



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



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have dispersed to all terrestrial habitats and land areas (needed for global analysis), their taxonomy is well-understood (needed for diversity analysis) and their geographical distributions are well-known (needed for mapping). Data on other animals and plants are also presented, and they generally support the conclusions drawn from birds. The analysis is based on all land-birds with an overall range < 50000 km<sup>2</sup>; this includes 27% of all bird species and 77% of threatened species. The ranges of these species are combined to identify EBAs: areas with more than one such species entirely restricted to them. It excludes some species of conservation interest, especially large birds inhabiting big ranges at low density (e.g. bustards, storks and cranes), but such species often include EBAs within their ranges.

The global coverage means that Africa gets only six pages to itself, but this ignores frequent mentions in more general sections. West Africa (as defined by Malimbus's area of coverage) has eight EBAs: Cape Verde Islands, Upper Guinea forests, Cameroon mountains, Cameroon-Gabon lowlands, Príncipe, São Tomé, eastern Zaire lowlands and Albertine Rift mountains. Alternative taxonomic treatment of one species would add a ninth: Pagalú (Annobon). All except Cape Verde are mainly or exclusively forest, as are most restricted-range bird species and EBAs world-wide. Habitat destruction is obviously the greatest threat to these areas and their birds.

There is not much here to surprise anyone with a knowledge of the West African avifauna but the book is packed with useful facts and figures on which to base conservation arguments and planning. It will be an essential reference for those whose role includes these activities and will hold the attention of anyone interested in bird conservation.

Alan Tye

**Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade. Paul Erdmann Isert's *Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands in Columbia* (1788).** Transl. and ed. by S.A. Winsnes, 1992. 278 + x pp.. Oxford University Press, Oxford. ISBN 0-19-726105-1. Hardback £30.

This is the first published English translation of the original German text (*Reise nach Guinea und den Caribäischen Inseln in Columbia*) by this respected amateur botanist with broad scientific interests, who worked for the Danes on the Gold Coast. The translator has thoroughly edited the text, giving additional information on the background to Isert's presence on the coast, and has included some drawings (two of birds, one first described by Isert) which were not in the original work.

Isert travelled to West Africa in 1783 as chief surgeon at Christiansborg Castle (Accra) and other Danish forts in the area, during the brief period of Danish expansion on the Gold Coast. He was there for three years, during which he journeyed east to Whydah in the Kingdom of Dahomey (now in Benin Republic) and inland as far as Akwapem, where he returned later to establish a plantation, in order to render transport

of slaves to the West Indies redundant. This enterprise resulted in the death, within a few months, of Isert, his wife and their new-born daughter; the project then collapsed.

Although Isert was one of the earliest post-Linnean biologists to visit West Africa, his scientific work is not dealt with in detail in this book. This is his account of his experiences, including his participation in a Danish-led war and narrow escape from murder on a slave ship to St Croix. He was far ahead of his time in his almost value-free and unprejudiced accounts of West African culture. Peppered throughout, he does record some of the plants and animals that he found, and his adventures in searching for them. Some of his bird notes are interesting, including what are perhaps the earliest records of woodhoopoes and indigobirds (which visited his ship on the voyage out!).

Although Isert was a competent naturalist, his biological notes are not especially well interpreted in the editor's footnotes. She is not a biologist, and has done well in searching for identifications in references known to her but, unfortunately, some of her biologist informants (credited in the footnotes), have misled her in a number of cases. Isert consistently provides the contemporary Linnean names of the plants and animals he mentions, which are sufficient for any modern biologist aware of the ways that nomenclature has changed over the years to identify most of them. However, in the footnotes, Isert's names are often wrongly interpreted; for instance, the *Motacilla curruca* of Isert is interpreted as a wagtail because *Motacilla* is thus currently applied, whereas in Isert's day, that genus covered a much wider range of birds (in the golden age of lumping) and it is obvious that Isert meant *Sylvia curruca* (and, with good scientific circumspection, Isert admits that it might not have been this precise species but a similar one). Such instances are common, and the unfortunate fact is that, because Isert's names are themselves so easy to interpret, no footnote is needed at all in the majority of cases. However, Isert's bird references provide little information that is not available in other contemporary accounts or from later, more exhaustive studies, so ignore the biology and enjoy this book for its historical description of the Coast, which is its proper purpose in any case.

Alan Tye

**Conservation of West and Central African Rainforests.** Ed. by K. Cleaver, M. Munasinghe, M. Dyson, N. Egli, A. Peuker, & F. Wencélius, 1992. 354 + xi pp. World Bank, Washington. ISBN 0-8213-2256-7. Obtainable from World Bank, 1818 H St NW, Washington, DC 20433, USA.

This is "World Bank Environment Paper No. 1", published in cooperation with IUCN. It consists of papers from a 1990 conference, which originated from the controversy over whether development aid contributes to forest destruction, or whether its role in the alleviation of poverty creates the social and economic climate necessary for forest conservation to succeed. The subject concerns all biologists interested in West Africa, where what little forest remains is disappearing at an alarming rate.