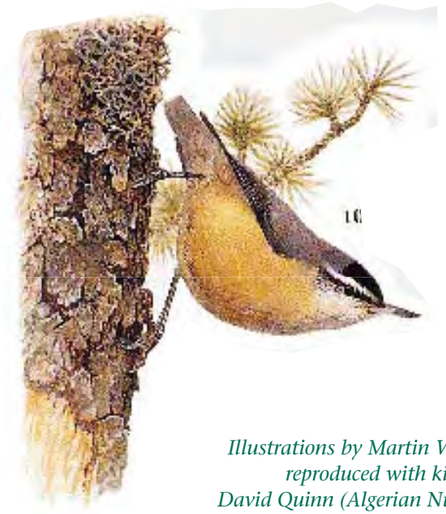


NEW BIRDS IN AFRICA

The last 50 years

Text by Phil Hockey

Illustrations by Martin Woodcock from Birds of Africa, *vols 3 and 4, reproduced with kind permission of Academic Press, and David Quinn (Algerian Nuthatch) reproduced from* Tits, Nuthatches & Treecreepers, *with kind permission of Russel Friedman Books.*

New birds are still being discovered in Africa and elsewhere, proof that one of the secret dreams of most birders can still be realized. This article deals specifically with African discoveries and excludes nearby Madagascar. African discoveries have ranged from the cedar forests of northern Algeria, site of the discovery of the Algerian Nuthatch (above), all the way south to the east coast of South Africa.

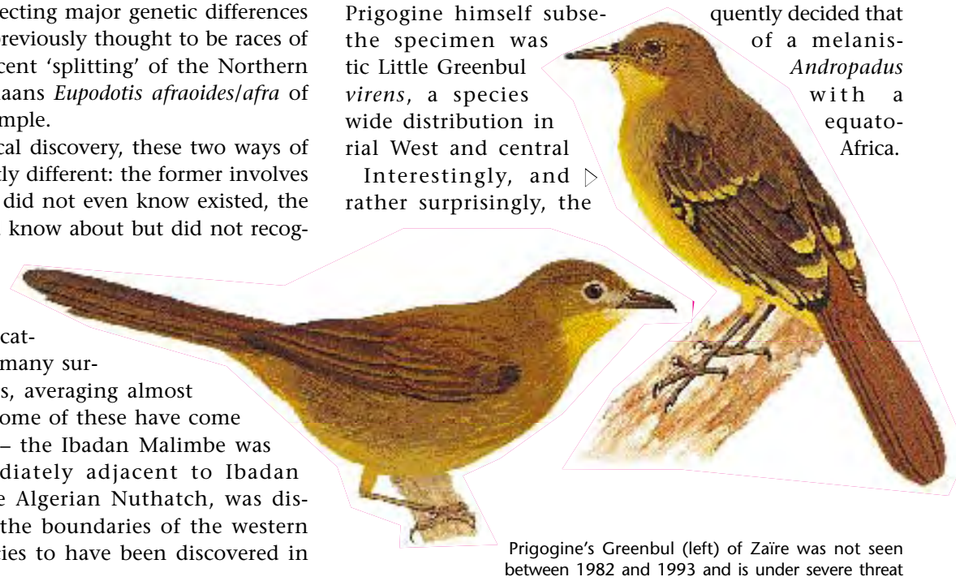
Some of the recent bird discoveries in Africa have come from explorations of poorly-known areas, such as the remote highland forests of eastern Zaïre. Other new species have been described by applying modern molecular techniques capable of detecting major genetic differences between birds that were previously thought to be races of the same species. The recent 'splitting' of the Northern and Southern black korhaans *Eupodotis afraoides/afra* of southern Africa is one example.

In terms of ornithological discovery, these two ways of describing species are subtly different: the former involves the discovery of birds we did not even know existed, the latter to birds that we did know about but did not recognize for what they were!

This article is concerned with 'exploratory discoveries', and, in this category, Africa has yielded many surprises in the last 50 years, averaging almost one new species a year. Some of these have come from unexpected places – the Ibadan Malimbe was found on lands immediately adjacent to Ibadan University! Another, the Algerian Nuthatch, was discovered in 1976 within the boundaries of the western Palearctic – the first species to have been discovered in this region since 1886.

Not all 'new' species that have been described have survived the depredations of sceptical taxonomists or, in one case, of their discoverer. In 1972, the late Dr Alexandre Prigogine described a new species of greenbul from Nyamupe in eastern Zaïre, which he named *Andropadus hallae*. The bird has never been seen or collected since and Prigogine himself subsequently decided that the specimen was of a melanistic Little Greenbul *Andropadus virens*, a species with a wide distribution in equatorial West and central Africa.

Interestingly, and rather surprisingly, the



Prigogine's Greenbul (left) of Zaïre was not seen between 1982 and 1993 and is under severe threat from forest destruction. The Liberian Bulbul (right) was described from a mummified specimen found near Zwedru, Liberia, in 1984. It is also under severe threat and has not been seen in recent years.

The Red Sea Cliff Swallow is known from a single specimen that died when it flew into a lighthouse in the Red Sea, off the coast of Sudan.

rate at which new species are being discovered in Africa has remained fairly constant. Between 1946 and 1955, 10 new species were described. The following three 10-year periods saw totals of seven, eight and 13 species respectively. Between 1986 and 1995, another eight new species came to light.

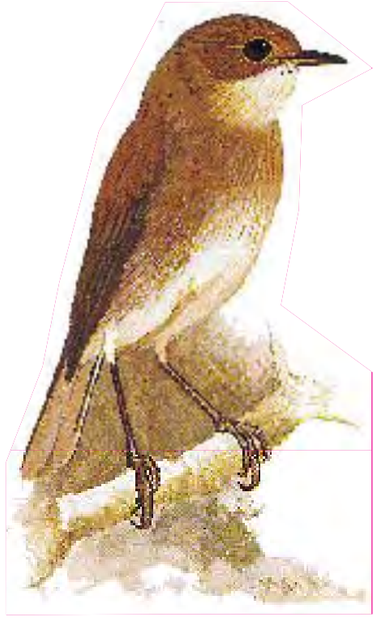
The geographical distribution of the 46 species described since 1946 is far from even. Ninety-three per cent of discoveries have been in the tropics, and 70 per cent of the total have been from within 10 degrees latitude of the Equator. The country that has contributed most to new discoveries has been Zaïre, with eight, followed by Liberia, Cameroon and Ethiopia, each with four. Somalia, Kenya, Uganda and Angola have each contributed three, Nigeria a further two, and another nine countries have contributed one species each. Most new birds have come from the east of the continent, with an impressive contribution of no fewer than six new species from in and around the Itombwe Mountain forests of eastern Zaïre.

Nearly all the new discoveries have been of resident, rather than migratory species, with two exceptions. The Mascarene Shearwater was described from a beached specimen collected in Durban, South Africa, but its breeding grounds almost certainly lie well to the north-east of here, possibly in the Comoro or Mascarene Islands. The discovery of the Red Sea Cliff Swallow was the result of a single bird flying into the Sanganeb Lighthouse, off the coast of Sudan in the Red Sea. To mark its misfortune, it was given the scientific name *Hirundo perdita*, the 'lost swallow'. Some similar-looking cliff swallows have been seen subsequently in Ethiopia, but these have rufous, not grey, rumps and are thought to belong to another (undescribed) species; the lighthouse casualty remains the only record of the presumably migratory Red Sea Cliff Swallow.

Among the resident birds, forest-dwelling species have figured prominently, comprising 61 per cent of the total. Some of these are very poorly known indeed – Prigogine's Nightjar and the Kibale Ground Thrush, for example, have not been seen since the original specimens were collected. The one and only specimen of Congo Bay Owl was collected in the Itombwe Mountains of Zaïre in 1951. Apart from a possible sight record from Burundi in the 1970s and a record of an unknown owl call in Rwanda in early 1990, this species was not recorded again for 45 years. It was 'rediscovered', and one female was caught, ringed and released, in the Itombwe Mountains in May 1996. In contrast to these, some recently discovered species are locally quite common. These include the White-throated Mountain Babbler of highland Cameroon, the Gola Malimbe and the Udzungwa Forest Partridge – although the partridge may already be threatened by specimen collecting.

Surely, however, one of the most bizarre tales of recent discovery must be that of the Bulo Burti Boubou from Somalia. This bird was first observed in the grounds of a hospital at Bulo Burti on the Shabeelle River, Somalia, in August 1988. On 5 January it was caught in a mist-net and taken into captivity. It was subsequently transported to Germany when the person caring for the captive ▷

The Sokoke Scops Owl (above right) is locally common in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest of coastal Kenya and may occur elsewhere. The Congo Bay Owl (left), by contrast, remained undetected from the time it was discovered in 1951 until May 1996.



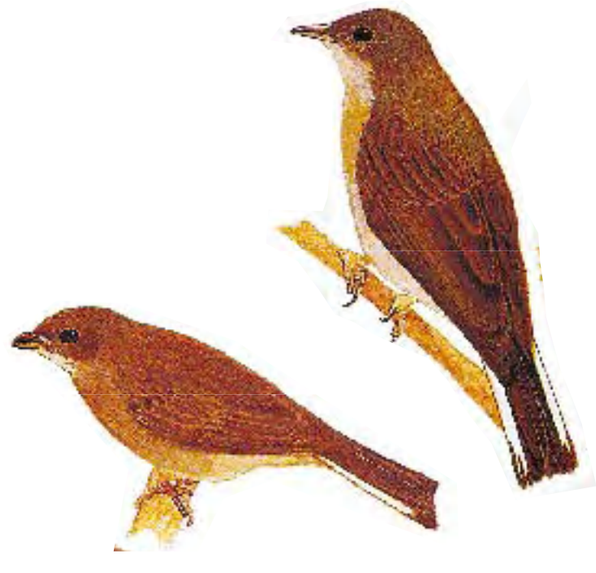
The Gabela Akalat (above) and the White-headed Robin-Chat (above right) were described from Angola within two years of one another. The robin-chat has a fairly wide distribution, extending into western Zaïre, but the akalat is restricted to relict forest patches on the western Angolan escarpment and is threatened with extinction.

bird was evacuated because of civil unrest. More than a year later, in March 1990, the bird was returned to Somalia, and was released back into the wild on 23 March in the Baclad Nature Reserve: neither it, nor any other Bulo Burti Boubou, has been seen since. The boubou made additional ornithological history in being the first instance in which a bird species has been described with DNA and a few feathers as the type material.

The tendency for birds to evolve into new species is greatest when populations become isolated from one another. Island populations are classic examples: the majority of the world's highly range-restricted species are found on islands. Worthy of note here is that the majority of species which have become extinct in the last 400 years were island species.

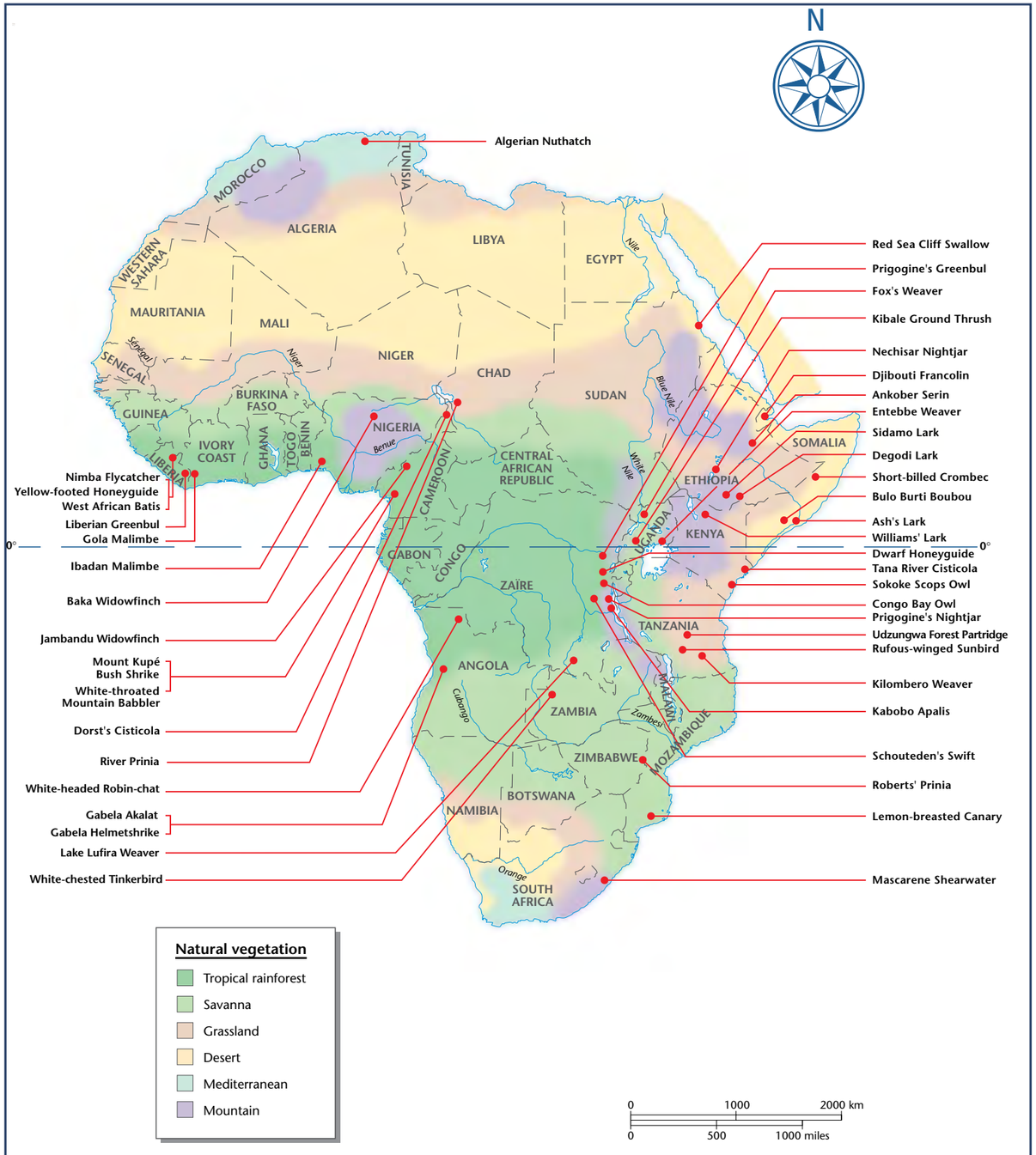
One could therefore predict that highly range-restricted species on the mainland will be found in situations which are analogues of islands, such as forested mountain peaks and isolated wetlands. The new birds of the last 50 years support this conclusion – two or more new birds have been found on Mount Nimba in Liberia, Mount Kupé in Cameroon, the Itombwe Mountains of eastern Zaïre and the Udzungwa Mountains of southern Tanzania. Intensive searching (or a bit of luck!) in the highlands of Ethiopia is also likely to produce at least one or two new species. A swamp adjoining the Kilombero River in Tanzania is a good example of an 'island' wetland. The site of the discovery of the Kilombero Weaver as recently as 1990, this swamp is geographically isolated and is unusual in that even though it is more than 300 kilometres from the coast, it lies at an altitude of only 250 metres above sea level. The same swamp is thought to contain two new, but as yet undescribed, species of cisticola.

It is probably a reasonable assumption that new species found in the future (by exploration rather than in the laboratory) will be highly range-restricted. A glance at the map of recent discoveries indicates a startling lack of new birds from the forested regions of the Congo Basin, even though this area is flanked by new species on three sides. In 1976, Leon Lippens and Henri Wille (*Les Oiseaux de Zaïre*) wrote 'we are convinced that new species of birds still remain to be discovered in Zaïre'. Right they were: ▷



It is quite likely that there are still new honeyguides to be described from Africa. The Dwarf Honeyguide (above) of Zaïre and the Yellow-footed Honeyguide (right) of Liberia have both been discovered in the last 40 years.

Sites of new bird discoveries 1946–1995



CHRONOLOGY OF BIRD DISCOVERIES IN AFRICA 1946–1995

The dates refer to the years in which the species were described to science, not to the years in which they were first found or collected.

1946 Roberts' Prinia *Prinia robertsi*, Zimbabwe
1947 Fox's Weaver *Ploceus spekeoides*, Uganda
1949 White-throated Mountain Babbler *Kupeornis gilberti*, Cameroon
1951 Mount Kupé Bush Shrike *Telephorus kupeensis*, Cameroon
1952 Djibouti Francolin *Francolinus ochropectus*, Djibouti
Congo Bay Owl *Phodilus prigoginei*, Zaïre
1955 Kabobo Apalis *Apalis kaboboensis*, Zaïre
Short-billed Crombec *Sylvietta philippae*, Somalia
White-headed Robin-Chat *Cossypha heinrichi*, Angola
1956 Williams' Lark *Mirafra williamsi*, Kenya
1957 Angola Helmetshrike *Prionops gabela*, Angola
Gabela Akalat *Sheppardia gabela*, Angola
1958 Dwarf Honeyguide *Indicator pumilio*, Zaïre
Ibadan Malimbe *Malimbus ibadanensis*, Nigeria
1960 Lemon-breasted Canary *Serinus citrinipectus*, Mozambique
Schouteden's Swift *Schoutedenapus schoutedenapus*, Zaïre
1965 White-chested Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus makawai*, Zambia
1966 Sokoke Scops Owl *Otus ireneae*, Kenya
1967 Prigogine's Greenbul *Chlorocichla prigoginei*, Zaïre
Tana River Cisticola *Cisticola restrictus*, Kenya
1970 Nimba Flycatcher *Melaenornis annamarulae*, Liberia
1974 River Prinia *Prinia fluviatilis*, Chad
Gola Malimbe *Malimbus ballmani*, Ivory Coast
1975 Sidamo Lark *Mirafra sidamoensis*, Ethiopia
Degodi Lark *Mirafra degodiensis*, Ethiopia
1976 Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti*, Algeria
1978 Kibale Ground Thrush *Zoothera kibalensis*, Uganda
1979 Ankober Serin *Serinus ankoberensis*, Ethiopia
1981 Yellow-footed Honeyguide *Melignomon eisentrauti*, Liberia
1982 Ash's Lark *Mirafra ashi*, Somalia
Lake Lufira Weaver *Ploceus ruweti*, Zaïre
Jambandu Widowfinch *Vidua raricola*, Cameroon
Baka Widowfinch *Vidua larvaticola*, Nigeria
1983 Albertine Owlet *Glaucidium albertinum*, Zaïre
Rufous-winged Sunbird *Nectarinia rufipennis*, Tanzania
1984 West African Batis *Batis occulta*, Liberia
1985 Red Sea Cliff Swallow *Hirundo perdita*, Sudan
Liberian Greenbul *Phyllastrephus leucolepis*, Liberia
1986 Entebbe Weaver *Ploceus victoriae*, Uganda
1990 Prigogine's Nightjar *Caprimulgus prigoginei*, Zaïre
Kilombero Weaver *Ploceus burnieri*, Tanzania
1991 Dorst's Cisticola *Cisticola dorsti*, Cameroon
Udzungwa Forest Partridge *Xenoperdix udzungwensis*, Tanzania
Bulo Burti Boubou *Laniarius liberatus*, Somalia
1995 Mascarene Shearwater *Puffinus atrodorsalis*, South Africa
Nechisar Nightjar *Caprimulgus solala*, Ethiopia

The White-chested Tinkerbird is an enigma among recent discoveries. It was found in the Mayau region of Zambia and is still known to science only from the type specimen. Repeated searches have failed to find any trace of the bird, even though the habitat in which it was caught is widespread.

another three species have been discovered there subsequently and their statement probably still holds true. They identify the Wamba Forest in Bandundu Province to the east of the Kwango River as one site that may still have ornithological secrets to reveal. Other potential 'mainland islands' include the Bongo Massif in the north-east of the Central African Republic, as well as nearby mountains on the south-western border of Sudan.

In 1955 and 1957, three new species were described from Angola but, in recent years, very few birders have visited the region. Two new species were described from Gabela in the same year and one wonders what might exist undiscovered on the mountains to the south-east of here, north-west of Huambo. These mountains, rising to 2 600 metres, are considerably higher than any others within a radius of more than 1 500 kilometres. Apart from the post-1946 discoveries in Angola, there are some other highly range-restricted species found here in escarpment forests, including Pulitzer's Longbill *Macrosphenus pulitzeri*, which has not been seen for many years, and the Gabela Bush Shrike *Laniarius amboimensis* which was seen in 1992 for the first time since 1960.

Further to the east, recent discoveries in the Udzungwa Mountains of southern Tanzania raise the likelihood of undescribed species still to be found in the hills of northern Mozambique, between the Zambezi and Ruvuma Rivers. There are some definite ornithological affinities between the two areas. For example, the Long-billed Tailorbird *Orthotomus moreaui* is known only from the eastern Usambara Mountains in Tanzania and from the Njesi Plateau in northern Mozambique. There has only been one recent record of the species in Tanzania; this was in 1992, after several previous attempts to locate the bird had failed. The Njesi Plateau has not been visited since 1945.

Further south in Mozambique, Mount Gorongosa is another good example of a mainland 'island'. It supports the only known population of Green-headed Oriole *Oriolus chlorocephalus* in southern Africa, as well as an endemic subspecies of Greater Double-collared Sunbird *Nectarinia afra amicorum*. The nearest populations of Greater ▷

Double-collared Sunbird are in the Soutpansberg, South Africa, and on the Nyika Plateau in northern Malawi. Genetic work may yet reveal the Gorongosa population to be specifically distinct. Although I think Gorongosa is probably sufficiently well known that it is unlikely that new species will be discovered there in future, the same cannot be said of northern Mozambique: here, surely, new birds await the pioneering ornithologist.

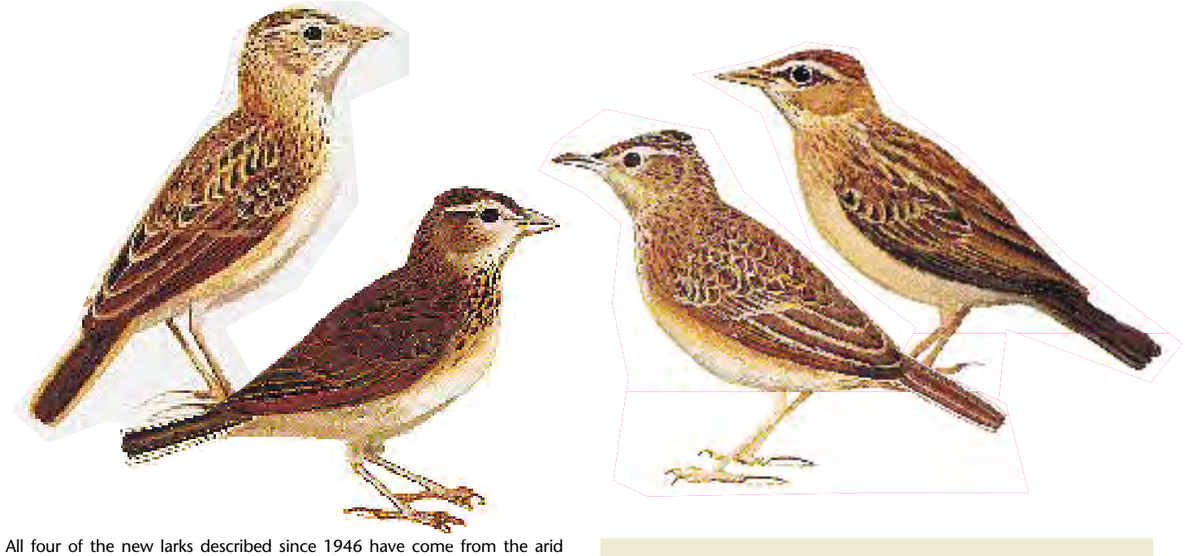
There are several 'new' birds that have seen sighted in Africa in recent years but as yet remain undescribed to science. An undescribed *Sheppardia* robin has been seen in the lowland forests of eastern Zaïre, to the north of the Virungu Mountains. Around Iranga, also in eastern Zaïre, there have been several recent sightings of an undescribed large spinetail and, further east, above the Kazinga Channel in south-western Uganda, there have been reports of rockfowl (*Picathartes*). The latter are so far from the rockfowl populations of West Africa that they may well be an unknown species. A small oxpecker has been seen in association with buffaloes in the Tai Forest of the western Ivory Coast: if this was a new species, it may already have become extinct, along with its buffalo hosts.

In October 1958, a thrush-sized bird with a bright red bill and reddish tail was seen briefly on Mount Wogra in north-western Somalia. Even given the scanty views, the observer was confident that what he saw did not tally with any known species. More recently (October 1984), a pair of small weavers was seen at Beyla in north-eastern Guinea. Although the male superficially resembled a male Slender-billed Weaver *Ploceus luteolus*, it is thought that this too is an undescribed species.

Based on the recent track record, it is going to be many years before Africa's avifauna is fully known – there are still plenty of areas sufficiently remote or unvisited that will undoubtedly yield new species to science. There may even be one in the semi-arid regions of South Africa, which, ornithologically, is one of the best-known countries on the continent. Over the last eight years there have been at least five independent sightings of a canary that resembles no other known in the region, or indeed in Africa. It most closely resembles either African Citril *Serinus citrinelloides* or Black-faced Canary *Serinus capistratus*, but occurs in completely different habitat to either of these two. If a new bird can be found in the western Palearctic in the 1970s, surely anything is possible on the dark continent! □

If this article has inspired any readers to set off for remote corners of Africa in the hope of discovering new species, remember that before a new bird can be described to science, a specimen is required (the Bulo Burti Boubou being the only exception to date). It is also worth considering that because new species are likely to be highly range-restricted and rare, the old adage of 'what's hit is history and what's missed is mystery' might bear some re-examination.

There is a strong case to be made, supported by recent history, that some attempt should be made to assess the population status of the 'new' species before any specimens are collected to satisfy taxonomic curiosity. Whichever route is to be followed, locating the bird is the first step in the process. Always expect the unexpected; but when it happens, make sure that you take down as detailed a description as you possibly can and inform conservation agencies, such as BirdLife International, about what you have found.



All four of the new larks described since 1946 have come from the arid north-east – namely (from left to right) Sidamo, Williams', Ash's, and Degodi. More new species await formal description from the arid south-west of Africa.

The author is grateful to Gary Allport, Nigel Collar and Lincoln Fishpool of BirdLife International for their input into this article.