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February / février 2008

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BIRD NOTES FROM THE PLAINS SOUTH OF LAKE CHAD

WINTER 1971-1972 PART 3

by

D.A. Holmes

Crested Lark Galerida cristata: Common in cultivated areas and open scrub.

Chestnut-backed Finch-Lark Eremopterix leucotis: Common in cultivated areas and open scrub.

Short-toed Lark Calandrella brachydactyla: Abundant visitor, first seen on 24th November although it was not until February that I could satisfy myself completely with their identification. They avoid scrub and long grass, and favour especially the hard smooth ground with short dead grass after grazing that is found around many villages and scrub areas, moving into the sorghum fields after the harvest. They occur in loose flocks of up to 200-400 birds, but are wild and flighty and almost impossible to approach on foot to within identification distance. We eventually obtained satisfactory views from a cautious approach by car. The flocks became larger or more compact early in March, the birds acting more in unison (previously they would fly off and resettle singly or in little groups), and they were last seen on 17th March.

White Wagtail Motacilla alba: Scarce visitor, in ones or twos at village wells or near water. First and last dates seen were 8th November and 13th March.

Yellow Wagtail Motacilla flava: Abundant early in the winter and one of the commonest migrants, becoming less common as the dry season developed, except near water. Minor passages noted from about the last week of February onwards, the flava race being the commonest, with probably cinereocapilla, thunbergii, iberiae and feldegg.

Red-throated Pipit Anthus cervinus: Pipits were only seen regularly on the Gambaru irrigation scheme, in small numbers, from mid-December onwards (perhaps overlooked previously). A few were satisfactorily identified as this species.

Sudan Brown Babbler Turdoides plebejus: Parties encountered twice only in November and December, in denser scrub woodland or riverine scrub.

Common Garden Bulbul Pycnonotus barbatus: Common near the river but not ranging far into the surrounding plains. (They were also present around the resthouse at Waza, N.Cameroon, where Fry apparently recorded none in November 1969).

Swamp Flycatcher Muscicapa aquatica: Two records in December of single birds along the river.

Senegal Puffback Flycatcher Batis senegalensis: A pair of Puffback Flycatchers believed to be this species seen on 25th & 26th November in scrub woodland along the northern sand ridge.

Paradise Flycatcher Terpsiphone viridis: One record only of a single bird in a dense riverside grove on 29th November.

Wheatear Oenanthe oenanthe: One of the commonest migrants and possibly one of the commonest birds of the plains. Still present on our departure on 27th March.

(Red-breasted Chat Oenanthe bottae: Very common at Rhumsiki in the mountains of N.Cameroun in February).

Ant-Chat Myrmecocichla aethiops: Moderately common in open scrubby country especially near pits, deserted villages etc., in parties of up to 5.

Black Scrub Robin Cercotrichas podobe: Very common in thorn scrub.

European Redstart Phoenicurus phoenicurus: Uncommon. Two separate birds along the riverbank in December and one in thornscrub near our Ala camp through February.

Whitethroat Sylvia communis: Common visitor seen most often in Acacia trees. One or two at our camp bird bath in mid-March.

Lesser Whitethroat Sylvia curruca: None identified until the two birds that visited our camp bird bath from 8th March onwards.

(Subalpine Warbler Sylvia cantillans: Brief glimpses of a probable Subalpine that never quite had the courage to come down to our camp bird bath on 14th & 15th March).

Rufous Warbler Cercotrichas galactotes: Moderately common in thorn scrub.

Olivaceous Warbler Hippolais pallida: Two or more present in Balanites trees at our Ala camp throughout our stay there from late January onwards. They were finally identified only with considerable difficulty. A tape recording of the song was obtained. They visited our bird bath in mid-March.

Possibly the warbler heard calling commonly (Whitethroat-like "tec tec" notes) in neem trees in the towns and larger villages is this species.

European Reed Warbler Acrocephalus scirpaceus: Many in flooded tamarix and rushes by the river in mid-December, associated with

what were believed to be Cane Warblers, Calamoecator sp.

Sedge Warbler Acrocephalus schoenobaenus: Common in riverside vegetation. One or two visited our camp bird bath in mid-March.

Willow Warbler Phylloscopus trochilus: Some seven records only, from all months except November. Song heard on 26th & 27th October. One visited our bird bath in mid-March.

Nuthatch Warbler Sylvietta brachyura: Common in riverine and thorn scrub. One seen feeding full-grown young on 7th November.

Grey-backed Eremomela Eremomela icteropygialis: A few records from better wooded areas of thorn scrub.

Grey-backed Camaroptera Camaroptera brachyura: Common in thorn scrub, always found near the ground or low in thick bushes.

Redpate Grass Warbler Cisticola ruficeps: Common in thorn scrub. The only Cisticolid identified.

West African Prinia Prinia subflava: Moderately common on edges of thorn scrub and in wild sorghum grass and wet areas.

European Swallow Hirundo rustica: The only European Swallows we succeeded in identifying were a few over the Gambaru irrigation scheme on 23rd March, although there may have been a few near Lake Chad on 7th February. We may well have overlooked this species when we first arrived in October; later we spent considerable time straining our eyes at swooping swallows, but at least the great majority proved to be the next species.

Ethiopian Swallow Hirundo aethiopica: Very common in and near all villages.

Red-rumped Swallow Hirundo daurica: Four seen at a canal culvert near Gambaru on 29th November, at least one of which was an immature still being fed. They must have left shortly after as they were not

present on 1st December and were not seen again.

European Sand Martin Riparia riparia: Abundant, and one of the commonest migrant visitors. Numbers declined a little after November. The first very minor northward passage was seen on 4th February, but from 11th February onwards they were seen flying north on most days, loosely strung out singly or in small parties probably on a wide and steady front. Presumably on reaching the lake they gather into the huge concentrations reported from Malamfatori. We may have overlooked the Sudan Sand Martin, Riparia paludicola.

Glossy-backed Drongo Dicrurus adsimilis: Moderately common in the better wooded areas.

White-rumped Grey Shrike Lanius excubitor: Moderately common in thorn scrub. A nest with three fledglings nearly ready to fly was found on 28th February (the family had left the site by 13th March). The nest was built of sticks and cotton bolls, about 6½ feet up in the middle of a small, isolated Balanites bush in a cultivated area. Numerous remains of grasshoppers were seen on surrounding thorns. In mid-March one visited our bird bath.

Masked Shrike Lanius nubicus: A common visitor to the riverine zone, one or two being seen on most visits there. The most westerly record was of one in a flooded area just west of Ngala in October. Our last record was on 15th January, as we were not able to visit the river again until late March, by which time the Masked Shrikes had left.

Isabelline Red-tailed Shrike Lanius collurio: Moderately common in thorn scrub. Still present on 27th March.

Woodchat Lanius senator: Common in thorn scrub. Last seen on 16th March.

Barbary Shrike Laniarius barbarus: Common in thorn scrub along the northern sand ridge and in the west of the area. See under the next

species.

Abyssinian Gonolek Laniarius barbarus erythrogaster: This shrike is common along the river where it completely replaces the previous species. The riverine belt is probably the western limit of the species in this area, and the geographical separation is complete. The adjacent clay plains must form a barrier to both species, but it would be interesting to find where the species meet elsewhere in the region (for example along the northern sand ridge which meets the river where the latter emerges on to the lake environs.

Call notes of the two species appear to be identical, although the present species always struck me as having a louder call.

Brubru Shrike Nilaus afer: Readily overlooked until the distinctive call is known, this species was first seen by the river on 15th Jan., and subsequently found to be quite common in thorn scrub.

Black-crowned Tchagra Tchagra senegala: Common in the better wooded areas of scrub, for example along the river and northern sand ridge.

Pied Crow Corvus albus: Very common generally.

Swainson's Glossy Starling Lamprotornis chloropterus: Few certain records, but probably present in riverine and better wooded areas.

Blue-eared Glossy Starling Lamprotornis chalybaeus: Probably the commonest of the family, in all types of scrub. When direct comparisons are available, this species is an inch larger than both chloropterus and Spreo pulcher, a useful guide in identification.

Long-tailed Glossy Starling Lamprotornis caudatus: Common in better wooded areas, for example along the river and northern sand ridge. Rare elsewhere.

Chestnut-bellied Starling Spreo pulcher: Common in all scrub areas.

Yellow-billed Oxpecker Buphagus africanus: Eight records, all from

the west of the area (Ala and Marte areas), in parties of up to half-a-dozen, usually associating with cattle but in February seen in thorn scrub with no cattle around.

Beautiful Long-tailed Sunbird Nectarinia pulchella: Probably the commonest of the family, in all types of scrub; identification is difficult except for males in breeding plumage, and the plumage changes are most confusing. In mid-March up to a dozen would descend to our bird bath, no two apparently alike (some were probably immature).

Pygmy Long-tailed Sunbird Anthreptes platura: Moderately common, but we only succeeded in identifying males in breeding plumage. It is possible that we overlooked the Yellow-bellied Sunbird Nectarinia venusta.

Scarlet-breasted Sunbird Nectarinia senegalensis: Few records but probably moderately common along the riverine zone.

White-rumped Serin Serinus leucopygius: Common near villages and in scrub.

Grey-headed Sparrow Passer griseus: Common generally.

Golden Sparrow Passer luteus: Common in scrub in the west of the area, in February in flocks of up to 2000.

White-billed Buffalo-Weaver Bubalornis albirostris: Common in scrub and near villages.

Sparrow-Weaver Plocepasser superciliosus: Common in scrub.

Slender-billed Weaver Ploceus luteolus: A few records early in the dry season, in Acacia arabica along seasonal streams.

(Niger Black-headed Weaver Ploceus melanocephalus: Probably this species seen in late October on the lake margins).

Vitelline Masked Weaver Ploceus velatus: Identified in early

November in a thickly-vegetated swamp area.

Village Weaver Ploceus cucullatus: Probably common near villages in better wooded areas. For a newcomer this was not the season for weavers generally, and most weaver identifications were made early in the season before they lost their breeding plumage.

Black-faced Dioch Quelea quelea: Common in dense scrub early in the dry season, the majority then apparently moving away. A few present after mid-March (identified principally from red bill). No remains of huge breeding colonies were seen, but a quelea eradication team was in the area during 1971.

Orange Bishop Euplectes orix: Moderately common early in the dry season, then not seen (either they left the area or were lost in the mass of ploceids in non-breeding plumage).

Yellow-crowned Bishop Euplectes afer: A few seen in late October.

Warbling Silverbill Lonchura malabarica: Moderately common in scrub. Evidence of breeding in January and March.

Cut-throat Weaver Amadina fasciata: Moderately common in scrub. A regular visitor to the bird bath in March.

Melba-Finch Pytila melba: Few records but probably moderately common in better wooded areas.

Senegal Fire-Finch Laganosticta senegala: Common, most frequently encountered in the neighbourhood of water.

Red-cheeked Cordon-Bleu Estrilda bengala: One of the commonest birds of scrubland. Two fledglings found in long grass on 15th November.

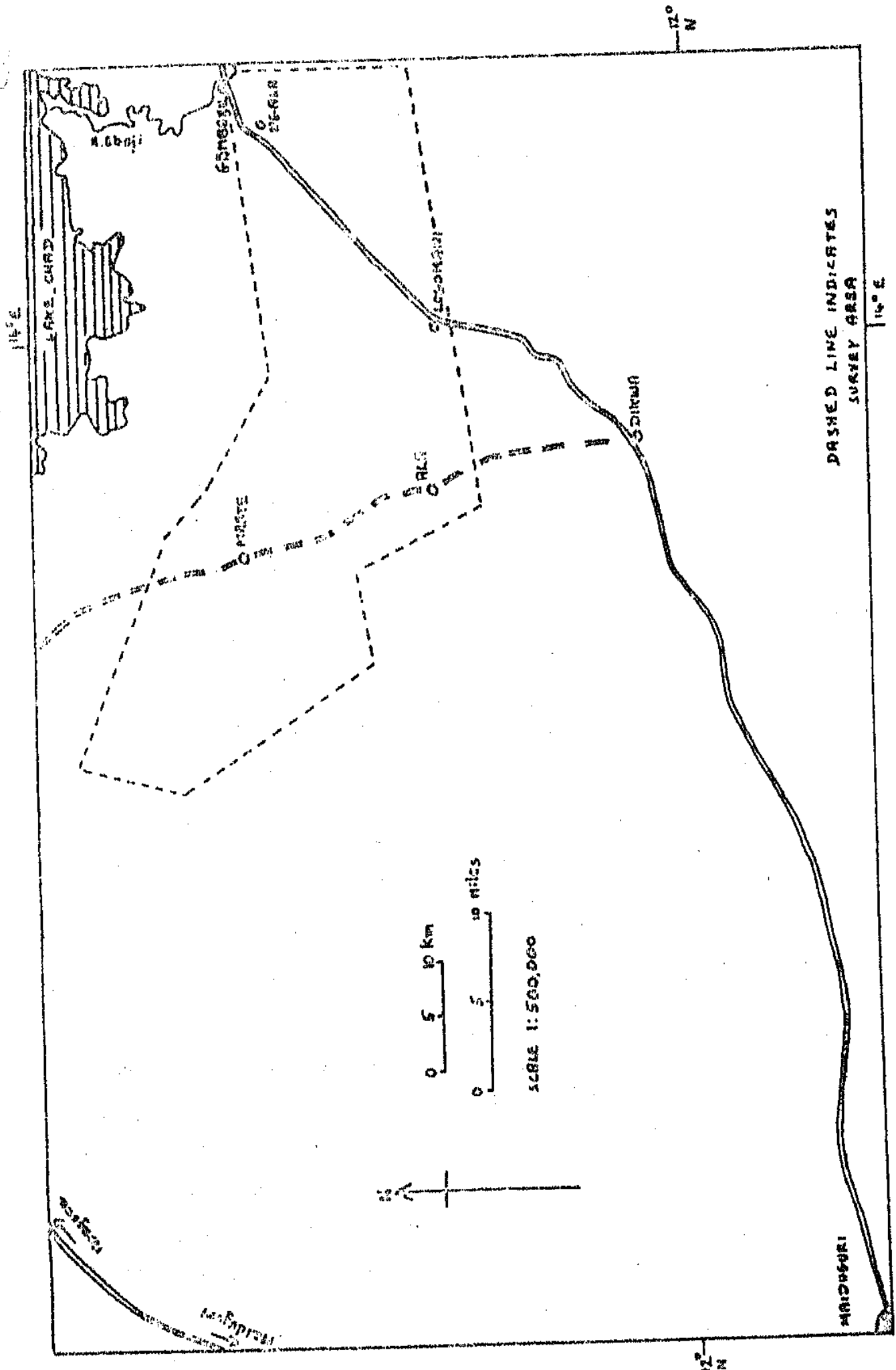
Senegal Combassou Vidua chalybeata: Common in most types of scrub.

Broad-tailed Paradise Whydah Vidua orientalis: Common in scrub.

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MAP - see next page.



DASHED LINE INDICATES SURVEY AREA



SCALE 1:500,000



17° N

14° E

14° E

LAKE CHAD

14.00000

650000

25-628

SARIS

SARIS

SARIS

14.00000

14.00000