



**West African Ornithological Society
Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
Africain**



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The Birds of Togo. By R.A. Cheke & J.F. Walsh, 1996. Xii + 212 pp. Checklist 14, British Ornithologists' Union, Tring. ISBN 0-907466-18-3, hardback, £22.

This new BOU checklist deals with one of the ornithologically least-known West African states. Togo's ornithology today, like the ornithology of other West African countries in the time of Bannerman, is still based upon the observations and collections of a relatively small number of individuals, among whom are the authors of this book. This is clearly revealed in the individual species accounts, where the same few names repeatedly appear, and where the number of records upon which the occurrence of a large proportion of species is based, is tiny.

The book is based not only upon a thorough literature and specimen review, where complications in localities, arising from the multiplicity of boundary changes which Togo has seen, are clarified, but also on a collation of unpublished records from more recent observers. The distribution of large, conspicuous species is particularly well-documented, largely because of the authors' extensive use of helicopter surveys. Historical records are meticulously assessed and the analysis of the distribution of subspecies is especially detailed.

The avifauna of Togo has a mainly western origin, with, in comparison with Ghana, extra sahelian species. An avifaunal analysis suggests that the Dahomey Gap (here unnecessarily renamed the "Togo-Benin Gap": political correctness can be extraordinarily irritating) may not have been such an important barrier as formerly thought; until recently it contained substantial forest blocks. The discontinuities appear to lie rather at the Volta and Niger rivers.

The book begins with the usual valuable introductory sections, but one would have liked that on "Geography" first — it is difficult to understand the relevance of the preceding section on boundary changes, before knowing where the country's present boundaries lie. To make things even harder for the reader, the map showing boundary changes does not indicate the current boundaries, rendering comparison without the aid of an atlas impossible. Apart from this, I found no major problems with the book, although minor irritations crop up, such as the consistently incorrect spelling of "Sierra Leone".

Togo suffers from one of the highest human population densities in Africa, and its vegetative cover is severely degraded almost everywhere, but the relicts of semi-natural vegetation still harbour substantial numbers of forest bird species. One wonders whether these are still viable populations. This book may be an important part of a record of a disappearing avifauna, or it may indicate that forest birds are more resilient than generally allowed; but the remnants of the forest and other natural vegetation types are in any case still fast being cleared.

In summary, this new checklist is an excellent example of the genre: a benchmark, as it should be.

Alan Tye