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Grey Woodpecker Mesopicos goertae: Resident at (e)(f)(g) and occasionally seen in the wooded parts of (c)(h). We do not find it a shy bird and, more often than not, it is the Grey Woodpecker that gives the alarm when an observer quietly enters the wood. Usually seen in pairs, (e) holding at least 2 pairs. Courtship (i.e. chasing each other) in August and December. Once seen catching flying termites.

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BIRD NOTES FROM THE PLAINS SOUTH OF LAKE CHAD

WINTER 1971-1972 PART 1

by

D.A. HOLMES

Among a team of soil surveyor working on the South Chad Irrigation Project were three bird-watchers, R.A.J. Harrison, R.B. Tucker and myself. Only the first named had had previous experience of this climatic zone (in Sudan), the other two being newcomers to the African continent in the context of this report. We arrived in mid-October 1971, shortly after the last rains, and remained in the area for most of the period until we left at the end of March 1972.

The project area consists of the flat clay plains south of Lake Chad, in the area of Marte, Dikwa, Logomani, Ngala and Gambaru. It is bordered on the south by the seasonally swampy area south of Logomani, on the east by the river Ebeji (a river of the Logone-Chari system), and on the north by a well marked sand ridge. This northern sand ridge slopes down to a flat marginal zone bordering Lake Chad (this zone lies outside the project area and we were rarely able to visit it). The seasonal River Yedseran runs north across the clay plains. Scattered through the plains are a number of low sandy rises, and all the villages are sited on these.

The clay plains are uncultivated, being used only for grazing, and are not normally burnt in the dry season. They are largely devoid of trees and carry three types of grassland. The predominant type is a dense growth of tall wild Sorghum, while adjacent areas carry a sparser growth of Pennisetum grass. Some extensive areas however carry only very short grass and quickly become almost bare in the dry season. Acacia arabica groves grow along depressions and seasonal channels. The sand ridges originally carried a dense thorn scrub of such species as Acacia sayal, Balanites, Zizyphus, Calotropis and Tamarindus, but in most

parts the vegetation is now rather sparse and the better wooded parts are now confined to some parts of the northern sand ridge and the riverine (Ebeji) zone.

Cultivation consists principally of Sorghum crops grown around the margins of the sand rises where they border on the clay plains. They are harvested in January. Some raid-fed crops (e.g. guinea corn) are grown on the sandy soils during the wet season (June to September). In total only a very small proportion of the total area is cultivated, but there is extensive grazing. Plans are on hand for the development of about one-third of the clay plains for irrigated agriculture.

At the end of the wet season in October, the clay plains are flooded. Bird life is very rich at this season. However by December the plains are dry and standing water is confined to the channels and local swamps which dry out about a month later. The Ebeji is often at its peak flow in December and was still flowing at the end of March. As the country dries up the wetland birds become more concentrated and local and many move away. By March the area away from the lake and now depleted river is waterless and water birds are very scarce. Puddles of waste water around village wells are then an attraction to birds from the surrounding scrubland. Indeed our water-filled canvas bath proved much more valuable as a bird bath than as a drink cooler, its original purpose.

The records that follow all refer to the project area defined above, except for a few extra-limital records indicated by brackets (brackets are also used for unconfirmed records). Few trips were made outside this defined area (except for one to Waza game reserve and the hills of North Cameroun in late February). Indeed from mid-January to mid-March we were virtually confined to the drier western area near Ala (between Dikwa and Marte), well away from the more interesting riverine zone.

The order and scientific nomenclature is that used by White (1960-65). All records are my own except where the observer's initials are given.

(North African Ostrich Struthio camelus: Not recorded in the area. Present in Waza game reserve, Cameroun.)

African Little Grebe Podiceps ruficollis: A few seen along the Ebeji at high water in December.

Rosy Pelican Pelecanus onocrotalus: Flocks of up to a hundred flying south over Ngala in mid-January. The identity of the few other pelicans seen in the area was not established.

(Grey Pelican Pelecanus rufescens: The only record is of six at a waterhole, feeding on mudfish, at Waza, Cameroun.)

Long-tailed Shag Phalacrocorax africanus: Widespread in wet areas in October, becoming concentrated along the Ebeji in December when the country dried out. Numbers later decreased, with only small numbers by the river and lake.

Night Heron Nycticorax nycticorax: Small numbers in the Ngala area up to early December (with immature birds seen at the end of October), and a few seen along the river in late March.

Squacco Heron Ardeola ralloides: Common in autumn, later restricted to the river and lake margins.

Cattle Egret Ardeola ibis: Common generally in autumn, becoming localized in spring to, for example, the Gambaru irrigation scheme and the lake shore zone. However a few individuals were encountered far from water, and they were common in the dry, hilly cattle country of N. Cameroun in late February.

Black Heron Egretta ardesiaca: Two records: two on a seasonal stream in October, and a party of eight on the river on 11th December.

Great White Heron Egretta alba: Solitary birds seen commonly along the river.

Little Egret Egretta garzetta: Common in October and November, becoming scarce as the season advances, although solitary birds were encountered far from water in Spring.

Grey Heron Ardea cinerea: Common. Slightly fewer numbers than the next species. Becoming local as the country dries out, although occasionally encountered far from water.

Black-headed Heron Ardea melanocephala: Rather commoner than the previous species, but becoming local as the country dries out, although a few individuals are seen far from water.

Purple Heron Ardea purpurea: Uncommon. Three records of single birds and one of a party of five, in November and December. After that, seen only by the lake, except for one on the river on 27th March.

(Hammerkop Scopus umbretta: Not seen in the project area. Several in and around Waza in February.)

White Stork Ciconia ciconia: A flock of 40-50 present in grass plains near Marte through November; thereafter few seen.

(Abdim's Stork Ciconia abdimi: Party of 30 storks at Ngala on 8th November believed to be this species, but seen at a distance, and may

have been confused for Black Storks Ciconia nigra, of which we have no record.)

Woolly-necked Stork Ciconia episcopus: A few single birds or pairs seen up to early January.

Saddle-bill Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis: Two records only, of solitary birds, but common in Waza, Cameroun.

Open-bill Anastomus lamelligerus: Common up to January, then only recorded from the remaining wet areas.

Marabou Leptoptilos crumeniferus: Infrequent, December onwards, with parties of up to 30, becoming rare in March.

Wood Ibis Ibis ibis: Moderately common up to early December, with parties of up to 24. No subsequent records, except at Waza.

Sacred Ibis Threskiornis aethiopica: Moderately common up to mid-January, after which seen only near the lake and river (and at Waza, Cameroun).

Hadada Bostrychia hagedash: One record only, a solitary bird in dense growth by the Ebeji on 16th December.

Glossy Ibis Plegadis falcinellus: Small numbers up to mid-December. Thereafter only seen near the lake (4 in February), and 4 on the river on 26th March.

African Spoonbill Platalea alba: A few small parties up to mid-December, and one on the river on 27th March.

Whistling Teal Dendrocygna viduata: Common up to mid-December, and seen along the river in mid-January, after which they presumably become very localized. D. bicolor was not identified.

Egyptian Goose Alopochen aegyptiaca: Probably overlooked, with only one confirmed record, of 30 or more in a small swamp near Ala on 23rd November.

Spur-winged Goose Plectropterus gambensis: Apparently the commonest of the larger anatidae, in parties of up to two dozen, and at least 100 in the swamp south of Logomani on 16th January. Scarcer later in the dry season, although parties seen in the grass plains far from water. Doubtless at this season they concentrate at the last remaining pools, as suggested by an estimated 2000-3000 in the marsh behind the rest-house at Waza, N. Cameroun, in late February. A large proportion of birds in December and January were in immature plumage.

Comb Goose Sarkidiornis melanota: Possibly overlooked earlier. Some identified along the river in December, and up to 100 in the swamp south of Logomani on 16th January. The pale or even whitish rump in flight seems to be a useful character not described in books.

Pygmy Goose Nettapus auritus: Unconfirmed record of 4 or 5 in a small swamp near Ala on 26th November (RAJH); possibly the species has been overlooked, especially early in the season.

Common Teal Anas crecca: A drake with other duck near Logomani on 16th January.

Pintail Anas acuta: Large flights of duck at dusk and dawn and on moonlit nights, over Marte and Ngala, from 12th November to about mid-December, were believed to be this species. Confirmed record of some 200 in the swamp south of Logomani on 16th January. Night flights last noted on 23rd January, the last record.

Garganey Anas querquedula: Large numbers of duck, numbering up to a couple of thousand, flying fast at height in a southerly direction over Ngala at dusk, during the week October 23rd-27th, were believed to be this species. These were apparently feeding flights, rather than migration, perhaps to the swamps a few miles south, as some at least returned at dawn. Confirmed records are of a lone bird in a roadside pool on 2nd November, and some three dozen in the swamp south of Logomani in mid-December and mid-January.

Shoveller Anas clypeata: A drake with other duck near Logomani on 16th January.

Ruppell's Griffon Gyps ruppellii and Nubian Vulture Torgos tracheliotus: Big vultures are tolerably common in the area but unfortunately their identity was not established; until March we had assumed them to be Griffons, without closer examination. Griffons are certainly present (identified partly by the presence of a white bar near the leading edge of the underwing), but it seems likely that the Nubian is present too. Indeed we believe that vultures seen at nests may have been Nubian; three were present at a massive nest in an Acacia arabica in a wide grass plain NE of Logomani in November, and RBT noted large vultures at a nest in February.

White-headed Vulture Trigonoceps occipitalis: Moderately common, and more readily identified than other vultures, but it is difficult to give the relative abundance of the different species. Birds seen in February were in fine, fresh plumage.

White-backed Vulture Gyps bengalensis: Not often identified, but evidently fairly common, for the majority of vultures at a carcass in early March were of this species, although some half of those present failed to show the white back and were presumably immature.

Hooded Vulture Neophron monachus: The most generally widespread and abundant vulture. We have no records of the Egyptian Vulture, Neophron peronopterus.

Pallid Harrier Circus macrourus: Only adult males identified. Very common or even abundant, quartering the grass plains, from our arrival in mid-October, but numbers slowly decreased through December and January, and from 20th January all male harriers (except Marsh Harriers) were of the following species. Possibly they move on south later in the winter (one was seen at Rhumsiki, S. of Mokola, N. Cameroun, on 22nd February).

Montagu's Harrier Circus pygargus: Only adult males identified. None identified until 22nd November, but prior to this date many immature male harriers were seen, some of them undoubtedly of this species. Although never in such numbers as the Pallid Harrier was early in the season, they remained common throughout the rest of the period, replacing the Pallid completely after the end of January. Habitat and mode of hunting of the two species seemed to be identical. Numbers possibly decreased a little at the end of March but some were still present on our departure on 27th March.

Marsh Harrier Circus aeruginosus: Seen quite commonly in the grass plains during November, although these had dried out. Subsequently seen only near water.

Bateleur Terathopius ecaudatus: Uncommon. A total of five records of solitary birds, in the west of the area or along the road to Maiduguri, November to February.

Short-toed Eagle Circaetus gallicus: Circaetus eagles of either this species or Beaudouin's (C. beaudouini) are the commonest large eagles of the area, with one or two seen on most days. Their field identification is perhaps beyond the capacity of a visiting amateur, but birds seen perched on 7th February and 6th March were confirmed as C. gallicus by the colour of the soft parts, assuming this is a reliable feature (dark grey bill and feet, grey-brown legs; these parts are given as yellow for C. beaudouini). Further evidence is that the majority appear to be migratory, for most if not all appeared to leave the area during the first half of March.

Chanting Goshawk Melierax metabates: Very common generally in thorn scrub areas. On two of three occasions from mid-December onwards the

piping call was heard for a prolonged period by day. However the bird seems to be most vocal by night (from about mid-November onwards), and this may be the reason for the literature to describe the call as not often heard. On many or even most nights, the birds were vocal early in the night, and at about one hour before sunrise, but especially on moonlit nights the calls were heard at any time of night. As many as half-a-dozen might be heard at any one time, some calling in flight, but by sunrise they would be sitting still and silent in the same tree-tops from which they had been calling an hour previously. The calls varied in speed of delivery, rising and falling slightly in pitch, and may on occasion have been uttered from the ground. Indeed for a long time we took them to be some form of plover or other ground bird.

On our last evening, 27th March, on the river bank, we were astonished to find that this bird was the author of a "mystery call" that I had throughout believed to be the call of a cuckoo in genus Clamator, owing to a certain similarity to the call of Clamator jacobinus in Pakistan. This call is a clear, ringing, somewhat metallic "quer-qui" or "quer-qui-qui", sometimes running into a longer series: "quer-quer-qui-qui" or similar. The bird we watched calling gave the double note in a single opening and closing of the bill, the "quer" on opening the bill, the "qui" on closing.

The remarkable feature of this call is the circumstances of its delivery. First heard on 1st November, it was heard commonly from the end of November onwards, but with rare exceptions only at dawn, for a period of a few minutes only, at 15-30 minutes before sunrise. In other words, this call was uttered, briefly, after an interval of 15 minutes after the goshawks had ceased calling in the usual manner. Furthermore, although several goshawks may have been calling in the pre-dawn period, generally only one (rarely two) would later give the "cuckoo" call. The identity of the call seemed impossible to determine, since on the few mornings that we could spare time at this hour, the brief delivery was fortuitously in the distance! Since on other mornings the call was heard close to camp, I was forced to assume that the "cuckoo" ranged widely in the area. Since the call originated over a range of two to three miles on different mornings, presumably different goshawks were calling, since they must hold comparatively small territories.

Very rarely was this call heard at any other hour, and this was in most instances in the evening. It was entirely fortuitous that on our last evening, at 17.40 (half to one hour before sunset), a Chanting Goshawk we had seen notionless on a tree-top close by suddenly gave vent to the "cuckoo" call several times, before flying across the river, from whence the call was heard again half-an-hour later.

Although the author of the call was finally solved, it remains a mystery why this very different call should be uttered, by a few birds only, at such specific times of day.

(Gabar Goshawk Melierax gabar: One seen briefly, chasing a Chanting Goshawk, on the wooded river banks near Gamboru, on 1st December, was almost certainly this species, but the possibility of its being one of the smaller accipitrines cannot be ruled out.)

Grasshopper Buzzard Butastur rufipennis: Common in October and early November, after which scarce (two records only, mid-December and mid-January, and possibly one in late March).

Long-legged Buzzard Buteo rufinus: One present at Ala from February 4th to 10th. Identification from the unbarred rufous tail and the striking underwing pattern of black trailing edge, brown coverts, pale secondaries, black carpal patch and white primaries tipped black; upperwing brownish tipped black; head and body brown or pale rufous brown with dark markings; tail especially rufous distally but base of upper tail paler.

A previous bird near Marte on 13th November had precisely the same underwing pattern, but the tail was unusual in being white at the base tipped red.

Long-crested Hawk-Eagle Lophoaelus occipitalis: One near Dikwa on our arrival on 21st October is our only record for the project area. Perhaps they move out early after the rains, as we saw several at Waza, N. Cameroun, on 24th February.

Tawny Eagle Aquila rapax: Eagles generally are difficult for the amateur and only this species was identified with any certainty (from large size, overall dark plumage, or "cafe-au-lait" of immatures, and sluggish habits), and is moderately common. However other dark raptors of slightly smaller size are also present, possibly Wahlberg's Eagle, Aquila wahlbergi.

(Verreaux's Eagle Aquila verreauxi: A raptor seen from a moving car in the mountains south of Mokola, N. Cameroun, on 22nd February, is entered under this species with "tongue-in-cheek", since this would appear to be well west of its known range, but it is difficult to know where else to place a raptor that was all black except for shining white upperparts. This record is given only as a warning to others travelling in the area of its possible occurrence.)

(River Eagle Haliaeetus vocifer: Seen only at waterholes at Waza, N. Cameroun, in late February, where quite common.)

Black Kite Milvus migrans: Widespread and abundant, especially around villages, and groves of Acacia arabica in dried-out depressions in the grass plains (these latter perhaps being winter migrants); noticeably less common from mid-March.

Black-shouldered Kite Elanus caeruleus: One record only, of a solitary bird at close range near Ala on 5th March. It is unlikely that I would overlook this bird, and the assumption is that this rather tree-less area is outside the bird's normal range, at any rate in the dry season.

Swallow-tailed Kite Elanus riocourii: Three records only, of single birds on 19th January and 4th February, and of a party of some 15 on 7th February. All were moving slowly in a NW direction.

Osprey Pandion haliaetus: One by the lake on 6th February. Another seen in Waza on 23rd February.

Lanner Falco biarmicus: The only larger falcon identified, and believed to be quite common generally, although the possibility of some of those seen being the Peregrine, Falco peregrinus, cannot be ruled out.

Kestrel Falco tinnunculus: First seen on 27th October, subsequently becoming very common generally. By February it was the commonest of all migrant birds of prey, perhaps becoming less common after mid-March, but still present on our departure on 28th March.

(Fox Kestrel Falco alopex: A gathering of some 30 at a small fire in the mountains at Rhumsiki (S. of Mokola), N.Cameroun, on 22nd February.)

(Secretary-Bird Sagittarius serpentarius: Our only record is of one in the hills south of Mora, N.Cameroun, on 22nd February.)

to be continued

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CROWNED CRANES

An Appeal

This magnificent bird is emblematic of more than sovereignty; it symbolises also wetland conservation, for Crowned Cranes need marshland for nesting.

In temperate countries marsh drainage has destroyed the habitat of many crane species, which have become scarce and even (like America's Whooping Crane) greatly endangered.