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First recordings of vocalisations of Yellow-footed Honeyguide *Melignomon eisentrauti* and confirmed records in Ivory Coast

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Summary

We document the first confirmed observations in Ivory Coast of the Yellow-footed Honeyguide *Melignomon eisentrauti*, at four sites: Marahoué and Mont Péko National Parks, and Guéoulé and Cavally Forest Reserves, all in the northern part of the forest zone. The song and calls were recorded for the first time and a spectrogram of the song is presented. Our observations suggest that this species may prefer the northern, semi-deciduous forests in Upper Guinea.

Résumé

Premiers enregistrements des vocalisations de l'Indicateur d'Eisentraut *Melignomon eisentrauti* et premières mentions confirmées en Côte d'Ivoire. Nous commentons les premières observations en Côte d'Ivoire de l'Indicateur d'Eisentraut *Melignomon eisentrauti*. Nous avons observé l'espèce dans les Parcs Nationaux de la Marahoué et du Mont Péko, et les Forêts Classées de Guéoulé et du Cavally, quatre localités situées dans la partie nord de la zone forestière. Le chant et les cris ont été enregistrés pour la première fois et un sonogramme du chant est présenté. Nos observations semblent indiquer que l'espèce pourrait préférer les forêts semi-décidues du nord de la Haute-Guinée.

Introduction

The Yellow-footed Honeyguide *Melignomon eisentrauti* is an elusive bird, closely resembling Zenker's Honeyguide *M. zenkeri* (Serle 1959, Eisentraut 1963, Colston 1981, Louette 1981). Few sightings have been good enough for certain identification (Bowden *et al*. 1995, Gatter 1997) including six unconfirmed observations from Taï National Park, Ivory Coast over many months of study (Gartshore 1989, Gartshore *et al*. 1995, Thiollay 1985). The last confirmed observations were made in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1980s (Allport *et al*. 1989, Gatter 1997). BirdLife International (2000) lists this species as Data Deficient.

Results

Observations

We observed the Yellow-footed Honeyguide in Marahoué and Mont Péko National Parks (NP) and Cavally and Guéoulé Forest Reserves (FR) in Ivory Coast; these constitute the first confirmed records for the country. Its hitherto unknown vocalisations were tape-recorded. These areas have been the subject of a number of recent bird surveys and have been found to hold many globally threatened bird species (Christy & Schulenberg 1999, Rainey 2000, Rainey *et al*. 2001, Demey 2002, Demey & Rainey 2002, Rainey & Lachenaud 2002). Our observations of *M. eisentrauti* are detailed below in chronological order.

On 31 December 2000 in Marahoué NP (7°5´N, 6°0´W), NB was walking with a tour group along the main circular track (the "Grande Boucle") in an area of generally open forest, with tall thin trees emerging from a dense understorey. An unfamiliar call was heard, consisting of a series of about 13 clear, emphatic notes, slightly descending in pitch and slowing towards the end, and transcribed as *tuu-i tuu-i tuu-i tuu-i ... tuu tuu tuu* (Fig. 1). When the tape-recorded song was played back, a bird responded immediately and aggressively by flying straight towards the source of the sound and perching in the tree above the observers' heads. It was a honeyguide with grey head and underparts, green upperparts and black tail with the conspicuous white outer feathers tipped black. The stout yellow bill with a strongly curved culmen was very obvious and, when the bird perched in clear view, yellow feet were apparent. The song phrase was repeated intermittently with no apparent standard pause between utterances. The bird usually remained at a height of *c.* 30 m, but occasionally came much lower, investigating the source of playback. This constitutes the first confirmed record for the country and appears to be the first description and recording of the species' song (Bowden *et al.* 1995, Chappuis 2001). The forest is semi-deciduous and the park lies on the forest-savanna boundary; it covers 1010 km^2, of which roughly two-thirds are forest (Fishpool 2001).

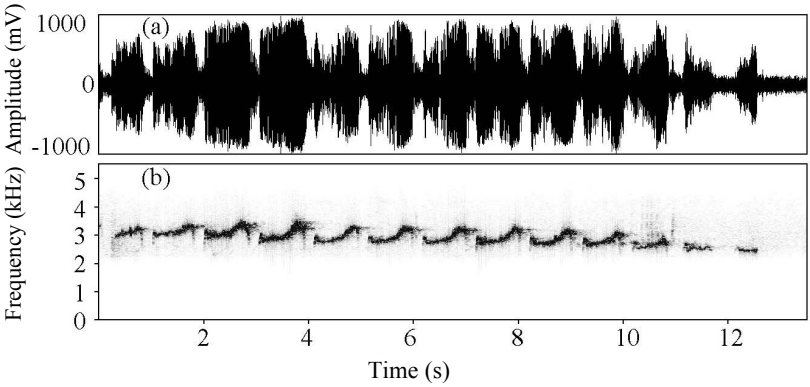

Figure 1. Power (a) and frequency (b) spectrograms of the song of Yellow-footed Honeyguide *Melignomon eisentrauti*. Recorded 31 Dec 2000, Marahoué National Park, Ivory Coast, by Nik Borrow.

On 23 March 2001, in the north of Mont Péko NP (7°0′N, 7°16′W), at the foot of Mont Kahoué, HR and Gondo Manh watched a small honeyguide for 10 min. It was feeding in a tree, moving along small branches and amongst the leaves at a height of 15–20 m. It was slim and quite agile, and behaved rather like a warbler (cf. Bowden *et al.* 1995). Its overall proportions were similar in some respects to Cassin's Honeybird *Prodotiscus insignis* rather than a more robust *Indicator* sp. It had uniformly pale grey underparts, including the throat and sides of the head, with no facial streaks. The bill and feet were pale yellow with a slight pink tinge. The outer tail feathers were white below; the inner tail feathers grey. Above, the outer tail feathers were grey-white at the base, becoming greyer towards the tips. The mantle and wings were not seen well, but towards the shoulder and edges of the wings appeared slightly brighter with a yellowish tinge to the general olive-green colour. Compared to the seven illustrations of which we are aware (Colston & Curry-Lindahl 1986, Fry *et al*. 1988, Bowden *et al.* 1995, Gatter 1997, Borrow & Demey 2001, Short & Horne 2001, del Hoyo *et al*. 2002) the bill and feet were much less yellow. The colour of the mantle resembled most that in Borrow & Demey (2002) and Colston & Curry-Lindahl (1986). The tail was paler than that in Borrow & Demey (2001) perhaps indicating an immature bird. Bowden *et al*. (1995) noted that the greenish wash on the breast of some museum specimens was not evident on the bird that they observed; it was also not visible on our bird. The forest in the area of the observation has been logged in the past and is now quite dense, but access is easy as elephants keep paths open in the understorey. It is in some ways similar to the semi-deciduous forest in Marahoué NP, with many tall thin trees forming a broken canopy. Mont Péko has lowland forest in the south and

becomes more mountainous (up to 1000 m a.s.l.) in the north with some lowland areas. The park area is officially 340 km^2 but in fact nearer 280 km^2 (Fishpool 2001).

On 1 March 2002, RD and LDCF saw a medium-sized honeyguide perching quietly *c.* 5 m above ground along the main trail through Guéoulé FR (7°34′N, 7°53′W) in semi-deciduous forest at an altitude of about 700 m. The bird was facing the observers and had a rather stout yellowish bill, with a conspicuously curved, dark culmen, giving it a distinctive jizz, quite unlike that of *Indicator* honeyguides. The head, ear-coverts and underparts were plain medium-grey, wings and mantle olive-green; the underside of the tail white tipped black. The legs and feet, which were clearly visible, were pale chrome yellow, confirming the identity of the bird. Playback of NB's tape-recording did not elicit any reaction. After having been watched for over 5 min., the bird silently disappeared into the forest. About three hours later and *c*. 500 m further down the same trail, a song identical to NB's recording was heard. It came from just below the canopy, at a height of *c*. 15 m, near a somewhat more open space next to the trail. This time, playback of NB's recording elicited an immediate response, the bird flying silently towards the source of the sound, crossing the trail back and forth several times above our heads. On one occasion it perched as low as *c*. 4 m above ground on small, leafless branches of a bush next to the trail, *c.* 5–6 m away. It remained there long enough for excellent views through a telescope of 30 x magnification. It appeared somewhat paler and more brightly coloured than that of the first, with the pale grey underparts showing a distinct greenish wash on the breast. The upperparts were a more vivid green than usually shown in illustrations. The bill was more extensively yellow than apparent on the first individual, with only the tip of the upper mandible dark; the legs and feet were as yellow as those of the first bird. After a while another bird flew in. During their interaction, a series of indistinct calls were uttered, transcribed as *wrreew wrreew rreew-rreew-rreew truwp*. Song and calls were tape-recorded. The song was very similar to that recorded in Marahoué NP. The call, which has not apparently been described before, is shown in Fig. 2.

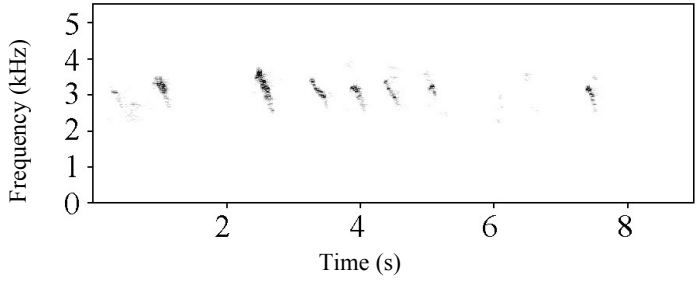

Figure 2. Frequency spectrogram of a call of Yellow-footed Honeyguide *Melignomon eisentrauti*, 1 Mar 2002, Guéoulé Forest Reserve, Ivory Coast, recorded by Ron Demey.

On 29 March 2002, a Yellow-footed Honeyguide was seen in Cavally FR (6°10´N, 7°48´W) by HR and RD. It was observed for *c.* 15 min. while feeding on small branches at a height of *c*. 20–25 m, sometimes close to other birds. It was chased by a sunbird and subsequently appeared to follow and perhaps chase a Sharpe's Apalis *Apalis sharpii*. This individual had an olive wash on its breast. It was silent, and playback of NB's recording did not elicit any obvious response. The forest in the area was fairly open and degraded, with some large trees but the canopy generally below 30 m. The forest in this area is transitional between moist and semi-deciduous (Laurent Aké Assi pers. comm.). Cavally FR lies west of Taï NP on the Liberian border. This is north-west of the unconfirmed observations in Taï NP (Gartshore 1989, Gartshore *et al*. 1995, Thiollay 1985). Cavally FR covers an area of approximately 1000 km^2 and is contiguous with Goin-Débé FR to the north.

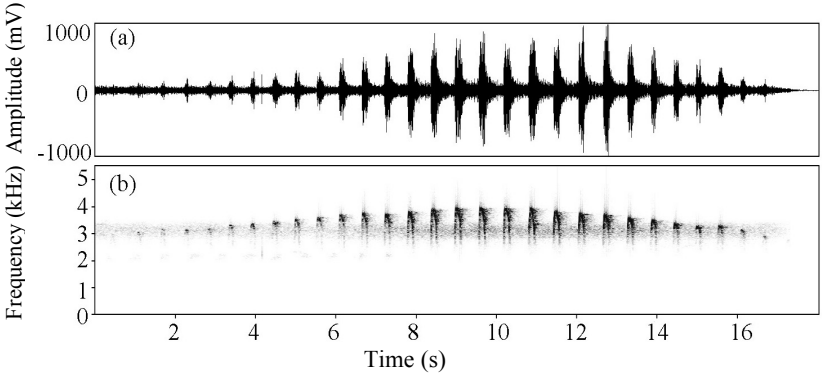

Figure 3. Power (a) and frequency (b) spectrograms for Zenker's Honeyguide *Melignomon zenkeri*. From Chappuis (2000), recorded in October at Mt Kupé, SW Cameroon, by R. Martins.

Vocalisations

A sonogram and power spectrum of the recording made by NB (Fig. 1) show that the song differs quite considerably from that of Zenker's Honeyguide (cf. Bowden *et al*. 1995, Chappuis 2001), which has short, whistled bell-like notes (Fig. 3). That of Yellow-footed consists of harsh strident notes which are more drawn out. Comparison of the power spectra of both species (Figs 1 and 3) illustrates the essential characters for distinguishing the calls in the field. The Yellow-footed song lasts 12.4 s and Zenker's 15 s. Both are series of repeated regular phrases that are similar in structure but vary in their maximum and minimum frequencies, as is typical of the songs of honeyguides (Claude Chappuis pers. comm.). The phrases of Yellow-footed are repeated at a rate of 1 s^{-1}, those of Zenker's at 1.8 s^{-1}. Each note of the Yellow-footed

song is separated by a very short pause, but four times longer than those in the song of Zenker's, a difference readily apparent in the field. The variation in intensity of the phrases throughout the song is another important distinction. Zenker's rises from the start and fades away at the end with the first and last phrases almost inaudible. The variation in intensity in the Yellow-footed is much less marked. Both songs begin at an average frequency just above 3000 Hz, but the frequency of Yellow-footed shows a marked decline throughout the song, whereas in Zenker's there is an initial rise and a final drop at the end.

Discussion

With this recording, it should be easier to detect this species than hitherto. However, as it does not appear to respond to playback unless it is already singing, systematic surveys using playback may not be very productive. Mont Péko and Marahoué NPs are now reasonably well known (Thiollay 1985, Demey & Fishpool 1991, Christy & Schulenberg 1999, Rainey 2000, Rainey *et al*. 2001, Rainey & Lachenaud 2002), but in Marahoué NP the song has so far been identified only once. The song is quite loud and strident and unlikely to be missed, so the absence of records suggests the species does not sing frequently. The song has so far been heard only in December and March, the first and last months of the dry season in the forest zone of Ivory Coast. Our observations are all from the northern, drier, semi-deciduous forests, as are almost all previous records throughout its range (Bowden *et al*. 1995). However, much remains to be discovered about this species and the relatively large number of unconfirmed records from the southern moist forest zone (Macdonald 1980, Thiollay 1985, Gartshore 1989, Gartshore *et al*. 1995; also Banco NP, Abidjan, 6 Apr 2002 (HR)) suggest that it may be more common there than yet supposed.

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