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BIRD NOTES FROM THE PLAINS SOUTH OF LAKE CHAD

WINTER 1971-1972      PART 2

by

D.A. HOLMES

Clapperton's Francolin Francolinus clappertoni:

Moderately common in thorn scrub. Well-grown chick seen on 28th March.

Common Quail Coturnix coturnix:

Few records of solitary birds, all before early December.

Grey-breasted Helmet Guinea-Fowl Numida meleagris:

After seeing the abundance of this species in the Waza game reserve in N. Cameroun, we must assume all guinea-fowl have long since been eaten in our area. The only evidence found of wild guinea-fowl was of one feather picked up in a well-wooded area of the northern sand ridge.

African Moorhen Gallinula chloropus:

Several records along the river in December, when the water was high.

Demoiselle Crane Anthropoides virgo:

Common visitor to the clay plains, first seen on 21st January, thence regularly until the last few left on 4th March. They were seen most regularly in the area between Marte and Logomani, feeding

in the harvested sorghum fields bordering clay plain areas. Generally they would rise or be disturbed about mid-morning and slowly drift off northwards in the direction of the lake in leisurely, circling, scaring flight, calling all the time. Presumably they would return to the fields during the night. The largest flock seen had an estimated 650 birds, but numbers in the Marte area may have approached 900.

Crowned Crane Balearica pavonina:

Common in the clay plains, although never seen in the Marte area. In January they became concentrated in the swamps south of Logo-mani (an estimated 200 birds), and later confined to very small numbers around the Gambaru irrigation scheme. An estimated 10,000 birds in the swamp west of the resthouse at Waza, N. Cameroun, in late February, shows where this species goes in the dry season.

Sudan Bustard Otis arabs:

Rather sparse. Perhaps a dozen sightings altogether (some probably repeats), principally from wild sorghum areas of the clay plains or the edges of surrounding thorn scrub.

Denham's Bustard Neotis denhami:

Only one confirmed record, of a pair in a grassy sandhills area near Ngala in December.

Savile's Pygmy Bustard Eupodotis ruficrista:

RAJH reported seeing a pair in sorghum crops near Marte on 13th November.

Senegal Bustard Eupodotis senegalensis:

Common in thorn scrub areas. Generally seen in pairs but occasionally up to 4 together. Only when we identified the call in February did we realise how common they are.

Black-bellied Bustard Eupodotis melanogaster:

The only one seen in the project area was one male near Marte on 13th November (RAJH). Another male was seen near the lake margins in early February.

Lily Trotter Actophilornis africanus:

Common along the river and lake margins, also present on some smaller swamps. None were seen after mid-January, but few visits were made to suitable areas after this time.

Senegal Thick-knee Burhinus senegalensis:

Two records: two birds along a tree-lined stream in the clay plains in late October, and one along the river on 26th March.

Spotted Thick-knee Burhinus capensis:

3 or 4 seen together in dense thorn scrub on 29th October and 1st November.

Spur-winged Plover Vanellus spinosus:

Common generally early in the period at which time it is associated with other species of the group, but later becoming confined to riverine and other wet areas.

Black-headed Plover Vanellus tectus:

The commonest of the group, and the only one generally distributed throughout the dry season, showing no particular preference for water.

Senegal Wattled Plover Vanellus senegallus:

A few present among the plovers up to 7th November only.

Little Ringed Plover ~~Vanellus~~ Charadrius dubius:

Moderately common especially near water and village wells. Still present on 27th March.

Kittlitz' Sand-Plover Charadrius pecuarius:

Moderately common, most frequently seen near village wells.

Black-tailed Godwit Limosa limosa:

One on 26th October, and a party of some 30 in a small swamp on 23rd November. An unidentified godwit seen flying north on 3rd March.

Greenshank Tringa nebularia:

The commonest of the group, in small numbers in suitable habitat. Still present on 25th March.

Marsh Sandpiper Tringa stagnatilis:

Possibly somewhat overlooked. 3 identified mid-December, and one along the river on 26th March.

Wood Sandpiper Tringa glareola:

Moderately common in suitable habitat. Still present on 27th March.

Green Sandpiper Tringa ochropus:

Small numbers present in suitable habitat. Still present on 27th March.

Common Sandpiper Tringa hypoleucos:

One or two seen along the river on 26th and 27th March.

Redshank Tringa totanus:

1 record only, of at least 1 in a small swamp near Ala on

23rd November.

Dusky Redshank Tringa erythropus:

Small numbers present in seasonal swamps in late November and December.

Common Snipe Gallinago gallinago:

A few records only, but probably quite common in suitable habitat.

Little Stint Calidris minuta:

Quite common in suitable habitat. Still present along the river on 27th March.

Ruff Philomachus pugnax:

Abundant, especially in the Ngala area. From October to December, immense flocks were present in the short grass areas of the clay plains (ie. south of Ngala), probably some 10,000 in some flocks. In the evenings there was a steady stream of small parties of Ruff down-river, presumably to roost near the lake, returning at dawn. Numbers decreased later in the dry season, but a few thousand were still present around the Gemberu irrigation scheme, feeding especially on freshly watered fields.

From December onwards there was a small but significant proportion (ca. 2%) of birds apparently partly albino, with white heads and white mottling on the wings.

Black-winged Stilt Himantopus himantopus:

Common in wet areas.

Avocet Recurvirostra avosetta:

1 present at shallow pools in the Ngala area from 3rd November to 2nd December.

Egyptian Plover Pluvianus aegyptius:

A few present along the river and seasonal streams up to the end of November.

Temminck's Courser Cursorius temminckii:

A party of 4, believed to be a family party, near Marte on 24th November, and a single bird on 26th November, are the only records.

Pratincole Glareola pratincola:

Very common up to December, with flocks of several hundred often associating with Ruff on the short grass clay plains. Fewer present latterly, though in early February they are common around the lake margins, and smaller numbers remained on the clay plains

through to March. All the birds examined had the chestnut axillaries of this species.

Grey-headed Gull Larus cirrocephalus:

One record only, of 3 or 4 along a seasonal stream on 26th October.

Gull-billed Tern Sterna nilotica:

Small numbers present along the river probably throughout the period. On 11th February I was surprised to come across a party of 30 sitting on the ground, in dry and barren clay plains near Marte.

White-winged Black Tern Sterna leucoptera:

One of the commonest migrants, common at small pools or swamps up to December, after which becoming rarer, although a few remained on the Gambaru irrigation scheme, and several were seen near the lake in early February. This was the only species of the group we identified.

Chestnut-bellied Sand-Grouse Pterocles exustus:

Common and only species identified in the area. Present in small flocks in November, later becoming distributed into smaller parties.

Speckled Pigeon Columba guinea:

Common around villages.

European Turtle-Dove Streptopelia turtur:

Fry (1970) on his visit to Waza game reserve in N. Cameroun in November 1969 made an estimate of 100 Turtle-Doves per square mile or a total of 60,000 within the park. On our visit there from 22nd -24th February, I would have thought this figure to be conservative with big flocks around all the water holes. It is significant that J.A. Button (pers. comm.) noticed no such flocks there in late January, suggesting that Waza serves more as a staging post than a wintering ground. In the evenings we saw big flocks flying off north at height.

In mid-February I was told of big northward evening movements over Ngala of birds that I believe to be this species. However, very few were seen in the west of the area (at Marte or Dikwa), except a few small parties in March, suggesting that the route from Waza northwards towards the lake is the main migration path. A small passage was noted along the river on our last evening, 27th March. These migrating birds generally fly at some height in flocks of 100 or so, and their identity is by no means immediately apparent.

Mourning-Dove Streptopelia decipiens:

Common and the most generally distributed of the doves. It has a confusing variety of notes, one very similar to S. roseogrisea.

Vinaceous Turtle-Dove Streptopelia vinacea:

Abundant in thorn scrub, especially the better wooded areas, but not often seen away from such habitat, except perhaps when watering. The characteristic call of this dove is the most monotonous of all the doves, the "better-go-home" call uttered at the rate of about one per second.

Rosy-Grey Dove Streptopelia roseogrisea:

Common in thorn scrub although it was not until February that we were satisfied with its identification. It is a common visitor to village waterholes. The call is a monotonous "ku-krerrr", the second syllable rising and falling; not as harsh as the note of S. vinacea but repeated with the same monotony, about three per seven seconds. This distinguishes the call from a similar but softer note sometimes uttered by S. decipiens, which is given more slowly and at irregular intervals.

Laughing Dove Streptopelia senegalensis:

Common in thorn scrub, with a distinctive call. On 25th March a nest had one egg and one newly hatched chick. The tiny nest was built of dry grass, about three feet from the ground in a low bush.

Namaqua Cena capensis:

Very common in thorn scrub.

Black-billed Wood-Dove Turtur abyssinicus:

Quite common in the better-wooded riverine areas. In late March one turned up in the bare scrub of our Ala camp, and this at least was the black-billed form, but I cannot be sure of the others.

(Yellow-bellied Fruit-Pigeon Treron waalia:

Seen in Waza, N. Cameroun. Its presence in our area is attested to by some caged birds seen at Gambaru agricultural show).

Long-tailed Parakeet Psittacula krameri:

Small numbers present along the river and better wooded areas along the northern sand ridge.

Grey Plantain-Eater Crinifer piscator:

Parties of up to 6 birds occasionally seen along the river.

Great Spotted Cuckoo Clamator glandarius:

Sparse, with four records only, all of single birds by the river or in thorn scrub. On 15th December, a full-grown immature was being

fed by Glossy Starlings.

Didric Cuckoo Chrysococcyx caprius:

Sparse, with three records only, October to December. The call was heard in October. On 23rd October an immature was seen being fed by weavers.

Senegal Coucal Centropus senegalensis:

Common in damp thickets, but also seen quite frequently in thorn scrub far from water.

Barn Owl Tyto alba:

The common owl of the area, heard most nights, probably living in both trees and buildings. Never seen hunting by day. European and African text-books are misleading on the call which to my mind is never the wild shriek quoted. Rather it is a sort of "shrilling" note, often quite low and soft (except when perched on one's tent in the night!). Being so long since I have heard Barn Owls in the U.K., it was not until February that we identified this bird. I then assumed the call of the African bird was different (less of a shriek) to that of the European bird, so it is interesting to add that I heard a very similar call on my second night back in U.K.

White-faced Owl Otus leucotis:

One (sometimes more) turned up at our Ala camp at the end of February, and was then seen or heard on most nights. The call is low and soft, generally a "who whooo", the second note rising and falling, and rather dove-like, but there were variants, one a sort of stuttering "who-oo-oo-oo".

Spotted Eagle-Owl Bubo africanus:

A pair present in a wooded grove beside the river, seen in November and January.

Long-tailed Nightjar Caprimulgus climacurus:

Common along the river and to a lesser extent in thorn scrub. This is the only nightjar we identified, although small, pale nightjars were common along a jeep-track in mid-November. The churring song is rather similar to that of the European Nightjar Caprimulgus europaeus, only quieter and lacking the pitch alterations.

Little African Swift Apus affinis:

Common in towns and villages (not closely examined for identification).

Blue-naped Mousebird Colius macrourus:

Common in thorn scrub, almost always in small parties of up to



a dozen birds.

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*:

Common along the river and lake shores.

Malachite Kingfisher *Alcedo cristata*:

Common along the river (and small pools before they dried up)

Senegal Kingfisher *Halcyon senegalensis*:

Two confirmed records only, in late October, in wet scrub areas. Possibly it moves out of the area during the dry season.

Striped Kingfisher *Halcyon chelicuti*:

Common in better wooded areas of thorn scrub, and near the river. Readily overlooked, until the distinctive call of "tea-cher tea-cher" (the second syllable trilled) is known.

Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala*:

Fairly common, October to mid-December only, chiefly along the river but also at other wet sites.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops superciliosus persicus*:

Recorded only between 17th December and 19th February, when very small numbers seen commonly, almost daily in February, invariably flying slowly in a northerly direction. Indeed only once was one seen to perch. It is unlikely that I should have overlooked this bird at other times, being familiar with it in other countries, especially its distinctive call note.

Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*:

Only once encountered within the project area (late November, RAJH), probably owing to its preference for well-wooded areas (for example in and near Maiduguri).

Carmine Bee-eater *Merops nubicus*:

Common generally but becoming more local as the dry season develops, especially favouring wetter localities.

White-throated Bee-eater *Merops albicollis*:

Several present in October, last record 1st November.

Least Bee-eater *Merops pusillus*:

Common along the river and lake shores, also encountered in dry areas. A small party took up residence at our dry camp site at Ala in mid-March.

Red-throated Bee-eater *Merops bullocki*:

A small colony discovered along the river in mid-December,

but not seen subsequently.

Abyssinian Roller Coracias abyssinica:

Very common in thorn scrub, the only roller identified.

Hoopoe Upupa epops:

Common, not sub-specifically identified.

Kakelaar Phoeniculus purpureus:

Common in parties of up to a dozen, often noisy.

Lesser Wood-Hoopoe Phoeniculus aterrimus:

Some half dozen records, generally in pairs but once a small party. The call was heard occasionally, a "weeo" note repeated generally three times, a low and soft note that I first mistook for a distant raptor. It also uttered a "kuk kuk kuk" in flight.

Grey Hornbill Tockus nasutus:

Very common. Not as gregarious as the next species.

Red-beaked Hornbill Tockus erythrorhynchus:

Probably greater numbers than the previous species, but has a slight preference for better wooded and riverine areas. Usually in loose parties. One bird seen in December with a grossly long and downcurved bill.

(Ground Hornbill Bucorvus abyssinicus:

The only record is of two in hilly country near Mokola, N. Cameroun).

West African Barbet Lybius vieilloti:

A common bird of wooded scrub areas.

Yellow-fronted Tinker-Bird Pogoniulus chrysoconus:

Common, in better wooded areas than the previous species.

Yellow-breasted Barbet Trachyphonus margaritatus:

Heard or seen quite commonly in wooded areas and scrub up to mid-December, after which absent (unless silent and hence overlooked)

Grey Woodpecker Mesopicos goertae:

Common in all variety of wooded habitats, and the only woodpecker identified.

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