

## A NEW BATIS IN EAST AFRICA

A key advantage of the Fitzpatrick Institute being recognised as a Centre of Excellence by the Department of Science and Technology (see August/September 2004, page 12) is that the Centre can have collaborators based at other institutions. One of these is Rauri Bowie, a graduate of the Fitz who, after four years at Stellenbosch University, has been lured away by the University of California, Berkeley, to head up a research programme on bird systematics at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology.

Throughout these moves, Rauri has remained part of the Centre of Excellence, obtaining research funding through the Centre.

One of Rauri's long-standing interests has been unravelling the evolutionary histories of montane-forest birds in East Africa, and he has collaborated closely in this research with Jon Fjeldså from the University of Copenhagen. Together with Jacob Kiure from Tanzania, they have examined the relationships among forest batisses. The results, published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Ornithology*, provide an objective assessment of this complex group of birds, and recommend the recognition of a new species in the Forest Batis *Batis mixta* complex. The paper also sheds light on the status of some distinctive forms of Cape Batis *B. capensis*, as well as Reichenow's Batis *B. reichenowi* from south-east Tanzania. This latter



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**Left: Male and female of the newly described Dark Batis *Batis crypta*. Right: Male and female Short-tailed Batis *Batis mixta*.**

taxon has had a chequered history, being recognised as a distinct species or placed in either Cape or Forest Batis by different authors.

Batisses are an exclusively African group of insectivores related to the bush-shrikes and characterised by their small size and marked sexual dimorphism in plumage. Like many montane-forest species, they exhibit regional variation between isolated mountain chains. Over the years, this has led to confusion as to how many species should be recognised. In central and East Africa, the forest forms have traditionally been divided into the Forest Batis, found in the Eastern Arc Mountains of Tanzania and coastal Kenya, and the Cape Batis of southern Africa, which is often taken to include the Malawi Batis *B. [c.] dimorpha* from Malawi and northern Mozambique.

The most surprising result was that the Forest Batis is

divided into two quite distinct species, which differ consistently in terms of their genetics and morphology. Birds from the southern mountains in the Eastern Arc (including the Udzungwa, Uluguru, Ukaguru, Kipengere and Rubeho mountains in Tanzania, and Misuku Hills in extreme northern Malawi) form a tight group that differs from birds from the northern mountains (Nguru, Nguu, Usambaras, Pares, Kilimanjaro) and coastal regions. The latter group includes the south-western Reichenow's Batis, which until now had been assumed to form part of the Cape Batis complex. There was some evidence that the two species are not even each other's closest relatives, with the Albertine Rift-endemic Ruwenzori Batis *B. diops* placing closer to the northern form of Forest Batis.

In terms of plumage differences, the southern birds are on average longer tailed and have darker plumage.

Compared to the northern species, southern males have broader black breast bands, blackish spots on the back and lack any white on the frons between the black facial mask and dark grey crown. Southern females are also generally darker, with a reduced supercilium and narrower chestnut wing panel. Because the southern species had been overlooked even at the subspecies level, it has been named *Batis crypta*. Jon Fjeldså suggests the common name Dark Batis. To avoid confusion with the old definition of Forest Batis, he advocates the use of Short-tailed Batis for the newly-restricted definition of *B. mixta*. Reichenow's Batis should be regarded as a subspecies of *mixta*.

What about the status of Malawi Batis? The genetic evidence confirms that it is sister to the Cape Batis, but birds from South Africa and Malawi have not shared a common ancestor for a considerable period. It would be nice to see how birds from eastern Zimbabwe and central Mozambique fit into the picture, but given the marked difference in male plumage between the two forms, it is perhaps prudent to treat Malawi Batis as a distinct species too. □

#### REFERENCE

Fjeldså, J., Bowie, R.C.K. and Kiure, J. (2006). The Forest Batis, *Batis mixta*, is two species: description of a new, narrowly distributed *Batis* species in the Eastern Arc biodiversity hotspot. *Journal of Ornithology*. 147: 578-590.

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