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Observations on some Palaearctic land birds in Ghana

by J. Frank Walsh and L. G. Grimes

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In his classic paper on problems of Mediterranean-Saharan migration Moreau (1961) drew attention to the paucity of published evidence for the occurrence of many species of Palaearctic birds in West Africa. This situation began to be rectified with the appearance of major papers from Senegal (Morel & Roux 1966) and Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1966). Subsequent information for Nigeria, published in the *Bulletin of the Nigerian Ornithological Society*, was partly used by Moreau (1972) and further data appeared for Senegal (Morel & Roux 1973) and for the Ivory Coast (Brunel & Thiollay 1969, 1970). Over a number of years we kept records of Palaearctic land birds in Ghana, of which the following add to our present knowledge.

Our observations mainly relate to 2 savanna areas; one in the north and one in the south of the country. Data from the northern savanna, especially around Bolgatanga (10° 48'N, 0° 51'W), were collected over 3 seasons (1970-1973) by J.F.W.; that from the Accra Plains in the south, particularly in the area around the University of Ghana at Legon (5° 38'N, 0° 11'W), were collected over several years by L.G.G. Reference is also made to records by M. Wink made during 2 short stays in February and March 1972 and 1973 (Wink 1976) and to the more extensive records of Sutton (1970), Macdonald (1978) and M. Lockwood (in prep.).

In the northern savanna there is one wet season and one long dry season (November to April) with an average rainfall of about 40 inches (1016 mm). On the Accra Plains the average annual rainfall varies from 30 inches (762 mm) near the coast to over 50 inches (1270 mm) inland, but in contrast to the north the rainfall is double peaked with a major peak in May and June and a minor one in September and October. In both areas the rainfall is erratic in timing and quantity, and the dry seasons are severe enough to quickly wither and dry the vegetation. It should perhaps be noted that in northern Ghana rainfall was well below average in 1970 but not in 1971 and 1972, while in the Sahel rainfall was particularly poor in 1971 and 1972 (Winstanley *et al.* 1974).

Of the 24 species discussed below, 8 are previously unreported for Ghana, though all have occurred in both Senegal (Morel & Roux 1973) and Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1966, Elgood 1975). These Ghana records provide strong evidence in particular of major wintering by Booted Eagles *Hieraaetus pennatus* and Sedge Warblers *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*, and support Moreau's (1972) view that the paucity of records reflects the shortage of observers, rather than the absence from much of West Africa of many species such as Hobby *Falco subbuteo*, Common Swift *Apus apus*, Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*, and Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*.

The records of territorial behaviour and singing add to the data on wintering behaviour. Many Palaearctic passerines exhibit territorial behaviour in their West African winter quarters, many sing to some extent, from occasional sub-song (Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*) to full song throughout the season (Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta*). Some, such as the Wood Warbler (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*) and Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), appear to be in full song during spring migration, but not to sing fully whilst in winter quarters.

The systematic list follows the order adopted by Serle *et al.* (1977).

SYSTEMATIC LIST

(*first published record for Ghana)

*Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*

Recorded only from the north; one in the White Volta valley on 7 January 1971 and single birds over rice paddies along the Bolgatanga-Tamale road in December 1972, January 1973, February 1972 and 1979, and March 1975. All records refer to male birds, which appear to be almost as common as male Pallid Harriers *Circus macrourus*, in a ratio of 6: 8. Females and immature birds of the 2 species were not distinguished.

*Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo refinus*

A party of 3 birds, all of different phases, considered to be this species was seen by both of us over Abokobi (5° 40'N, 0° 12'W) on the Accra Plains on 30 November 1971.

*Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

This eagle is now known to winter regularly in West Africa. It was recorded regularly at Bolgatanga between December and March in each year of J.F.W.'s stay (1970-73). Recently in Upper Volta, J.F.W. has seen it at Ouagadougou in January and at Banfora in March, as well as along the main road from Paga on the Ghana border to Ouagadougou in October, January and March. Light phase birds have turned up occasionally on the Accra

Plains and have been seen by both of us there. Mundy & Cook (1972) have a number of records for Sokoto in Nigeria between January and March.

*European Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Good sightings at less than 10 m of an adult over an area of burnt grass at Legon on 5 March 1973. B. Smit (*in litt*). had other sightings, in the dry season of 1971/72, which he considered to be this species. J.F.W. saw 3 in the Bafilo area of neighbouring Togo on 12 December 1978 (Cheke & Walsh 1980).

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

There are a few records of this species from the north and none from the south. It has been taken at Mole Game Reserve, where an adult and an immature bird were shot on 12 October and 12 November 1971 respectively. A single bird was seen at Bolgatanga in December 1971 and 4 were at Ve a Dam for several days in January 1973. The only published record is that of Wink (1976) who recorded a flock of c. 50 on 1 April 1973 near Lawra (10° 37'N, 2° 53'W). The increase in rice cultivation at the Ve a Dam may help to concentrate numbers in the future, as Morel & Roux (1973: 538) found in Senegal.

European Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus canorus*

One bird at Pong Tamale on 26 April 1971 is the only savanna record. Macdonald (1978) saw it at New Debiso (6° 38'N, 3° 08'W), in the forest zone, on 8 April 1977.

*Alpine Swift *Apus melba*

On 4 March 1974, groups of c. 30 birds occurred over the Accra Plains with Common Swifts and the Mottled Swift *Apus aequatorialis* and were quite widespread over the western districts of the plains. It is impossible to know whether they were from the Palaearctic, but the date is suggestive. A large group (c. 300 birds) was present with Common Swift and House Martin over Amedzofe (6° 54'N, 0° 24'E) in February 1975 following the re-occurrence of harmattan conditions in the south.

Common Swift *Apus apus*

The autumn passage in the north is extremely small compared with the spring passage. Six were seen at Bolgatanga on 19 August and 20 at Ve a Dam on 21 August, then a few others later; while at Tumu, Sutton (1970) only had one record. In contrast the spring records are numerous (latest date at Bolgatanga, 6 June) and invariably occur after storms. At Nandom (10° 50'N, 2° 45'W), Sutton (1970) witnessed a broad front movement involving thousands of swifts. In the south most records fall between February and March but some flocks appear over Legon in December and January, indicating a wintering population. Largest numbers (c. 500) were present on 4 March 1974 following unusual weather, the inter-tropical convergence zone returned southwards to reach the coast owing to a large anticyclone over southern France and Spain (Grimes 1974).

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*

Sutton (1970) strongly suspected that it occurred at Tumu with Common Swifts. J.F.W. recorded one among 50 Common Swifts on 29 April 1971, 25 miles north of Tamale and 2 at Mole Game Reserve on 19 December 1971. Macdonald (1978) saw the species at Cape Coast on 30 November 1976 and,

in the company of G. Vanderstichelen and J.F.W., at Tafo on 29 January 1978. These are the only published records from Ghana.

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

Sutton (1970) recorded it in September and May at Tumu and R. B. Payne (*in litt.*) in October 1975 at Mole Game Reserve. These are the only records for the Upper Region of Ghana. Further south J.F.W. saw a flock of 12 feeding over savanna woodland on 3 December 1971 at 7° 45' N, 1° 45' W; 3 were in noticeable wing moult. It is a regular visitor to the western areas of the Accra Plains and there is evidence that numbers have increased since the 1950's. Gass (1963) recorded them occasionally, but they are now regularly seen between November and April, usually in flocks of 5-10 feeding in cassava plantations. About 25 were seen together in the Asukakaw valley (7° 40' N, 0° 17' E), in the cocoa growing area of the Volta Region, by J.F.W. on 11 January 1972.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Sutton (1970) recorded them at Tumu only in October and in the spring months beginning in February, latest date 21 May. This is also the pattern at Bolgatanga; earliest and latest dates are respectively 18 September and 2 May. In the south, Wink (1976) saw 5 along the Volta river near Akosombo (6° 20' N, 0° 05' E) on 27 February 1972. M. Lockwood (*in litt.*) found Sand Martins roosting regularly with Swallows (1: 100) near Tafo-Akim in January and February 1975, but not in other months.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

At Veia Dam, 'European' Swallows have been recorded from mid-September (with *H. rustica lucida*) until mid-October and then very few until early March, after which they become fairly common from mid-April to early May (5 moving east on 16 May near Bolgatanga). In the south the earliest arrivals reach the Plains in late August (Gass 1957). Large numbers arrive in September and roosts occur in reed beds bordering the Densu river on the western edge of the Plains. Most birds leave by late March but on 2 March and 6 April 1973 flocks of c. 30 and c. 10 birds respectively were seen flying purposefully northwest over the University at Legon at about 0800 hours, which suggests that they had come in from off the Gulf of Guinea (see Moreau 1972: 124) on their way north. After a storm on 14 April 1973, c. 100 birds were present with Common Swifts over the hills that skirt the Plains to the north of Accra. In the forested areas it is widely distributed in clearings and towns and along roads. A large roost (c. 20,000 birds) in a sugar cane plantation first located in 1971 near Tafo-Akim was used also in subsequent years; the tight swirling flight of the flock that precedes fall out into the roost at dusk (see Rudebeck 1955) has been observed there. M. Lockwood (*in prep.*) has trapped French and German ringed birds at the Tafo roost and re-trapped her own ringed birds in subsequent years. The data do not support the suggestion in Elgood *et al.* (1966) that most Swallows depart from southern Ghana in late December.

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

At Tumu, Sutton (1970) gained the impression that considerable numbers arrived in October and continued to build up until December, after which they were less numerous. Large numbers, however, have been recorded in late March at Mole Game Reserve. At Pong Tamale three were seen on

28 April with Common Swifts *Apus apus* and Little African Swifts *Apus affinis*. The only observation in the south (3 at Amedzofe (6° 45' N, 0° 24' E)) was made a few days after the re-occurrence of harmattan conditions. Wink (1976) saw 300 on 17 March near Prang (8° 05' N, 0° 24' E) and 5 on 4 April 1973 near Gambaga (10° 33' N, 0° 30' W).

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

One, very shy, was found in an open arid treeless area covered with tussock grass near Boltgatanga on 26 December 1971. Wink (1976) considered that he saw one on a sandy section of a lagoon east of Accra on 21 February 1973 and Macdonald (1978) reported single birds near the coast at Ankaful on 27 February and on the coast at Nakwa on 21 June 1977. These are the only published records from Ghana and it is surprising that 3 of the four birds were seen on the coast.

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*

Many records from mid-November to the end of January in the vicinity of Veia Dam, where flocks of c. 30 birds often formed; much commoner in the north than the Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*. On the Accra Plains, Lamm & Horwood (1958) recorded it once with a small flock of *Motacilla flava* sp. and they have turned up occasionally at irrigation dams. Within the forest belt, M. Lockwood has netted the occasional bird at Tafo-Akim near the town's reservoir and on the golf course.

*Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*

Regularly seen at the Bongo Hills (10° 54' N, 0° 49' W) during 1971 and 1972, when up to 3 birds ♂, ♀♀ were often seen during a single visit, the 2 females being together. A male was present from November at Mampong Quarry (5° 42' N, 0° 04' E) on the Accra Plains in 2 consecutive years, remaining until mid-March 1971 and the end of February 1972. In 1971 there were 2 males there on 12 and 23 February, song was heard and chasing occurred on the first date, but the birds were well separated during the second visit. Wink (1976) recorded a female at the same quarry on 27 March 1973 which had not been present earlier and was not seen subsequently. The local Cliff-Chat *Myrmecocichla cinnamomeiventris* is resident at the quarry, and the Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis* has also been seen there. These records are similar to those from the Gambia (McGregor & Thomson 1965) and Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1966) in that the birds were seen on rocky outcrops at low altitudes, the Gambia record actually being at a coastal cliff, whereas the records from Sierra Leone and Liberia are from highland areas (Field 1973).

*Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

First seen on 12 November 1972 at Veia Dam, where a male, believed to be *cyaneola*, was seen in rank vegetation over water. The following day 2 males were seen and the number eventually reached 10 on 3 December. On this date the birds were noticeably more noisy and some chasing occurred; one male gave a subdued but musical song. Birds were in rank grass and thorny vegetation on the bunds and in the ditches separating the paddy fields, and in 2 uncultivated but floodied paddies. They occasionally entered grown rice. Numbers probably remained the same until 7 January, the highest counts being on days when there was much territorial behaviour; on other visits birds were skulking and only a few were located. A male netted on 6 January was considered to be the nominate race. Other species netted

on the same day in the same net were Great Reed Warbler, Savi's Warbler and Sedge Warbler. After the first week in January the paddy dried out rapidly and the Bluethroat numbers dropped, the last being seen on 17 January, though 8 later visits were made. The series of observations in rank vegetation over wet ground closely parallels those of Fry (1966) in Nigeria. The only other record for Ghana is of a male at the Kumasi sewage farm, on 28 January 1973, in rank grass growing up to 2-3 m high beside a polluted stream. Present in the same area were Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler and a *Cisticola* species. Ashford (1969) netted a similar group of species with a Bluethroat in a patch of spiny weed *Amaranthus spinosus* at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The Kumasi record is thus the second from the derived savanna zone.

*Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*

Three birds were heard giving liquid trills in rank vegetation on wet ground at Veia Dam on 4 January 1973. A specimen of the nominate race (weight 15.0 gm, wing 69 mm), now housed in the British Museum, Tring, was netted at the same place on 6 January. It is unlikely that these birds were overwintering at the site. This is the first record for Ghana and the only record between Senegal and Nigeria. Other species present in the rank vegetation were Sedge Warblers, Bluethroat and Black-backed *Cisticola* *Cisticola eximia*

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

Records indicate that Ghana is an important wintering area. The first arrivals (earliest date 24 August 1972) at Veia Dam are skulking and silent and may be more numerous than records suggest. By mid-November 1972 many birds held territories within rice paddies and the high counts of c. 17 and c. 30 birds obtained respectively on 26 November 1972 and 7 January 1973 were possible only because of their marked territorial activity. In mid-January the paddy was cut but birds remained in the area (c. 6 on 2 and 10 February). Two netted on 6 and 7 January 1973 weighed 10.5 and 12.8 gm; one sent to the British Museum was considered to be of the nominate race. At Accra they have been located in *Typha* beds in wetlands and at the edges of irrigation dams. Three birds were caught in the same net on 30 January within a period of 3 hours (weights 10.5, 10.5, 10.8 gm and wings 60, 64 and 64 mm respectively); all had earlier been in song. Other sight records are: 4 on 19 December 1972 at Yeji ferry (8° 17'N, 0° 53'W) where they were in vegetation bordering the Volta lake, which now provides a very extensive habitat for *Acrocephalus* species; 3 at Kumasi sewage farm (6° 42'N, 1° 40'W) on 28 January in rank undergrowth, their calls suggesting that at least 12 may have been present; and at least 6 at Tafo on 29 January 1978, some of them in song, were seen by J.F.W. in the company of M. A. Macdonald and G. Vanderstichelen. Sutton (1970) located Sedge Warblers at Tumu (10° 51'N, 2° 00'W) in February, March and April. Recent records from Upper Volta at latitude 12°N by J.F.W. suggest regular wintering. In Nigeria, Walsh (1971) found evidence for it wintering on Foge Island on Lake Kainji (c. 10° 35'N) and also a movement through the area in April, with stragglers in May. British ringed birds have been recovered in Ghana.

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

One was seen in rank vegetation beside a polluted stream at Kumasi

sewage farm, which also contained Sedge Warblers and a Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*, on 28 January 1973. On the Accra Plains one was collected in dry thicket within the Botanical gardens of the University on 12 December 1964 (weight 10.0 gm, wing 66 mm) and another on 31 January 1973 (weight 8.6 gm, wing 61 mm) in *Typha* beds which also held Sedge Warblers and the Rufous Cane Warbler *Acrocephalus rufescens*. In Upper Volta at 12°N it occurs on passage in March, but wintering was also noted in 1976–77, one of 4 years during which careful observations were made (J.F.W.). British ringed birds have been recovered in Ghana.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

At the Veia Dam near Bolgatanga 2 were in song on 26 November and 3 on 3 December 1972. They were not heard again, but one (weight 27.0 gm, wing 90 mm) was netted in the same area on 6 January 1973. It was of the nominate race, its tawny buff underparts suggesting a first year bird. Not yet recorded from the Accra Plains but likely to occur in sugar plantations on the eastern edge, as it has been netted near the coast at Lomé in Togo (Robinson 1972). Recent studies by M. Lockwood (in prep.) in the forest region near Tafo-Akim (6° 13'N, 0° 22'W) have shown it to be a regular winter resident, particularly in sugar cane plantations.

Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta*

There are few records from the north: one near Bolgatanga giving sub-song in January whilst feeding low down in *Mimosa pigra* and a tangle of rank grass; and one at Pong Tamale (9° 40'N, 0° 50'W) on 3 occasions (21 and 26 April and 7 May 1971). On each visit a bird was singing from within the same large *Acacia* and thus might well have been the same bird. In Mole Game Reserve (9° 12'N, 1° 50'W) singing birds were recorded daily in late March by L.L.G. On the Accra Plains it is well distributed in parklands and well-watered gardens, and on inselbergs. Most birds arrive in mid-October (earliest date 30 September) and song may be heard regularly from the end of October (some are in song earlier) through to early April. In mature gardens, birds appear to hold territories from mid-January, for song is heard from the same bush or tree each day. In less hospitable areas birds are heard irregularly, which suggests that some do not hold territories.

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Wink (1976) did not realise that his record was the first for Ghana. At Yeji on 16 March 1972 he netted one which was moulting on head, breast, primaries and secondaries. He also recorded one in song on 21 February 1973 in a thicket clump east of Accra.

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*

The only records from the north involve birds apparently on passage in spring 1971. A few were present in tall trees at Pong Tamale from at least 28 March until 26 April and also one was seen there on 6 May. Those in April were present with large numbers of Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus* which departed between 3 and 10 April; both species were in song. Singing Wood Warblers have been recorded on several occasions in March and April in well wooded areas of the Accra Plains and also along the edges of forest reserves north of the Plains. The earliest record for Accra is 29 November 1973.

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The Collared Turtle Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* in Egypt by Steven M. Goodman & Patrick F. Houlihan

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On 8 February 1979, while on a roof-top of a six-storey building at Talaat Harb Square in downtown Cairo, Egypt, we observed 3 Collared Turtle Doves *Streptopelia decaocto*. Two doves were perched approximately 4 m from one another on a wire, and were singing the characteristic tri-syllabic "coo-coooo-cuh" call. After several minutes of observation, a third bird



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