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THE BIRDS OF OBUDU, CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

by Andrew M. Heaton and Anne E. Heaton

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INTRODUCTION

Although the bird life of the Obudu Plateau has been well documented over the years (see, for example, Elgood 1965), the birds of the adjacent lowland areas have received relatively little attention. A paper by Hatch (1935) mentioned only ten species, while Serle (1957) referred in general terms to Ogoja Province rather than the specific area. The present paper is based upon our observations over a period of 22 months (September 1977 to June 1979) around the town of Obudu (06°38' N 09°05' E) which, at an altitude of 250 m, lies 1300 m below the Plateau. Observations were carried out daily in a restricted area including the town itself and the countryside within a two-kilometre radius; no netting was undertaken.

Obudu lies at the northern edge of the derived savanna zone; the locust bean tree *Parkia clappertoniana* is the commonest tree of the woodland areas, while the ground layer is dominated by tall grasses (particularly *Hyparrhenia rufa* with some *Pennisetum purpureum*) which typically grow to three metres tall. Immediately around the town the land is fairly intensively cultivated (cassava and yams, with some maize and groundnuts, being the main crops), but to the east the savanna is less disturbed. The area is provided with water by two small permanent rivers which support a number of rice fields and small patches of fringing forest. Due to the orographic influence, the climate of Obudu is relatively mild. Rainfall averages 1875 mm per annum, the dry season lasting from late October to April. Geographically the Obudu area is similar to that of Serti in Gongola State (see Hall 1977), and the list of species recorded likewise shows many similarities.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Scientific nomenclature follows Heigham (1975), derived from White (1960-65).

Ardeola ibis Dry season migrant, abundant from October to May (see Appendix A).

Egretta intermedia A single bird recorded occasionally in January and February, generally feeding at a ricefield.

Ardea melanocephala A single bird recorded occasionally from August to November.

- Scopus umbretta* Twice in June (but also once in December at the Butum River, 36 km east of Obudu).
- Ibis ibis* Once, a single bird in flight in May.
- Threskiornis aethiopica* Once, a single bird in flight in December.
- Bostrychia hagedash* Once, a single bird in flight in June.
- Neophron monachus* Common resident.
- Accipiter badius* Common resident.
- Accipiter ovampensis* Once, a single bird in April.
- Kaupifalco monogrammicus* Common resident.
- Butastur rufipennis* Once, a single bird in February.
- Polemaetus bellicosus* Once, a single bird in January.
- Aquila rapax* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally in February.
- Milvus migrans* Dry season migrant, common from October to May (all specimens of the African race, *M. m. parasitus*).
- Elanus caeruleus* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally from January to May.
- Machaeramphus alcinus* Twice, in March and April, feeding at dusk.
- Falco biarmicus* Once, a pair in November.
- Falco ardosiaceus* Dry season migrant, common from November to March.
- Francolinus bicalcaratus* Common resident.
- Francolinus squamatus* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Crex egregia* Twice in August near rivers.
- Limnocolax flavirostra* Wet season migrant, recorded regularly by rivers from February to September. Juveniles present in August.
- Eupodotis melanogaster* Once, in December, at a ricefield.
- Vanellus superciliosus* Once, in June.
- Charadrius dubius* A single bird on two consecutive days in October, attracted to standing water on flooded football pitches.
- Tringa nebularia* Passage migrant recorded occasionally on north-bound passage in February and March.
- Cursorius temminckii* Twice in November on newly-burnt areas.
- Streptopelia semitorquata* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.
- Streptopelia vinacea* Dry season migrant, common from August to April.
- Streptopelia senegalensis* Common resident. Courtship behaviour seen in June.
- Turtur abyssinicus* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Treron australis* Once, a party of twelve in August.
- Crinifer piscator* Pairs of birds seen twice, in February and April.
- Clamator levaillantii* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.
- Cuculus canorus* The African race *C. c. gularis* recorded once in June; the European race *C. c. canorus* a passage migrant recorded occasionally on north-bound passage in February and March.
- Chrysococcyx caprius* Once, in October; flew from a low perch to catch an insect in mid-air.
- Centropus senegalensis* Common resident. Juvenile present in October.
- Tyto alba* A single specimen killed by a student at the Government Secondary School.

- Otus scops* Common resident.
- Glaucidium perlatum* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Caprimulgus climacurus* Scarce dry season migrant, recorded in December and February.
- Macrodipteryx longipennis* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally from December to March.
- Apus apus* Passage migrant recorded in large numbers on north-bound passage from February to April.
- Apus affinis* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Cypsiurus parvus* Common resident, occasionally feeding in mixed flocks with swallows and martins.
- Alcedo cristata* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year. A juvenile, with bill in the process of changing from black to red, present in December.
- Halcyon senegalensis* Common resident. Juveniles present in December.
- Halcyon malimbica* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year, usually away from water.
- Halcyon leucocephala* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally from December to March.
- Merops nubicus* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally in December and January.
- Merops albicollis* Dry season migrant, common from October to May, feeding in parties of up to 50.
- Coracias abyssinica* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally from January to May.
- Coracias naevia* Once, in December.
- Coracias cyanogaster* Scarce dry season migrant, recorded in March.
- Eurystomus glaucurus* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally in March and April, feeding at dusk in parties of up to twelve.
- Phoeniculus purpureus* Common resident, usually seen in parties of up to eight.
- Tockus nasutus* Dry season migrant, common from October to May.
- Tockus fasciatus* Once, three birds in flight in December.
- Lybius dubius* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year. Two juveniles in a party of four in June.
- Lybius vieilloti* Scarce resident.
- Pogoniulus chrysoconus* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally from December to May.
- Indicator minor* Possibly sighted once in January.
- Dendropicos fuscescens* Common resident. Juveniles present in March and April.
- Mesopicos goertae* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally from October to March.
- Mirafra nigricans* Once, in December, perched in a tree by a newly-burnt area.
- Hirundo rustica* Winter visitor, common from October to April.
- Hirundo aethiopica* Wet season migrant, common from February to October.
- Hirundo semirufa* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Delichon urbica* Passage migrant, recorded occasionally in December and commonly in February/March.

- Motacilla aguimp* Once, in August, at a ricefield.
- Anthus leucophrys* Common resident.
- Macronyx croceus* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year. Juvenile present in August.
- Prionops plumata* Common resident, usually seen in parties of six to twelve. Juveniles present in March and May.
- Nilaus afer* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally from December to March.
- Dryoscopus gambensis* Common resident.
- Tchagra senegala* Common resident.
- Laniarius ferrugineus* Common resident.
- Malaconotus sulfureopectus* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.
- Malaconotus blanchoti* Common resident.
- Corvinella corvina* Abundant resident. Courtship and mating observed in February.
- Lanius collurio* The nominate race *L. c. collurio* recorded on 13th December 1978 and 2nd April 1979. These are the first sightings for Eastern Nigeria.
- Lanius collaris* Recorded regularly from February to May and once in August 1978, but at no other time.
- Oriolus auratus* Common resident.
- Dicrurus adsimilis* Common resident. Young at the nest in December.
- Lamprotornis purpurea* Common resident.
- Cinnyricinclus leucogaster* Once, in March.
- Corvus albus* Scarce local migrant, recorded in March, May and June. (This species is common from Ogoja westwards.)
- Campephaga phoenicea* Common resident.
- Pycnonotus barbatus* Abundant resident.
- Phyllastrephus scandens* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Saxicola rubetra* Winter visitor, common from November to April in the more open savanna areas.
- Oenanthe bottae* Once, in November.
- Turdus pelios* Common resident.
- Turdoides plebejus* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.
- Turdoides reinwardii* Once, two birds in June.
- Sphenoeacus mentalis* Common resident. Juvenile present in December.
- Sylvia borin* Scarce winter visitor, recorded in September, November and December.
- Phylloscopus trochilus* Winter visitor, recorded regularly from December to April.
- Phylloscopus sibilatrix* Scarce winter visitor, recorded in April.
- Cisticola erythrops* Common resident.
- Cisticola brachyptera* Common resident.
- Prinia erythroptera* Common resident.
- Prinia subflava* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.
- Hypergerus atriceps* Scarce resident; on one occasion, a pair openly feeding on oil palms at a ricefield.
- Cameroptera brachyura* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Eremomela pusilla* Common resident.
- Sylvietta brachyura* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.

- Muscicapa striata* Mainly a passage migrant, common in October and late April, but also recorded in January, February and March.
- Bradornis pallidus* Common resident.
- Hyliota flavigaster* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Batis senegalensis* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Platysteira cyanea* Once, a pair in May, amongst dense vegetation near a ricefield.
- Terpsiphone viridis* Twice in December, in fringing forest (one a chestnut-phase male, the other a female or juvenile).
- Parus leucomelas* Common resident. The most frequent species in mixed parties (see appendix B).
- Salpornis spilonota* Twice, in December and February, on farmland.
- Anthreptes collaris* Twice, in December and March, in fringing forest.
- Nectarinia verticalis* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Nectarinia cuprea* Common resident.
- Nectarinia coccinigaster* Common resident.
- Zosterops senegalensis* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Emberiza cabanisi* Dry season migrant, recorded occasionally from December to April.
- Ploceus heuglini* Resident, present at small breeding colonies from May to August and recorded occasionally during the rest of the year. One colony, in a locust bean tree, was in close association with the nest of a vertical comb-building wasp. This is the southernmost breeding record for this species in Nigeria.
- Ploceus cucullatus* Abundant resident.
- Ploceus superciliosus* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year, usually amongst tall grass.
- Ploceus ocularis* Once, in June.
- Euplectes macrourus* Wet season migrant, recorded regularly from June to November.
- Plocepasser superciliosus* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.
- Passer griseus* Common resident.
- Petronia dentata* Mainly a dry season migrant, recorded regularly from November to March, but also recorded in June.
- Vidua macroura* Common resident.
- Vidua camerunensis* Resident, common in breeding plumage in October and November.
- Vidua orientalis* Probably resident, recorded occasionally in breeding plumage from September to December.
- Pirenestes ostrinus* Once, a pair in December, feeding on the ground in open grassland.
- Pytilia hypogrammica* Small numbers recorded in April and May only.
- Estrilda melopoda* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.
- Estrilda larvata* Resident, recorded occasionally throughout the year.
- Lagonosticta rufopicta* Common resident.
- Lagonosticta senegalensis* Resident, recorded regularly throughout the year.
- Lonchura cucullata* Abundant resident.

DISCUSSION

In general, the species we recorded are those which would be expected in the moist savanna environment. However, certain species are worthy of note. Small numbers of *Lanius collurio collurio* had been predicted for Eastern Nigeria by Elgood (1975). *Ploceus heuglini* is also not unexpected; Bannerman (1953) records it as having bred in Takum, Benue State, and it appears to range further south in Nigeria than elsewhere in West Africa.

In addition to *P. heuglini*, there are a surprising number of species which would typically be thought of as northern, dry-country birds, yet are regularly seen at Obudu - such are *Turtur abyssinicus*, *Lybius dubius*, *Pogoniulus chrysoconus*, *Corvinella corvina* and *Sylvietta brachyura*. It is tempting to speculate that the spread of desert conditions in the Sahel zone is pushing these northern birds to the southern parts of the savanna.

A few species were notably absent from the Obudu area. In particular, *Motacilla flava*, which Serle (1957) describes as a "ubiquitous winter visitor" and which was certainly present on the Obudu Plateau, was not recorded once at Obudu itself during the course of two dry seasons; perhaps the proximity of a preferred highland area attracted the birds at the expense of the adjacent lowlands. *Serinus mozambicus* was likewise not seen at Obudu (though Serle, 1957, calls it a "common species of the tree savanna of Ogoja Province"), and neither was *Euplectes orix* ("abundant" at Enugu - Cowper 1977), though the latter was sighted at Vande'ikya, 25 km north of Obudu. It will be noticed that many of the species in the systematic list were recorded only once or a very few times; this is probably a result of the restricted area of study close to an urban area.

Appendix A gives the arrival and departure dates at Obudu of selected migratory species. Of these, three species were not recognised by Elgood, Fry & Dowsett (1973) as migrants - *Limnocorax flavirostris*, *Pogoniulus chrysoconus* and *Mesopicos goertae*. These three were all recorded on several occasions between the dates mentioned, but not at any other time of the year, and hence they appear to be at least local migrants in this area; however, one should heed the warning of Greig-Smith (1978a) that observed changes in abundance may be due to several factors other than movement into or from the area. Conversely, *Clamator levaillantii* and *Sylvietta brachyura*, previously regarded as migrants, were recorded throughout the year at Obudu.

Mixed-species bird flocks were regularly observed around Obudu and a summary of the composition of such flocks is given in Appendix B. No detailed quantitative analysis was carried out, but the observations appear to correspond well with those of Greig-Smith (1978b) in Mole National Park, Ghana; *Parus leucomelas* and possibly *Campephaga phoenicea* act as "nucleus" species, whilst *Eremomela pusilla* is also a frequent member of the mixed parties. In addition, mixed aerial flocks of birds hawking for insects were often seen and included, at various times, all the species of swifts, swallows and martins (except *H. semirufa*), often in large numbers.

In terms of its ornithology, Cross River State (formerly South-Eastern State) has been relatively neglected, although potentially it is extremely interesting and it is certainly one of the most scenic parts of Nigeria. The vegetation of the state ranges from mangrove and freshwater swamp through high forest to derived savanna and montane areas; the only comparable state in Nigeria is Bendel (see Heigham 1976), but the latter lacks any highland areas. The present paper, together with those of Elgood (1965) and Mackenzie (1979), demonstrates the range of species to be found in this state. Further studies, particularly over a broader area of the Ogoja-Obudu savanna and in the less disturbed rainforest between Ikom and Obudu, may show that Cross River State has a greater variety of bird life than any other state of Nigeria.

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RESUME

Les oiseaux observés près de la ville d'Obudu, dans le sud-est du Nigéria, entre septembre 1977 et juin 1979, sont enregistrés. La majorité des oiseaux sont les espèces qu'on attendrait dans la savane humide. Cependant, quelques espèces de la savane aride sont enregistrées aussi (*Turtur abyssinicus*, *Lybius dubius*, *Pogoniulus chrysoconus*, *Corvinella corvina*, *Sylvietta brachyura*, *Ploceus heuglini*). *Lanius collurio collurio* est enregistré pour la première fois dans l'est du Nigéria. Les dates de l'arrivée et du départ sont présentées pour quelques espèces migrateurs. Les oiseaux qui composent les volées mêlées sont enregistrés.

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APPENDIX A FIRST AND LAST DATES OF SOME MIGRANTS AT OBUDU

<u>Ethiopian migrants</u>	<u>First date</u>	<u>Last date</u>
<i>Ardeola ibis</i>	25 Oct	18 May
<i>Milvus migrans</i>	5 Oct	12 May
<i>Falco ardosiaceus</i>	13 Nov	16 Mar
<i>Limnocolaptes flavirostris</i>	18 Feb	28 Sep
<i>Streptopelia vinacea</i>	5 Aug	? Apr
<i>Halcyon leucocephala</i>	10 Dec	6 Mar
<i>Merops albicollis</i>	4 Oct	20 May
<i>Coracias abyssinica</i>	4 Jan	9 May
<i>Tockus nasutus</i>	20 Oct	9 May
<i>Pogoniulus chrysoconus</i>	16 Dec	25 May
<i>Mesopicos goertae</i>	3 Oct	1 Mar
<i>Hirundo aethiopica</i>	8 Feb	18 Oct
<i>Emberiza cabanisi</i>	16 Dec	30 Apr
<i>Euplectes macrourus</i>	3 Jun	1 Nov
 <u>Palaeartic migrants</u>		
<i>Apus apus</i> (north-bound)	11 Feb	29 Apr
<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	7 Oct	2 Apr
<i>Delichon urbica</i> (north-bound)	9 Feb	19 Mar
<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	17 Nov*	19 Apr
<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	7 Dec	2 Apr
<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	2 Oct	1 May

* (Present at least one week earlier on the Obudu Plateau)

APPENDIX B BIRDS OF MIXED-SPECIES FLOCKS

Most frequent species

Campephaga phoenicea
Eremomela pusilla
Parus leucomelas

Species seen in mixed flocks once or twice only

Nilaus afer
Laniarius ferrugineus
Lanius collurio
Phylloscopus trochilus
Phylloscopus sibilatrix
Hyltiota flavigaster
Batis senegalensis
Salpornis spilonota
Zosterops senegalensis
Estrilda melpoda
Estrilda larvata

Species often seen in mixed flocks

Pogoniulus chrysoconus
Dendropicos fuscescens
Mesopicos goertae
Dryoscopus gambensis
Tchagra senegala
Dicrurus adsimilis
Cisticola erythrops
Cisticola brachyptera
Prinia erythroptera
Prinia subflava
Sylvietta brachyura
Nectarinia cuprea
Nectarinia coccinigaster
Emberiza cabanisi
Ploceus heuglini
Plocepasser superciliosus
Lonchura cucullata