

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

### A second record of the Northern White-tailed Bush Lark

#### *Mirafra albicauda* in Ethiopia

The Northern White-tailed Bush Lark *Mirafra albicauda* occurs primarily in Uganda, central Tanzania and west and central Kenya, with a population in Chad (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989). It is one of a group of small *Mirafra* species, difficult both to observe and to identify. Three species have been recorded in Ethiopia: *M. albicauda*, Singing Bush Lark *M. cantillans* and Friedmann's Bush Lark *M. pulpa*. Their status in Ethiopia and known records are reviewed by Ash (1992), including the rediscovery in 1990 of *M. albicauda* at its only known Ethiopian site (Safford 1992), detailed here.

#### Site details

Before 1990 the only Ethiopian records of *M. albicauda* were four specimens from south and south-east of Lake Abaya collected in March 1912 by the Childs Frick expedition (Friedmann 1937). This area is now contained within Nechisar National Park (6°N, 37°E), which covers around 750 km<sup>2</sup> largely between Lakes Abaya and Chamo in the Rift Valley. Work carried out by six observers in Nechisar National Park between July and September 1990 (Duckworth *et al.* 1992) included a bird survey. The latter half of the period was spent partly on the Nechisar plains, a flat or undulating area of treeless, short grassland of about 270 km<sup>2</sup> at 1200 m elevation. Annual rainfall is between 800 and 1000 mm (data from Arba Minch state farm, about 15 km away but experiencing similar weather). The soil is a calcareous black clay of lacustrine origin ('black cotton' soil), with various grass species (Gramineae) no higher than 50 cm tall (see Evans *et al.* 1992).

#### The 1990 records

Only two species of lark were found within the Park. Flappet Larks *M. rufocinnamomea* occurred where there were scattered trees or bushes at the edge of the plains; Friedmann (1937) also recorded it in the area. A second species was found only in the most open parts of the plains. It was very difficult to observe, but appeared to be a small *Mirafra*. From available literature (notably Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1960)) and notes and photographs from previous examination of skins at the British Museum (Natural History), it could not be identified at the time, but the choice of known species was narrowed to the three listed above. The Ethiopian check-list (Urban & Brown 1971) listed none of these for the Rift Valley, gave only one record of *M. pulpa* and omitted *M. albicauda* entirely (the authors had, like us, overlooked the 1912 records), and so identifying this lark was clearly important. On one walk across the plains six birds were flushed in a few hundred metres; since birds only flew at close range (typically a few metres), they must have been locally abundant, despite their elusiveness. For these reasons it was decided to collect one. A 12-m four-shelf mist net was rapidly set up after a bird was flushed a short distance and then the bird was driven into the net at the first attempt.

The bird was measured, described and photographed when freshly dead and tentatively identified as *M. albicauda* by J. S. Ash, B. P. Hall, P. C. Lack, D. J. Pearson



(J. S. Ash *in litt.*) and myself. The specimen was later presented by the Natural History Museum of Addis Ababa and Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation to the British Museum (Natural History), specimen number 1991.12.1, where the identity was confirmed by comparison with one of the 1912 *M. albicauda* specimens (number USNM 246208) on loan (through the courtesy of Dr S. L. Olson) from the Smithsonian Institution, a photograph of a specimen of *M. pulpa* and skins of *M. cantillans* from elsewhere.

The main diagnostic feature was the very dark, almost black, colour of the upperparts, fringed with cream to give a scaly appearance. *M. pulpa* is much more uniform and browner, whereas *M. cantillans* (of the race *marginata*, recorded closest to Nechisar: Urban & Brown (1971) is very similar (Hall & Moreau 1970; pers. obs.), sharing the scaly upperparts, but has consistently browner feather centres. The 1990 specimen fitted *M. albicauda* in this and all other respects, with discrepancies insignificant compared to the similarities: it may have been rather large (maximum wing chord when fresh 87 mm, unstretched wing of specimen 83 mm; Friedmann (1937) gave 77–84 mm for his series) and had a less obvious supercilium than the 1912 specimen. Other measurements (in mm) of the 1990 bird were: tail 49, culmen to feathering 13.0, bill to gape 16.6, bill depth at feathering 7.2, tarsus 22.6, hind-claw 8.5, longest primary tip 1 mm short of longest tertial.

Birds were flushed from the ground, flying only a few metres with hesitant wingbeats or wings held out stiffly below horizontal, before dropping slowly (almost hovering) out of sight, back into the grass, but occasionally they landed in small patches of bare earth where they could be watched briefly. Several times two were seen, but not associating particularly closely. No call or song was heard.

## Discussion

*M. albicauda* seemed to occur only on the plains and no similar habitat was seen near the Park, so this population is probably isolated. When Bolton (1970) visited Nechisar in 1969 and 1970, thousands of cattle were being grazed by nomadic pastoralists on the plains, resulting in severe habitat degradation by overgrazing and trampling. The lark population has evidently survived, thanks to effective management of the National Park by the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation, and in 1990 the plains were no longer being used for grazing and had probably reverted to a more natural condition.

There is much variation within some lark species depending on the colour of the soil on which they live; the dark *M. albicauda* blends in well at Nechisar. It is part of a superspecies with *M. cantillans*, and the difference in song and display flight between the two forms confirms that they are good species (Hall & Moreau 1970).

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## The spread of the House Sparrow *Passer domesticus indicus* in Africa with new records from Tanzania

Harwin & Irwin (1966) and Summers-Smith (1988) summarized what was known about the introduction and subsequent explosive dispersal of House Sparrow *Passer domesticus indicus* in southern and central Africa. We briefly review these important contributions and present new distributional records from southwestern Tanzania.

The first introductions of House Sparrow were made in the 1890s and early 1900s in the Republic of South Africa. Individuals of the eastern subspecies *P. d. indicus* were released at Durban, and nominate *P. d. domesticus* from western Europe were released at East London. Later, *indicus* was also released at East London, where it interbred with *domesticus*. In 1955 *domesticus* was released at Maputo (= Lourenço Marques) in Mozambique. It spread throughout the city but did not appear to be colonizing new





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