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THE RED-CAPPED ROBIN-CHAT COSSYPHA NATALENSIS IN  
WEST AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

The Red-capped Robin-chat Cossypha natalensis is a common bird in forest patches through much of eastern, central and southern Africa. It avoids the main rainforest belt of west and central Africa but occurs in forest patches to the south of the belt, as far north as Gabon, Congo, northern Angola and southern Zaire (Chapin 1953; Rand et al. 1959; Schouteden 1962, 1964, 1965; Traylor 1963; Hall and Moreau 1970). However, to the north of the rainforest belt there are only very few records, all along the northern edge of rainforest in the forest-savanna mosaic. Four records shown in Hall and Moreau (1970) to the south of Lake Chad are errors (Snow 1978).

RECORDS FROM CAMEROON AND NIGERIA

There is only one record from Cameroon, of a bird collected 25 March 1944 to the north of Yaounde by A.I. Good (Chapin 1953; Good 1953; examination of specimen in Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (FMNH)). The species was first recorded in Nigeria in 1977 when R.E. Sharland mist-netted a bird in the Nindam Forest Reserve, 5 km south of Kagoro (09° 32'N, 08° 30'E) in Kaduna State (Elgood 1982). These two localities are both in the forest-savanna mosaic zone and appear to be highly isolated from all other populations of the species. It has been suggested that records to the north of the rainforest refer to small numbers of migrant birds (Chapin 1953; Good 1953; Britton 1971; Traylor and Archer 1982). There is now evidence to suggest that this might be at least partially so, and that the species is a migrant, breeding visitor to a very narrow belt along the northern boundary of the rainforest from Nigeria and Cameroon, eastwards to Central African Republic and southern Sudan (Traylor and Archer 1982). All records from this belt, except some from Nigeria, fall between March and August or September, with evidence of breeding in June to August (Friedmann 1978; Traylor and Archer 1982; Dyer et al. 1986). Migrant birds would presumably spend the non-breeding season south of the rainforest belt. The hypothesis that the species breeds widely through this narrow vegetational belt north of the rainforest rests on three pieces of evidence:

1. The occurrence of the species in southern Sudan. The Red-capped Robin-chat is widely reported from southern Sudan, occurring mainly in forests in mountainous and hilly areas in the extreme south and south-east of the

country (Cave and MacDonald 1955). However, the species has also been reported from Bangangai Game Reserve (or Bengengai) (042 51'N, 272 45'E) (Chapin 1953; Cave and MacDonald 1955; Traylor and Archer 1982; Hillman 1983) and from the Aza Forest (042 42'N, 292 50'E) (Traylor and Archer 1982). The habitat at Banganai, which is adjacent to the Zaire border and close to the northern boundary of the rainforest is rainforest-savanna mosaic (Hillman 1983). Birds from Aza Forest were in breeding condition between late June and late August (Traylor and Archer 1982).

2. Records from the Central African Republic. Three specimens were collected in June 1976 in mature riverine forest, 11 km west of Baroua (052 20'N, 242 20'E) in south-eastern Central African Republic (Friedmann 1978). There is evidence that the species breeds at this locality since the three specimens (two males and one female) all had much enlarged gonads. Traylor and Archer (1982) suggested that these birds were breeding migrants from the south.
3. Observations from Nigeria. Observations of this species in Nindam Forest Reserve between 1977 and 1981 have shown that a breeding population exists at this locality (Dyer et al. 1986). A total of 24 individuals was ringed during that period including many spotted juveniles. On 15 June 1980 a nest containing 3 eggs was found in a hollow of a small forest tree 1.5 m above the ground. It was photographed (see Dyer et al. 1986). In this locality, however, it seems that the population is resident (Dyer et al. 1986), being unrecorded only in January and August.

In the light of these few records, we suggest that breeding populations either resident or migratory, occur elsewhere along the northern boundary of the rainforest in southern Sudan, Central African Republic, Cameroon and Nigeria. In general, there has been very little ornithological exploration of this area. It is likely, therefore, that the populations of the Red-capped Robin-chat in West Africa (Nigeria and Cameroon) are not disjunct from others of the species. It is of course possible that populations such as that at Nindam are recently isolated as a result of habitat clearance.

#### SUBSPECIFIC IDENTITY

No firm conclusions can be made concerning the subspecific identity of the birds in Cameroon and Nigeria because of the very small number of specimens involved. Comments made here are very tentative in light of a more thorough study on speciation in this species being carried out by A. Prigogine. This comparison of specimens was made using the very brief descriptions of the subspecies given in White (1962b) as a guide. SNS has examined A.I. Good's specimen (a female) from Yaounde, and one (unsexed) collected by MEG in Nindam Forest Reserve in 1980. These were compared with specimens at the British Museum (Natural History) (BMNH) at Tring, UK., including the female collected by F.O. from Bangangai in

south-western Sudan. Subspecific variation in this species appears to be slight. Birds from Sudan are usually referred to the race intensa. The specimen from Yaounde is unusually dark on the breast, belly, cap, mantle, rump and upper tail-coverts and in this respect it seems closest to larischi which occurs in Gabon, Congo, southern Zaire and Angola (White 1962b). It is also similar to larischi in its short tail (65 mm) (see White 1962b). The specimens from Nindam Forest Reserve and Bangangai Game Reserve are paler and closest to intensa in colouration. The Nigerian bird is intermediate between intensa and larischi in its tail length (70 mm) but the Bangangai specimen is curiously closest to larischi in this respect with a very short tail (63mm).

Clearly, these comparisons are of little relevance until more specimens can be obtained, and the distribution of the species north of the rainforest belt can be clarified.

#### CONCLUSION

We predict that future ornithological exploration will show the Red-capped Robin-chat to be widely distributed north of the rainforest belt in Africa in a narrow band in the forest-savanna zone. We suspect that most of these populations are composed of breeding migrants, but more research is needed to confirm this.

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#### SUMMARY

The presence of the Red-capped Robin-chat north of the rainforest belt is discussed and it appears that populations in Cameroon and Nigeria are probably not disjunct from others of the species. It seems that populations to the north of the rainforest are of breeding birds, but more work is needed to show whether they are resident or migratory in origin.

#### RESUME

La presence nord du foret equatoriale du Cossypha natalensis est discute. Il paraît que les populations aux Cameroun et

Nigeria ne sont pas reparees d'autres populations en Afrique de L'ouest. C'est

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