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NOTES ON SOME BIRDS OF WESTERN CAMEROON

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While visiting western Cameroon from 26 Oct to 13 Nov 1988 we made ornithological observations mainly on Mt Oku and Mt Cameroon. It seems worthwhile to record some of our field notes because, to judge from recent publications (Louette 1981, Stuart 1986), several of the species we found are rarely reported there and the information on a few others is not in the literature. A fuller summary of our data will be appended to the Report of the 1987 Imperial College Expedition to Mt Oku.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

A single bird was seen soaring each day from at least 31 Oct to 3 Nov at Mt Oku (6°12N, 10°28E). It was seen repeatedly at ranges down to 200 m in good light; on 1 Nov it was soaring with a *Buteo auguralis*, allowing direct comparisons. Louette (1981) regarded the only previous record from Cameroon (by Dragesco) as probably erroneous. However, occurrence of *B. buteo* in Cameroon is not surprising in view of what is known of the normal wintering range of the species in Africa, where it extends southwards in the east to South Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982) and in the west to Mt Nimba, Liberia (where three specimens have been collected: Colston and Curry-Lindahl 1986). Morel and Browne (1981) discuss the subspecific identity of migrants of this species in West Africa.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

A single adult was seen well on 10 and 11 Nov flying over grassy slopes of Cameroon Mountain at c.2200 m elevation above Buea (14°10N, 9°12E); on 10 Nov it pursued a Cassin's Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus africanus* for more than 1 km. Louette (1981) described this species as 'widespread but scarce' in Cameroon, although the basis for this statement is unclear; the only specimen he lists is of *F.p. minor* from Adamawa preserved in the Berlin Museum; Louette surmises that this form is 'probably regular'. Stuart (1986) recorded the species only from Mt Oku. Thiollay's (1978) sightings from Waza in the far north of the country were attributed by him to both resident *F.p. minor* and wintering Palearctic *F.p. calidus*.

Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*

A pair was seen on 26 Oct by the N11 road c.4 km west of Jakiri (6°05N, 10°37E); single birds were seen almost daily at Mt Oku from 29 Oct to 4 Nov. Louette (1981) describes this as a falcon of the savanna districts, recorded mainly in the dry season. However, Stuart (1986) recorded it from Mt Manenguba, the Rumpi Hills, near the Sabka Pass and the Bamboutos Mts. It thus appears to be of frequent occurrence in montane regions of W Cameroon.

Cameroon Mountain Francolin Francolinus camerunensis

This elusive francolin, which is endemic to Mt Cameroon, was encountered from 9-11 Nov in the forest above Buea on Mt Cameroon (elevation 1950-2100 m). We report our observations of this threatened species in detail because these, especially the notes on vocalisations, add to existing published information (Serle 1962, 1965, Collar & Stuart 1985, Stuart 1986, Crowe et al. 1986).

Our visit occurred soon after the trail up the mountain had been cleared and widened by cutting back the herbaceous vegetation in preparation for the 'Cameroon Mountain Race'. Single francolins and pairs were seen several times at close range as they ventured out of the dense undergrowth to feed on this path in the mornings (06.55 to 11.30). They were very shy, usually running at the slightest disturbance into cover but once flying up with whirring wing-beats and away downhill with the usual rapid flight of francolins.

Calling was heard mainly as the light faded at dusk, when up to five birds answered each other from scattered locations. This sustained calling was only heard at dusk, but a single bird once gave a brief series of calls at c.09.30.

The calls are not described in detail in the literature although they have been tape-recorded (Chappuis 1980; we have not heard this recording). The commonest call was a short series of rather musical squealing whistles, e.g. 'cow cow cow' or 'coo coo coo coo' or various combinations of these. Most of the calls appeared to originate from widely spaced birds, but two birds were heard calling at dusk very close together, apparently from high in a thick leafy bush. The latter gave what was apparently a duet: 'COW coo COW coo COW coo COW' with a rapid series of notes alternately from each bird (the 'COW' note being much louder). All of the calls heard lacked the rasping or scraping quality of many francolin calls.

Our local guide told us that this species is still regularly shot, despite its extreme shyness. We found shotgun cartridge cases along the trail between 1900-2100 m and met a hunter there.

House Martin Delichon urbica

Seen daily at Mt Oku from 1 to 4 Nov, with a total of c.30 on 1 Nov. Some were moulting the remiges. They were associated with larger numbers of Barn Swallows Hirundo rustica, which apparently descended to feed over Lake Oku in cloudy and wet weather. Louette (1981) lists only five records from Cameroon for this species, which he notes is 'not well known in its winter quarters'. However, Stuart (1986) recorded it at several locations in the montane regions of western Cameroon so it probably occurs there regularly as a winter visitor.

Grey-chested Akalat Kakamega poliothorax

Two were caught together in a mist-net near L. Oku on 28 Oct and one was retrapped the next day. One was apparently adult and was moulting its primaries (score 5,5,5,5,1,0, 0,0,0,0). The other bird was clearly a juvenile because it had short feather sheaths remaining at the bases of all remiges and rectrices.

There does not appear to be any previous description of newly fledged birds of this species (Hall and Moreau 1970, Mann et al. 1978, cf. Stuart 1986, Louette & Prévost 1987). This is significant because there has been considerable uncertainty as to whether it is correctly placed as a babbler, Timaliinae (in the monotypic Kakamega : Mann et al. 1978) or as a thrush, Turdinae (allied to Alethe). An important character differentiating these groups is that juveniles of most Turdinae have spotted underparts, while spots are lacking in the Timaliinae. In agreement with previous reports based on older immatures (see below), our juvenile bird lacked all trace of spotting, which tends to confirm this species' position as a babbler. The bird was photographed, and a full description follows:

Forehead and crown blackish-grey with brown feather tips; nape, mantle and back rufous-brown; upper tail-coverts bright rufous-brown; wing-coverts and remiges blackish-grey, with rufous-brown feather fringes; rectrices (already somewhat abraded at tips) dark rufous-brown, with rufous feather fringes; lores dull grey-brown; supercilium, cheeks and ear-coverts warm brown; chin and upper throat pale grey (whitish); lower throat and upper breast light grey, with olive-brown feather tips forming breast band, which is browner and more obvious at sides; belly and vent white; flanks grey with dull, light olive feather tips; underwing-coverts grey; undertail-coverts grey with dull, light olive tips. Upper mandible black; lower mandible orange-yellow with extensive blackish tip; tongue and gape orange; irides brown; tarsi, toes and claws light blue-grey (legs and feet notably strong). Bill from skull 17 mm, tarsus 32 mm, wing 81 mm (feather bases still in sheath), tail 65 mm (feather bases still in sheath); weight 40 g.

The accompanying adult differed in having: red-brown irides; top of head blackish-brown; upperparts generally somewhat brighter rufous; underparts greyer with no olive across breast or on flanks. Bill from skull 19 mm, tarsus 32 mm, wing 85.5 mm, tail 73 mm.

Examination of specimens in the British Museum (Natural History) collection revealed only one skin in undoubted juvenile plumage, collected 19 Dec 1960 at Dikume Balue, Cameroon by W. Serle (BMNH registration no. 1966.16.400). This specimen was closely similar in coloration to our bird, although it was apparently older with no feather sheaths remaining at the bases of remiges and rectrices. Mann et al. (1978) mention three other juveniles, but the Oku bird appears to be the youngest juvenile to be described so far.

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SUMMARY

Observations were made of six rarely recorded species in western Cameroon; including Cameroon Mountain Francolin Francolinus camerunensis and the first detailed description of a fledgling Grey-chested Akalat Kakamega poliothorax.

RÉSUMÉ

Observation de six espèces rarement signalées au Cameroun occidental, dont Francolinus camerunensis ainsi que la première description détaillée d'un tout jeune juvénile de Kakamega poliothorax.

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