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February / février 2010

Short-tailed Glossy Starling: Lamprotornis chalcurus chalcurus (p.1229).

On 16/5/72 two juveniles of this species were netted and ringed in our garden at Vom Christian Hospital, and at the same time two adults (the parents) were observed closely in the garden.

Opaque Tree Warbler: Hippolais pallida opaca (p.1024). An Opaque Warbler was netted in our garden on 12/2/73. This is in fact the second Plateau record, since one had previously been netted at the Veterinary Station, Vom by V.W.Smith, but had not been entered on the Plateau Check List. (On 5/4/73 an Olivaceous Warbler - H.pallida laeneni - was also netted in our garden).

(White's nomenclature involves substantial changes in name for two species marked *. These are:- Coturnix chinensis adansonii for Excalfactoria adansonii, and Calidris ferruginea for Erolia testacea. The other changes are not likely to puzzle the reader. In the case of the Olivaceous Warbler Hippolais pallida laeneni, White states that nominate H.p.pallida is resident in Egypt and that H.pallida laeneni occurs in West Africa. ED.)

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A ROOST OF PIED KINGFISHERS - Ceryle rudis.

Netta Robinson.

It was intended in the first place that these notes on Ceryle rudis should cover a period of twelve months with twice weekly regular observations being recorded. It had been hoped to discover whether any definite wet season departures from the area took place and how many birds overall were involved in movements at the roost or whether eggs were laid and young hatched.

Unfortunately, unavoidable interruptions occured during the time scheduled for the exercise, culminating in final departure from West Africa in August 1972.

These notes therefore are offered as fragments, which may fit other fragments and thereby be of value.

"D.A.Bannerman, Birds of West and Equatorial Africa, Vol.1; states that: "In some localities gatherings of Pied Kingfishers, Ceryle rudis, have been observed towards evening, but no communal roost has been found". A communal roost and possibly a nest site of this species has been observed with some regularity in the Lagoon vicinity of Lome, Togo, since October 1970. Larger gatherings of birds have been seen at the roost site in the morning between 6.30 a.m. and 7.30 a.m. than in the evening when, for the most part there have been only one or two birds in evidence; this applied also in November and December when the number of individuls observed at the roost site was at its highest level. Sixteen birds were counted one morning at the end of October. However, the number of birds seen on visits to the lagoon fluctuated considerably. Some birds appeared to be present in the area throughout both the dry and wet seasons.

Straggling from west to east from Ghana through the town of Lome, the Lagoon is one of the many water courses which back the sand-bar area of Lome, forming part of the coastal savanna zone of Ghana which extends between the sea and the inland tropical forest. Its waters, brackish, black and odorous alternate physically between clear mainstream water and patches of dense reeds, water lettuce Pistia stratiotes; bordered by sedge with small pools and buttressed by a sandstone cliff. The supporting vegetation on higher ground at the base of the cliff consists of small shrubs and trees, coarse grasses, Dactyloctenium aegyptium, Eleusine indica and Baobabs Adansonia digita. The flat table top of the escarpment is farmed with crops of maize and cassava. Gloriosa superba thrives in the early rains amid surrounding thicket. The location of the Lagoon under observation lies just inside of the Ghana boundaries. Border restrictions at this point seem not to prevail and pedestrian traffic to and fro is steady, consisting mainly of Togolese fisher folk bringing in their daily catches of Tilapia melanopleura, T.huedolotti and T.zilli.

The roost holes occur in the face of a section of the sandstone cliff. , They are situated in the highest portion of the cliff and number upward of 50, 30 being located in close proximity to each other, the remainder distributed haphazardly across the roost area. In November to January when it was thought that young might be present, the area outside occupied holes was decorated copiously with droppings. By July the site had been washed clean by heavy June rains. A Baobab tree situated directly in front of the roost area offered a convenient perch.

The following diary entries were made when visits to the lagoon took place for the purpose of observing the Kingfishers.

November 9,1970: A cliff side gathering of 12 Pied Kingfishers was observed on an early morning visit to the Lagoon. Aerial display between pairs was taking place accompanied by penetrating trilling calling. Some birds seen to be entering the holes in the cliff face.

July 3,1971: Heavy rains have fallen since the last visit to the roost area over a month ago when few Kingfishers were present and there was little activity. 6 birds present on this date. The birds were leaving the area from time to time to fish in the lagoon where water is high. On their return they entered the holes with, it appeared, fish in their bills, both sexes taking part. A bird seen to be offerring food to another.

July 6,1971: High activity at the roost, the birds displaying and calling loudly while appearing to be engaged in feeding each other, even in hovering flight. Both sexes seen to be entering roost holes where they were occupied, and scraping out sand with a backward movement of the feet, birds also attacking and jabbing at the rock face with their bills, seemingly to create fresh holes.

July 23, 1971: Evening visit to roost. 4 male birds seen to be engaged in entering and scraping out roost holes - attending to several different holes in turn. A single female took no part in the activities but sat alone in a small shrub outside the holes. A male mated with the female, copulation lasting 7 seconds. Later the female briefly entered a hole, the male hovered outside until she reappeared. Both birds then flew to the hole together, hovering outside. The female entered the hole for a longer period while the male remained below on the cliff watching intently for the female who presently joined him. The pair perched in the Baobab tree. After some minutes, the female once more entered the hole leaving the male in the tree. The male returned to the hole, then entered another, emerged after a minute and seemed to await the female before flying back to the tree. The female was not seen to leave the hole. The male was joined in the tree by another male. Before the watcher left the site there were three males in the tree and one female; it was not known if the latter was the original female. A male bird flew to the tree with a fish in his bill taking it to where the female was perched.

Aug.22, 1971: Evening visit to roost. 5 p.m. Both a male and a female perched in the Baobab tree. This pair was joined by another pair who flew around and over the roost before alighting in the tree. A male bird was seen to be holding a fish in its bill for five to ten minutes. There was an absence of activity at roost holes.

Sept.7, 1971: 7 a.m. No activity at roost. 3 or 4 birds in the vicinity.

Sept.21, 1971: 7 a.m. 6 birds at roost site. Seen to be in three distinct pairs; 3 males, 3 females. A bird left to fish in the Lagoon. The birds were lethargically entering the holes from time to time. A male bird entering a hole was watched

by the female, turning her head purposefully whilst she waited for and observed her mate. Could it be that such behaviour by the male is designed to encourage the female to occupy the roost holes for the purpose of ultimately laying eggs and rearing young? Watching period on this occasion was one hour.

Following an absence in U.K. the next opportunity to visit the area was on:

Jan 11, 1972: 7 a.m. 4 birds at roost. 2 male birds participating in (mock?) combat in mid-air, meeting over the roost, attacking, and repairing to the Baobab tree. It was then noticed that there were five birds, 3 male, 2 female. Mating or pseudo-mating appeared to be taking place between one pair. Another bird appeared; there were now 4 males and 2 females. The female would seem to be the quieter bird, calling less frequently than the male. The call of these kingfishers is a loud trilling utterance made chiefly when in flight, in particular when the birds are either in display, play or combat. Frequent depressions of the tail are characteristic of both sexes.

During the watcher's three and a half months absence there is little evidence to suppose that the roost site may have been used for the purpose of rearing young. Unlike last season there seems no increase in the number of individuals. White droppings around the exterior of the holes are absent, occurring only at favourite adult perching places. Bannerman refers to the nesting period as being between November and February.

Between January 11 and March 31, few Pied Kingfishers were observed in the area and almost never in the vicinity of the roost.

Feb 19, 1972: 1 bird at the roost site with a fish held in its bill.

March 20, 1972: A sighting of 5 birds in the vicinity of the roost.

After March 31 there was resumed activity at the site with up to 6 birds present. On April 23 6 birds were present. 2 pairs were engaged in entering and excavating the holes in the rock face and attempting to drill new ones. 2 males indulged in a deal of calling while flying back and forth between the roost and the Baobab tree.

April 26, 1972: 6 birds at the roost.

May 16, 1972: 7 a.m. 7 birds active at roost. Calling noisily while entering holes, birds making frequent forays to the Lagoon to fish. 2 females only in group of 7.

May 30, 1972: 7a.m. 8 birds at roost site in 4 clearly definitive pairs. Each pair located outside a hole. Both sexes calling and entering holes. Occasionally a pair or a single bird would take off to fly round in a circle returning to the original perch. Presently all 8 birds left the site and flew off in a westerly direction. Some soon returned while others hovered and dived into the lagoon.

During May a Dutch Company moved into the area to commence a reclamation and draining project. The road to the lagoon became impassable with the area rendered unpleasant by the noise of machinery plus a surfeit of people. In June the writer left for a spell in Nigeria and soon after returning to Lome had to quit the scene altogether.

Reports from Lome by people interested in the observations indicate that the technological upheaval has resulted in many birds leaving the area. Of Ceryle rudis there is no mention.

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