



**West African Ornithological Society
Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
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BANNERMAN or PRAED AND GRANT?

G.D.Field.

Now that the final volume of the African Handbook of Birds (Mackworth-Praed, C.W. and Grant, C.H.B. 1973. Birds of West Central and Western Africa, Vol.II. Longmans, London.) is published, we in West Africa are well provided for. How does Praed and Grant compare with Bannerman, and will the new supercede the old? Which book should one recommend to a bird-orientated but non-expert newcomer to West Africa?

Price: the new volume costs £8, which with the £6 of Vol.1 adds up to £14, an enormous sum, surely beyond the range of the casually interested, whereas Bannerman's two volumes can still be bought for £10.

The amateur will go first for illustrations and these are far more comprehensive in Praed and Grant. No-one, however raw, should in most cases have much excuse for failing to allocate a bird to its correct family from a study of the illustrations alone. However, there are dangers (let me say here that the criticisms that follow are aimed mainly at the publishers rather than the artists who have had a mammoth task to do and have often done it with extreme sensitivity; witness the meticulous page of Cisticolas, plate 65): at least three pairs of birds are wrongly captioned: the Leafloves, Chlorocichla sp. on plate 52, the Drongos, Dicrurus sp. on plate 69, and the Oxpecker, Buphagus africanus & Amethyst Starling, Cinnyricinclus leucogaster on plate 75. This last is obvious to anyone but the other two are more dangerous if used as a means of identification. Moreover, there is serious difficulty in deciding on some plates which caption goes with which bird, for example the Cisticolas on plate 65, and plate 56 has ten birds with nine captions. The scale within an illustration is often badly out: the most glaring case is plate 73 with the Tits actually bigger than Picathartes, but there are other, more insidious, examples such as the Emerald Starling, Coccycolius iris, on plate 75, hugely bigger than the Amethyst, Cinnyricinclus leucogaster, or plate

78 with the Olive Sunbird, Nectarinia olivacea, appearing tiny in comparison with the great fat Fraser's Sunbird, Anthreptes fraseri. It is a pity that several wholly West African species get no plate at all whereas some of these illustrations make their third appearance in the series. For example, neither of the two Rough-wing Swallows, Psalidoprocne sp., common in Upper Guinea are depicted, nor the wholly west African Trichastoma rufescens or Prinia leontica.

But the real test of illustrations is the help they give over critical groups. As I have built up my knowledge of the Sierra Leone birds over the years, I or less experienced friends have at one time or another been troubled in identifying in the field: a) the savanna Glossy Starlings Lamprotornis chloropterus/chalcurus/ (chalybeus), b) the Nectarinia sunbirds johannae/coccinigaster/ superba, c) Neocossyphus/Stizhorina, d) certain Andropadus bulbuls, e) the Trichastoma species. In not one of these cases would these illustrations have helped: the starlings are too small for one to be sure how far the gloss depends on light; the colours of the sunbirds are actively misleading (e.g. the crown of C.superba and one might almost say the whole of C.coccinigaster); Neocossyphus poensis is not illustrated and, infuriatingly, N.rufus is depicted at quite a different angle from S.fraseri so that direct comparison is impossible; the Andropadus and Trichastoma plates are valueless on any criterion. Plate 52, at any rate in my copy, is a disaster; A.latirostris has a bright yellow underside, the only clue to the identity of A.gracilirostris is the red eye, and I defy anyone to name correctly Baeopogon indicator without first looking at the caption (I also failed to recognise two other common Sierra Leone species, Criniger barbatus and Thesceloichla leucopleura, and was sure of the Leaf-love substitution only because one occurs in a previous volume). Plate 50 is equally impossible. The tragedy is that just where large clear figures are needed we are given these minute and ill-defined pictures. Again, I draw attention to the Cisticola plate to show what can be done to help identify a difficult group. It is easy to go on carping: how many people can swear to have recognised unaided Anthus trivialis on plate 48? Compare the illustration here with

that in the European Field Guide, and likewise some of the migrant Sylvia and Acrocephalus warblers on plate 61. I know how difficult it is to get good bird illustrations, having just produced a booklet on Freetown birds, where the illustrations will be open to just such charges (or worse) as I make here but, when asked to pay £8 a volume, one is entitled to demand value for money and not, for instance, find Turati's Bush-shrike spelt Turah's or have the beautiful blue-grey flycatchers Muscicapa cassini and M. opulata (plate 53) reduced to dirty browns.

As for the text, there is a major difficulty for West African readers brought up on Bannerman in the use of English names. Often these names have evolved independently on each side of the continent and, though one sympathises with the authors' desire for uniformity, the fact remains that East African names can only lead to confusion. Who recognises our Olive Bushcreeper, Macrosphenus concolor under the name of Grey Longbill (olive is surely a better descriptive epithet than grey)? In the South African volume at least the genus was called 'Longbills or Bushcreepers' but here the alternative has been omitted. Take the case of the Trichastoma genus: At one time the scientific name was Illadopsis and on the analogy of Camaroptera or Eremomela I suppose the name, ugly as it is, could be used also in English. But the Latin is now superceded, thus leaving the English 'Illadopsis' high and dry with no conceivable justification for its use, particularly as we have a perfectly good name 'Akalat' proposed years ago by Bates. True, the authors wish to use 'Akalat' for a member of the Thrush family, as in East Africa, but, again, we have a fine name for Sheppardia cyornithopsis in the 'Whiskered Redbreast'. What has the simply and aptly named White-bearded Bulbul Criniger calurus done to deserve the monstrous appellation 'Thick-billed Red-tailed Greenbul'? (Incidentally I deplore the habit, not confined to Praed and Grant, of turning bulbuls into greenbuls - a horrible hybrid word which should have been scotched at birth generations ago). Why has the Simple Leaflove Chlorocichla simplex become the Simple Greenbul, particularly when the authors keep the three leafloves in one genus, thus making a

compact group? To turn the Golden Bulbul Calyptocichla serina into the Serine Greenbul is change for the sake of change, as it is a wholly West African bird. Again, one can go on indefinitely; the imaginative Amethyst Starling becomes the Violet-backed, Johanna's Sunbird Nectarinia johannae becomes the ponderous Madame Verreaux'. Surely, wherever possible English names should be as short as possible and in cases of doubt follow the scientific name (see the admirable name given by Elgood to his new Malimbe, an example, unfortunately not followed by Forbes-Watson over his new flycatcher).

The authors have no truck with the modern lumping of genera or with the lumping of families within, for instance, the Musciopinae sensu lato. As a matter of convenience in the field I think this is sometimes justified. I have always felt it a pity to sink almost all the sunbirds in Nectarinia. There is, in the field at least, a distinction between a Cinnyris and a Cyanomitra, and I'm delighted that seimundi is kept in Anthreptes where on field characters it so obviously belongs. On the other hand, the Andropadus bulbuls appear so closely related (with Calyptocichla as well?) when seen in the field that it seems absurd to split them into four genera. And whatever else Picathartes may be, it really can't be a starling. Clearly, points of nomenclature are simply a matter of opinion, but the plethora of genera does give the book a rather old-fashioned air, and it seems unfortunate that some agreed order of families cannot be evolved. Possibly we should fall back on suggestions made long ago by Lack and Moreau and follow a strictly alphabetical order.

The keys have always been one of the least satisfactory features of this series (the Ibis reviewer of the very first volume made detailed suggestions for their improvement). Though the book is specifically stated to be for the field ornithologist, to use many of the keys one must have the bird in the hand. For instance, the Bulbul key starts by differentiating between one notch on the bill and several notches, the second feature being whether the toes are

free or partially fused. Neither character will greatly appeal to the field watcher. Later it divides the birds into three categories, large (wing over 93 mm), medium (wing 80-90), small (wing 70-80), terribly difficult to judge, especially as of those listed under 'small' if you look up Xavier's Greenbull Phyllastrephus xavieri you find wing measurements 72-91 and the 'Serine Greenbul' 85-94 mm, i.e. not in the 'small' range at all. Of course the same sort of criticism (though less blatant) often goes for Bannerman's keys, but it is rather distressing to think that authors are still catering only for those who have shot the bird rather than studied it alive.

In the text there are far fewer careless errors than there were in Vol.I. of this type: page 66, General Distribution: Ghana to Gabon and Uganda. Range in western Africa: Western Liberia to..., and fewer maps that bear little relation to the text, though such occur, for instance, on pages 73, 105, 148 (a particularly bad one) and 447. The map on page 43 of Trichastoma cleaveri johnsoni correctly includes Sierra Leone, the text does not. Inevitably, the small scale of the maps makes some species appear more widespread than they are. Here is a quick list of birds never recorded from Sierra Leone which appear from the maps to occur throughout the country: Muscioapa aquatica, Cisticola juncidis, Hirundo smithii, H. senegalensis, Lamprotornis purpureus, L. caudatus, Buphagus africanus, Ploceus heuglini, Quelea quelea, Euplectes orix, Estrilda caerulescens, Serinus leucopygius. On the other hand, Sylvietta brachyura, Cisticola eximia and Lagonosticta rubricata appear to miss Sierra Leone altogether though all are well documented, and the myth that Hirundo fuligula does not occur in or anywhere near Sierra Leone started by Bannerman, though there are specimens in the British Museum from before his time, is perpetuated here. In all these instances Hall and Moreau (1970) give the correct position. Many of Forbes-Watson's recent discoveries on Mt Nimba have been incorporated but not all, e.g. Myioparus griseigularis (found also in the Sierra Leone forests and on field characters certainly congeneric with Myioparus plumbeum).

It is perhaps less fair to criticise the inevitably brief notes on plumage, habits and so on, but it is reasonable to point out that only workers in the field are in a position to judge which species cause confusion, some that appear very similar in the museum having quite clear field characters and others, easily separable in the hand, behaving alike. Thus to anyone who has worked in the forests of Upper Guinea it is nonsense to suggest (page 57) that there could be any difficulty in distinguishing Criniger olivaceus from C. calurus, though in bad light one might confuse it with C. barbatus were it not that its habits (more those of a Phyllastrephus) are quite different. Where difficulty does arise is over the position of the Lower Guinea C. ndussumensis (full species?, race of C. olivaceus?, form of C. calurus?). The position is succinctly explained in Hall and Moreau (op cit) but muddled in this volume, where the reader, not having been told that this form has a white throat, might be forgiven for not understanding why there should be any possibility of confusion. On the difficult pair Stizhorina finschi and Neocossyphus poensis no real help is given, less certainly than by Bannerman, and the latter's erroneous (at least for the western part of its range) remark that S. finschi has bare blue skin below the eye is perpetuated. Nor will the field observer get much help in distinguishing that other very similar pair Andropadus gracilis and A. ansorgei; as the key field character is not stressed - the rufescent flanks and under tail coverts of A. ansorgei, giving the bird a dark appearance, against the yellowy olive of A. gracilis, giving a pale look. At least in Sierra Leone habitat is also a useful guide: A. gracilis, preferring secondary bush or the small trees along forest roads, A. ansorgei higher trees, often deep in true forest. The song given for A. gracilis almost certainly belongs to A. ansorgei. Incidentally, the reported call (page 440) of Laniarius turatii is, of course, that of a pair duetting - the clear ringing call being the male, the harsh creaking the female.

The upshot of all this is that the new book should be used with caution by anyone not familiar with the area. It is extremely useful to have the birds discovered since Bannerman's day included and to note the various 'species' which have now been reduced to racial status. We also get a more up to date view of the range of many species, and, to digress to Vol.II for a moment, the immature plumages of the Birds of Prey which Bannerman hardly touched on are very valuable. But for all that, I should still advise anyone who wants more than pictures to continue to use Bannerman, and if only someone could revise Bannerman (bringing it up to date and cutting down on the surplus verbiage) it would still be a first-class book.

References:

- Bannerman, D.A. 1953. The Birds of West and Equatorial Africa, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh.
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I appreciate that many members have paid by Banker's Order for 1973 and 1974 but have only received one Bulletin. If any member would like a refund I will arrange to repay it, otherwise I will assume that members wish their subscriptions to remain in the Society and assist paying for the many copies sent to Museums. R.E.Sharland.