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THE MARSH OWL, *ASIO CAPENSIS* ON THE JOS PLATEAU

V.W.Smith

The Marsh Owl *Asio capensis* is relatively common in certain areas of the Plateau, particularly where the open grassland in the more level areas becomes saturated with water during the wet season (April to October). During this period, when the birds are not breeding, they may be found in ones and twos wherever the habitat is suitable; rocky outcrops and hilly areas do not attract them, nor do forest reserves. When flushed from the grass they do not fly far and may circle inquisitively, when the dark brown eyes in a pale well-marked facial disc are readily noticeable. Another feature worthy of note is the pale patch on the wings, formed by the pale basal portion of the outer primaries, which shows as the bird circles in flight. Once the bird settles in the grass it is difficult to flush again without the aid of a dog.

As the grassland dries up at the beginning of the dry season, the birds tend to congregate in the lower-lying swampy areas which persist in some cases until the end of the year; even when they dry out completely, the deep holes and grass provide cover and shade for roosting during the day, and it is during the period at the end of the dry season that greatest concentrations of these birds occur in this type of locality. It is difficult to say whether there is any local migration; it is more likely that during the wet season they are dispersed in the same area and are less likely to be seen.

Rodents form the main diet, varying in size from large rats, five or six inches long, to mere morsels an inch long, but insects (locusts) are included. Hunting appears to be carried out from some vantage point rather than in flight; the parapets of roadside culverts (watching for rodents crossing the road), a shrubby bush, guinea-corn stalk, or pile of atcha straw are all favoured sites.

Breeding commences at the end of the wet season and takes place when all the swamps are at their fullest. At this time of year these swamps are very treacherous places indeed, with the tall grass and weeds concealing water-filled holes two or three feet deep. On the other hand the surrounding grassland has begun to dry out, the adjacent grain crops are being harvested, and the rodents attracted to the spilt grain are more easily caught when the ground cover becomes less abundant.

Birds pair off during September and October, and large swamps may hold several pairs. Territories are well-defined in the swamps themselves, though each territory has access to the perimeter of the swamp and the hunting area beyond. Display flights seen at dusk or on moonlit nights take the form of long flights in wide circles, with deliberate wing-beats and periodic clapping of the wings. Pairs chase each other,

occasionally flying up to meet each other feet to feet. The normal call, heard most frequently during the breeding season, is a croaking 'Kaaa' uttered in flight or on the ground (when the similarity to the croak of a frog is most marked). During aerial chases the call may be repeated several times in quick succession.

The nest is well concealed in rank herbage in these swamps; usually a slight pad of vegetable matter is placed in the heart of a dry tussock of old grass or weeds, and the white eggs are not visible from above. Where patches of tall dense grass (so typically seen in these swamps) have been flattened, the nest is sometimes placed beneath, as long as there is a firm dry foundation, and in one case there was an entrance 'tunnel' almost three feet long leading to the nest itself.

Eggs when fresh are chalky white, though later they become stained with vegetable juices; they measure approximately 41 x 35 mm. Nests containing eggs have been seen between 1st October (the first egg of a subsequent clutch of four) and 12th January (although this last record was probably a replacement clutch, being within a few yards of a nest found in early November and subsequently deserted). Most nests with eggs have been seen during October and November. Of five nests found, two had clutches of three eggs, two of four and one of six. Eggs are laid at two-day intervals, and hatch accordingly, and the incubation period is about four weeks. The newly hatched young are covered with a pale fawn down, and the eyes remain closed for six to eight days. The young spend two or three weeks in the nest, and are probably fed nearby for a further two or three weeks. Young have been found out of the nest as early as 15th December, and this was a young bird estimated to be five or six weeks old, with abundant food laid beside it and scarcely able to fly more than a few yards. On this evidence it is clear that the main breeding season in this area is October to December. Adults with well-incubated eggs or newly-hatched young carry out a very vigorous form of distraction display. They fly around in tight circles and then literally fling themselves to the ground uttering a squealing cry, and behaviour like this is a sure indication that there is a nest in the vicinity.

The young in the nest utter a husky 'Queeep', which becomes more of a musical 'Too-eee' when they leave the nest, and this can be heard at a considerable distance.

The local race is A.c. tingitanus, more reddish than the A.c. capensis of East and South Africa, and closely resembling the race found in the Sudan, North Africa and southern Spain.

Reference

- Smith, V.W. & Killick-Kendrick, R. (1964) Notes on the breeding of the Marsh Owl Asio capensis in Northern Nigeria. *Ibis* 106 : 119-123