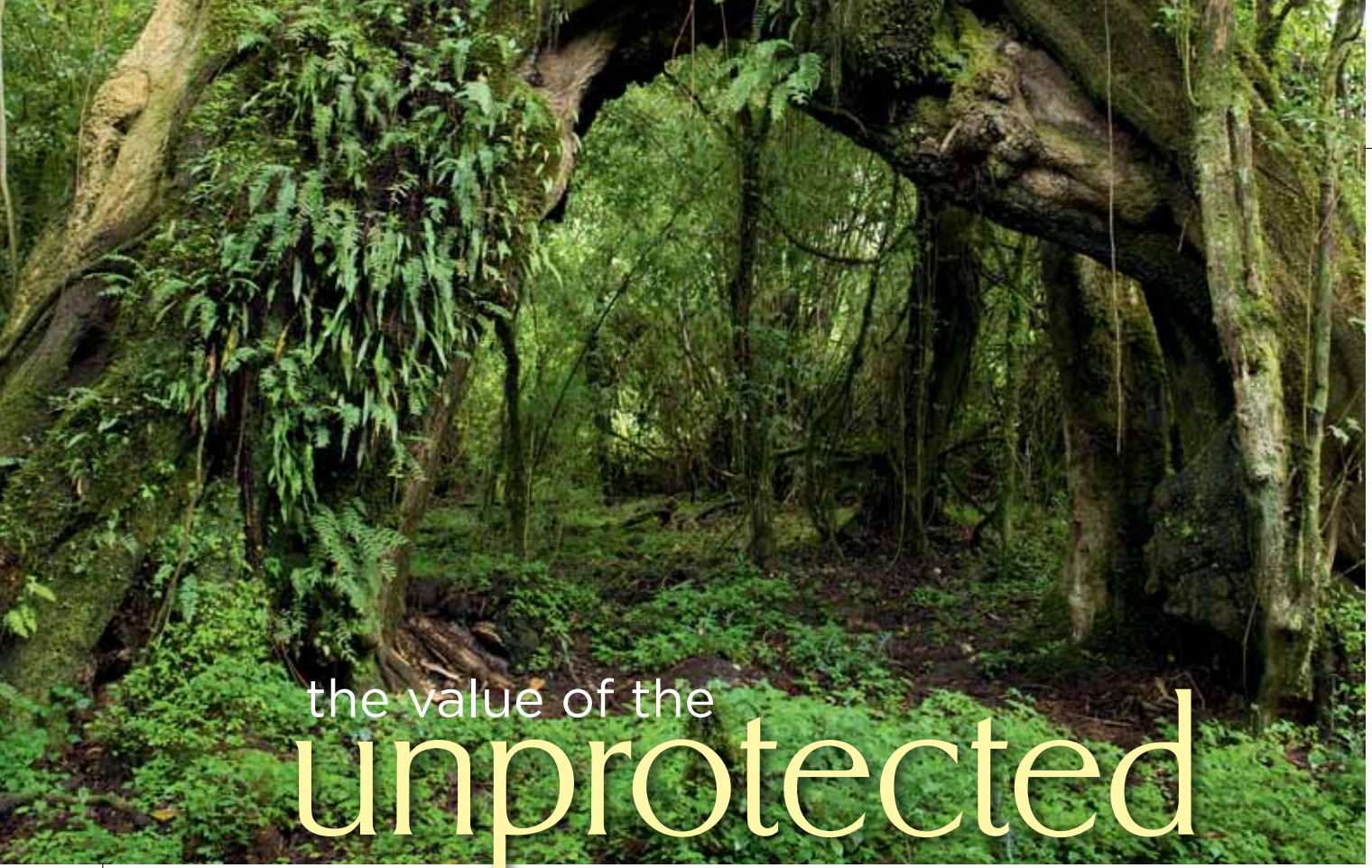

the value of the unprotected

ARIADNE VAN ZANDBERGEN

Bale's forest birds

The Bale Mountains of Ethiopia are legendary among birders and wildlife enthusiasts. Rising to a dizzying altitude of 4300 metres, the massif is home to iconic mammals such as the Ethiopian wolf and gelada baboon, while the Afromontane forests on the mountain slopes host specials including White-cheeked Turaco, Abyssinian Woodpecker, Abyssinian Catbird and Abyssinian Crimsonwing.

Forests globally are under severe pressure from human activities and those of the Bale Mountains are no exception. Recent research by a team of ornithologists from the University of Pretoria and Frankfurt Zoological Society focused on bird communities in the dry evergreen forests on the northern slopes of the Bale Mountains, examining the impacts of human disturbance on avian diversity and abundance. Addisu Asefa, an Ethiopian student whose MSc research was funded in part by the FitzPatrick Institute, conducted comprehensive bird surveys of six patches of juniper forest at an altitude of approximately 3000 metres.

Of the six forests in Addisu's study area, three are situated within the Bale Mountains National Park and as a consequence are protected and relatively free of human disturbance. The other three forests are outside the park and affected to varying degrees by logging, grazing and clearing for agriculture. This study system provided an opportunity to evaluate the differences between intact and disturbed forests in terms of bird diversity, abundance and community structure.

Somewhat unexpectedly, overall species richness was 27 per cent higher and bird abundance 19 per cent higher in the unprotected forests compared to those that were protected from disturbance. However, many of the species contributing to the diversity in the unprotected forests were generalist species or birds associated with shrubland, woodland or open habitats, mainly occurring along habitat edges. Forest specialists were more diverse and abundant in the protected forests, with significantly higher abundances for species such as Abyssinian Woodpecker, Yellow-fronted Parrot and White-fronted Black Tit.

In addition to providing new insights into the dynamics of forest-bird communities in a region of Africa that is generally poorly researched from an ornithological standpoint, Addisu's study has an important take-home message for the conservation of forest birds. While intact forests protected from human encroachment remain critical for the conservation of forest specialists whose evolutionary history is inextricably tied to these habitats, the conservation value of unprotected forests should not be underestimated. Although degraded and fragmented by logging, agriculture and other human activities, these forest patches remain important for maintaining avian diversity at a regional scale and provide important habitats for a diverse array of species.

ANDREW McKECHNIE

above *Research reveals that even disturbed forest patches are important for conserving avian diversity in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains.*

Reference

Asefa, A. et al. 2017. 'Effects of anthropogenic disturbance on bird diversity in Ethiopian montane forests.' *Condor* 119: 416–430.