contained a number of mimetic elements including White-faced Duck *Dendrocygna viduata*, White-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops albicollis*, Grey Woodpecker *Mesopicos goertae* and Tawny-flanked

Prinia *Prinia subflava*, all of which were seen in the area. At the end of this period the bird descended to land on the ground within a few metres of its take-off point.

Sound recordings were made of a perched bird (apparently the first time *M. cordofanica* has been recorded: C. Chappuis *in litt*.) but none was made during the aerial cruise since it was felt that the bird's altitude and the strength of the wind would have resulted in a recording of poor quality. This decision was, in retrospect, a mistake since playback of the recordings subsequently revealed that the mimetic elements were only or mostly confined to the aerial song.

The reddish sand habitat concurs with previous reports of its association with this substrate (Butler 1905, Bannerman 1936, Cave & MacDonald 1955, Salvan 1968, Nikolaus 1987, Dean *et al*. 1992). This appears, however, to be the first time the bird has been noted in association with *Schoenefeldia gracilis*. The two other grass species with which the lark has previously been reported to be associated are Heskanit *Cenchrus biflorus* (= *C. catharticus*: Butler 1905, Bannerman 1936, Cave & MacDonald 1955), and *Stipagrostis uniplumis* (= *Aristida papposa*: Lynes 1924, Bannerman 1936, Cave & MacDonald 1955).

No other lark species was seen in the immediate vicinity; nor was *M. cordofanica* seen other than in this apparently limited area. It is of interest that *M. cordofanica* was singing despite the lack of rain, while *M. cantillans*, seen commonly not far away, was not.

Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*

A pair of larks was found on a rocky outcrop at approximately 14°40´N, 0°0´, altitude *c*. 300 m, some 5 km north of the town of Markoye on 18 June 1999. The larks were uniform, unstreaked dark slate grey on the crown, back, mantle and wings; the ear coverts were slightly paler but were otherwise also unstreaked grey. There was a narrow whitish eye-ring, fairly conspicuous against the face, which was dark and plain except for a poorly defined, narrow, dirty white supercilium extending behind the eye, over a darker line through the eye. The flight feathers were blackish on the inner webs, buffy on the outer ones. There were a few darker, almost black spots on the median coverts; the edges of the greater coverts had buffy fringes. The tail feathers were likewise black on the inner webs, while the outer webs, at least in the basal half of the outer feathers, were a rich rufous-chestnut. Although the rump was not clearly seen, it too appeared to be rufous-chestnut and black. The throat was dirty white, with some darker streaking on the neck and upper breast. The lower breast and belly were pale centrally, while the flanks were a conspicuous buffy-tan. The bill was prominent, relatively large, and of a dirty yellow colour except for a darker line along the culmen. The eyes were black.

The isolated, small outcrop on which they were discovered rose abruptly from the surrounding stony plain to a height of perhaps 20 m. It comprised a jumble of

weathered, granitic boulders and rocks, uniformly battleship-grey in colour which contrasted conspicuously with the yellows and browns of the plain. The larks were clearly intimately associated with this habitat; they were not seen to leave it and their overall colour closely matched that of the rocks.

The birds were relatively confiding, allowing good views through a telescope at close range as they foraged in the sparse, dry vegetation between the broken rocks where they were seen to catch and eat acridid grasshoppers, at least one of which was *Harpezocatantops stylifer*. They appeared relatively large, larger than the locally common *M. cantillans*, about the same size as the nearby Grey-headed Sparrows *Passer griseus*. The pair was persistently tracked by a White-throated Bee-eater, which left its perch to harass one or other whenever it caught a grasshopper.

A second pair was later found in, and also seemed confined to, identical habitat at similar altitude 6–7 km southwest of Markoye on the Gorom-Gorom road, at about 14°36´N, 0°2´E, on a higher, more extensive hill also of broken granitic boulders and stones. These birds often perched conspicuously on the tops of rocks when they appeared almost thrush-like. A third bird seen later, in company of the other two, was possibly an immature, as it was distinctly browner above with paler spotting on the coverts. They made "wheoo" or "weow" contact calls as they foraged, while in flight a soft, rapidly delivered series of "tyup-tyup-tyup-tyup" notes was heard. Although we were present at dawn on 19 June, no song was heard.

While these birds were clearly Desert Larks *Ammomanes deserti,* their subspecific identity is less apparent. As Dean *et al*. (1992) make clear, the species is very variable and, in parts of Africa at least, the situation appears confused. These birds should, on distributional grounds, be of the race *geyri*, the range of which is given by Dean *et al*. (1992) as "Mauritania to Nigeria (Kano) and SE Algeria". However, the upperparts of *geyri* are described as being "sandy grey-brown, rump pink-brown; tail feathers darker brown with rufous outer margins" which does not match the colour of these birds. Examination of skins at the Natural History Museum, Tring has confirmed that the Burkina Faso birds were much darker than *geyri* and, in fact, resemble the dark grey races *assabensis* of Ethiopia and Somalia, *saturatus* of Saudi Arabia and *annae* of Jordan and Syria. They did, however, match *geyri* in basic colour pattern, in particular in the distribution and amount (but not degree of saturation) of red in the flight, tail and rump feathers, and thereby differed from the other three dark subspecies, which lack or show much less red in wings and tail.

These records appear to be among the southernmost localities known for Desert Lark in West Africa. Hall & Moreau (1970) map none south of 15°N; Dean *et al.* (1992) state that the species' range includes Kano (12°N, 8°E), although Nigeria is not included in the accompanying distribution map. The Kano record had, however, earlier been rejected by Elgood (1982), who attributed it to White (1961). White wrote that the range of *A. d. geyri* comprised "the southern edge of Sahara from Tillia to Damergou and Kano in northern Nigeria." The confusion may date back to Sclater (1930) who stated that *geyri* occurs in "Damergu country between Asben and Kano,

in French Sahara", words repeated almost exactly by Bannerman (1936). Both these authors, however, say "between" Asben (= Aïr) and Kano; White's (1961) slight re-wording changes the sense. These authors were probably all drawing upon the description of *geyri*, the type locality of which is Farak (15°18´N, 8°55´E), Damergu in present day Niger (Hartert 1924). The only localities from the southern, sahelian parts of the country given by Giraudoux *et al*. (1988) are those of Hartert (1924), and of Bates (1934), from Tillia (16°8´N, 4°47´E), other than for a sight record of two, 30 km south of Filingué (14°21´N, 3°19´E). More recently, Holyoak & Seddon (1991) report the species from several sahelian localities but none south of 16°N.

Elsewhere in West Africa, Lamarche (1981) states that in Mali *A. deserti* is common and widespread in the north of the Sahel, descending in the east to 16°N. In Chad it is apparently not known south of Ennedi (*c*. 17°N) (Salvan 1968, Dean *et al*. 1992); there are no records from Senegal (Morel & Morel 1990).

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