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ABYSSINIAN ROLLERS *CORACIAS ABYSSINICA* AND EUROPEAN  
ROLLERS *C. GARRULUS* IN THE GAMBIA

by M.E. Smalley

Received 24 February 1983

Two recent checklists have disagreed over the status of the European Roller *Coracias garrulus* in The Gambia. Jensen & Kirkeby (1980) described it as a rare winter visitor from mid December to late March, while Gore (1981) accepted only one record, of a bird seen at Banjul in January 1968. Morel (1972) listed specimens from Senegal, some 300 km north of The Gambia, collected in September and others seen in August and September. He ascribed the paucity of observations in Senegal and The Gambia to the difficulty of distinguishing *C. garrulus* from the Abyssinian Roller *C. abyssinica*.

The problem does not arise when the birds are in adult plumage since *C. abyssinica* is then easily recognized by its long tail streamers compared with the short tail of *C. garrulus*. But juvenile *C. abyssinica* and moulting adults lack the tail streamers, which presents difficulties in separating them from *C. garrulus*. *C. abyssinica* has rich purple primaries, compared with mainly black primaries of *C. garrulus*; unfortunately that is a useful field character only for perched birds seen in good light. Voices of the two species are different, that of *C. garrulus* being harsher and deeper than that of *C. abyssinica*.

*C. abyssinica* breeds to the north of The Gambia in the drier Sudan savanna and Sahel-zones, nesting in northern Senegal between April and July (Morel 1972). There are no well substantiated reports of breeding in The Gambia. It is a migrant, moving north to breed and afterward south into the more humid woodland savannas. Both Jensen & Kirkeby (1980) and Gore (1981) describe *C. abyssinica* as a dry season visitor to The Gambia from October to June or July, and the former also suggest it to be a common autumn passage migrant through The Gambia.

Between 1977 and 1981 a study of the birds was made on the campus of a research station in Fajara (13°40'N, 16°50'W). The extensive open spaces of the 24 ha campus, with scattered shrubs and trees and mown grass, provide the ideal habitat for perching birds like rollers that scan the ground for prey. The proportions of each month that *C. abyssinica* was present in 1977-1981 are given in Fig. 1. Numbers seen in a regular 1500 m walk around the campus, carried out at least once a week in 1979, are shown in Fig. 2.

The study reveals a considerable drop in both residency and abundance from April and June, but a small nonbreeding population remains. The first birds lacking tail streamers, many in heavy body moult, appear in 10-19 July (mean date 15 July) and are common until 19-24 September (mean date 22 September). Birds with growing streamers were noticed from September onwards. During July and August the numbers of *C. abyssinica* are as high in February and March but are variable (Fig. 2), indicating that the population is mobile. The birds may well be passing through The Gambia for the south, as suggested by Jensen & Kirkeby (1980). Similarly, whilst the residency was more than 90% of days in each month from October to April,

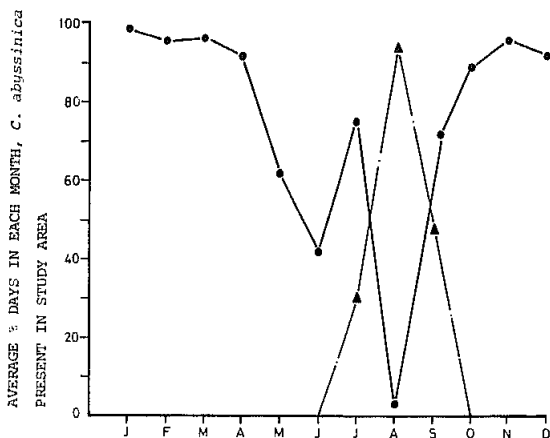


Figure 1 Residency of *C. abyssinica* in study area, 1977-1981 (birds in adult plumage ●, juveniles and adults in moult ▲)

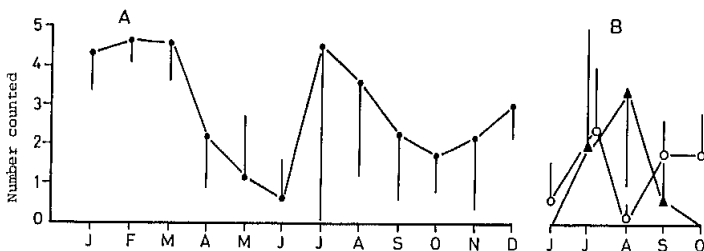


Figure 2 Numbers of *C. abyssinica* counted in regular survey of study area during 1979. Mean and S.D. of weekly counts. A - All *C. abyssinica*. B - Juveniles and adults in moult ▲, birds in adult plumage ○.

the increase in numbers from January to March probably indicates pre-breeding northward passage.

A consequence of the population movements by *C. abyssinica* is that from July and September any *C. garrulus* present are very difficult to discern, and it is then that *C. garrulus* has been noted in northern Senegal (Morel 1972) and in Mali (Curry & Sayer 1979, Lamarche 1980). Despite careful scrutiny none were seen in The Gambia during these months. But in other months *C. garrulus* is readily identifiable and any bird lacking tail

streamers deserves close scrutiny. (I should note that no *C. abyssinica* with broken tail streamers were seen during the study.)

At least six *C. garrulus* were identified in 1977-1981. One was seen on 13 and 23 June 1978 (probably the same bird); one on 15 and 18 February 1979 (probably the same bird - in worn plumage on the second date); one in fresh plumage on 1 March 1979; one on 12 and 14 May 1979 in vivid fresh plumage; one on 13 June 1979; and one on 26 November 1980, with brown streaks on dull blue breast indicating a juvenile, harassed by an adult *C. abyssinica* which displaced it from three perches in quick succession. These records considerably extend the period of occurrence of *C. garrulus* in The Gambia, from late November to late June; it is clear that it is a regular (if scarce) visitor. It is a rare or uncommon winter visitor also to Ghana, Benin/Upper Volta and Nigeria (Macdonald 1978, Green & Sayer 1979, Elgood 1982).

#### SUMMARY

*Coracias abyssinica* is a passage migrant through The Gambia in spring and autumn and a dry season visitor. *C. garrulus* is hard to detect from July to September (when *C. abyssinica* is moulting) but in other months six were recorded from November to June, 1977-1981; it is a regular but scarce passage migrant or winter visitor in The Gambia.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mr M.E.J. Gore for his comments on the first draft of this paper.

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