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THE MARSH OWL *ASIO CAPENSIS*: A WET SEASON MIGRANT
TO THE GAMBIA

by M.E. Smalley

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Marsh Owls *Asio capensis* occur on a small coastal marsh at 13°40'N, 16°50'W in The Gambia during and just after the rainy season (June-October). Their numbers were counted for four years, 1977-1980, by systematic searching of the marsh between 1700 and 1830 h every day. There was no evidence of breeding. Each year they appeared in July and increased to maxima of 26-53 birds in the second half of August, then decreased until December (Fig. 1). They roosted communally in a section of the marsh of about 100 x 250 m containing five islands of grasses and sedges, each c. 150 m² in area, in an area of sand partly ringed by mangroves. Roosting densities were high, for the birds congregated on only one or two islands, but moved from day to day so that no island was especially favoured. Up to 28 owls roosted on one island, with an average density of one per 16 m² (range one per 2-40 m²). Owls flushed by the searchers flew round above them and then settled onto bare sand, plunged into herbage, or perched in the mangrove. They were always silent despite harassment by Grey-headed Gulls *Larus cirrocephalus*, Caspian Terns *Sterna caspia* and, particularly, Pied Crows *Corvus albus*. Only once did a flushed owl fly away from the marsh, on 14 October 1978, when one of only six owls present rose high and drifted out of sight to the east.

At each resting site the vegetation was flattened, with tunnels into the grasses and sedges so that the bird remained covered over; most sites contained pellets and moulted contour feathers.

In West Africa Marsh Owls breed during the dry season, October-April (Table 1), and there is evidence that some then disperse away for the wet season (Lamarche 1980, Smith & Killick-Kendrick 1964). Gee & Heigham (1977) described them as migrants at Lagos and Sharland & Wilkinson (1981) consider them to be rare wet season visitors to Kano State, Nigeria.

While The Gambian birds could be from Morocco there is no evidence for any west Saharan movement (D.W. Snow, pers. comm.). The nearest known breeding population is in Mali (Table 1) where they are common south of 17°N (Lamarche 1980). The Gambia lies about 1000 km west of that population, and if part of it moved westward in April or May, after breeding, some birds could reach the West African coast along the River Gambia. It is interesting that Marsh Owls have been recorded neither along nor at the mouth of the River Senegal (G.J. Morel pers. comm.). That the Mali population decreases when The Gambian one increases, and vice versa, suggests that they are the same birds.

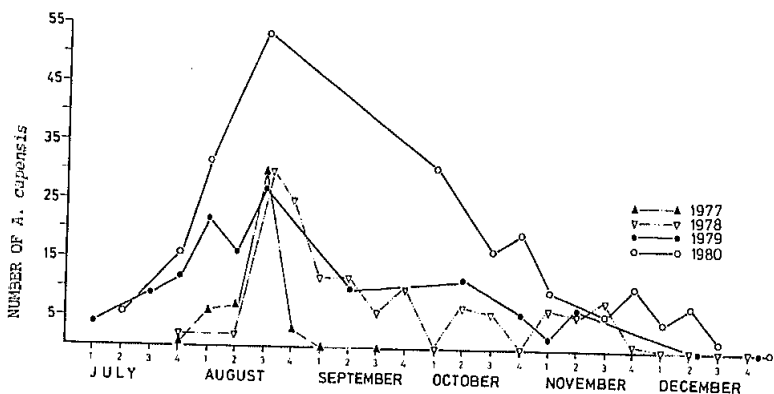
Table 1 Breeding records of *Asio capensis* in West Africa

Mali: Tilembaya	Mar: eggs and nestlings	
Mopti	Feb: display flight	(Lamarche 1980)
Nigeria: Vom	Nov-Dec: eggs	
	Dec: nestlings and fledglings	(Smith & Killick-Kendrick 1964)

Table 2 Other West African records of *Asio capensis*

The Gambia	?	(Hopkinson 1911)
	Oct	(Gore 1981)
	July-Dec	This study
Nigeria: Zaria	Aug-Sept	(Fry 1964)
Mambilla	Oct	(Hail 1976)
Lagos	May-June	(Gee & Heigham 1977)
Kano State	June	(Sharland & Wilkinson 1981)
Benin/Upper Volta	Dec-Jan*	(Green & Sayer 1979)

* Pendjari/Arli National Park; perhaps a breeding population (MES)
 (There are further records from the Lake Chad basin and the Cameroon montane - Ed)

Figure 1 Occurrence of *Asio capensis* on a coastal marsh in The Gambia

Such large numbers have not been recorded in The Gambia hitherto. Hopkinson (1911) recorded one 180 km up the River Gambia (month?), and one was identified near Banjul (10 km from my study area) in October 1970. Records of Short-eared Owls *Asio flammeus* in The Gambia (Banjul, September 1965; study marsh, December 1972 and twice in January 1974) may refer to Marsh Owls (Gore 1981).

In Eas. Africa Marsh Owls are nomadic rather than truly migratory (L.H. Brown pers. comm.), but in West Africa many bird species tend to move more regularly. The pattern of wet season sightings of Marsh Owls in West Africa away from known breeding areas (Table 2) lends support to the belief that they are partly migratory.

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SUMMARY

Up to 53 Marsh Owls *Asio capensis* occur in a communal roost on The Gambia coast in July-December, without evidence of breeding. It is suggested that they are migrants from Mali.

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POSTSCRIPT

Marsh Owls were again seen on the study marsh (but were not counted) during the autumns of 1981 and 1982.