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The birds of the Parcours Vita, Yaoundé, Cameroon

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Summary

Over a period of 21 months in 1993–5, 163 species of birds were recorded on the site of an exercise circuit in the northern suburbs of the Cameroonian capital, Yaoundé. Breeding evidence was obtained for 37 species, including first record of Vieillot's Barbet *Lybius vieilloti* breeding in Yaoundé region. Occurrence of three savanna species previously unrecorded near Yaoundé seems to be part of a continuing trend, possibly caused by forest destruction by man.

Résumé

Pendant une période de 21 mois entre 1993 et 1995, nous avons enregistré la présence de 163 espèces d'oiseaux le long d'un parcours de santé dans une banlieue nord de la capitale Camerounaise, Yaoundé. Parmi 37 espèces nicheuses, nous avons réalisé la première observation de nidification du Barbican de Vieillot *Lybius vieilloti* pour la région. La présence de trois espèces de savanne qui n'avaient jamais été enregistrées auparavant proche de Yaoundé semble confirmer une tendance liée à une destruction par l'homme de la couverture forestière

Background

In this article we record our observations of the avifauna of the Parcours Vita, a public exercise circuit created by the Cameroonian Presidency in the late 1980s in the northern suburbs of Yaoundé. The 2.5 km track encircles a site of c. 50 ha on the lower slopes of Mont Fébé, at an altitude of c. 800 m. The topography is characterised by steeply sloping wooded valleys, opening into flatter areas at the southern end. Several springs at various points around the site feed a stream at the bottom of the main valley, creating marshy conditions.

The vegetation is characteristic of the Yaoundé area, which lies within the forest zone at c. 4°N and 11°E. The original semi-deciduous forest has been heavily

modified by several decades of human activity, but a few mature forest trees remain. Beneath their canopy old cocoa plantations and mature fruit trees such as mango *Mangifera indica*, bush plum *Dacryodes edulis* and avocado *Persea americana* are evidence of long-standing human activity. Abandoned cultivated areas have been taken over by dense scrub particularly *Eupatorium odoratum*. Umbrella Trees *Musanga cecropoides* well known as vigorous colonisers of cleared forest areas, abound. Much of the site is occupied by squatter farmers who grow maize, cassava, coco-yams and other crops on a rotational basis. The clearance process is continuing, progressively transforming the vegetation from forest to derived savanna.

Yaoundé has a tropical climate with little temperature variation between the hottest month (March: average temperature 25.6°C) and the coolest (August: 22.8°C). Annual rainfall is c. 1700 mm, distributed throughout the year, though with marked dry seasons from the end of November to mid-March and again in July–August.

The paved training circuit around the site is intensively used by sports clubs, fitness groups and individuals, particularly in the early mornings and at weekends (up to 1000 people at once on Saturday mornings). The site is bounded on the west by the Yaoundé Golf Club, on the east by a fairly busy road and to the north by the grounds of the Mont Fébé Hotel. Notwithstanding this high level of human activity, the site is rich in bird life: its accessibility and the ease with which birds can be observed from the paved track make it a rewarding birding site.

Method

Between June 1993 and March 1995 we visited the site weekly when possible. Each visit was made in the afternoon and lasted 2.5–3 h, ending at dusk. In all we made 70 visits. On each occasion, we walked around the full circuit, recording the species and numbers of birds present, although small canopy-dwelling and skulking birds without easily recognisable calls are probably under-recorded.

Results

Appendix 1 shows the maximum number of each species recorded on any one occasion in each month, and the total number of occasions on which each species was recorded. Where more than 15 individuals of a species were present, we simply recorded them as “Abundant”. In the final column of the table we have recorded any evidence of breeding and the month in which it was noted.

We recorded 163 species. This is not a comprehensive list of birds which may be seen on the Parcours: at Appendix 2 are lists of species which others have told us they have recently recorded on the site even though we did not see them in the course of our survey; and species which have been seen, either by us or by others, elsewhere in

the Mont Fébé area although not, to our knowledge, within the confines of the study site.

Only seven species (Speckled Mousebird, Pied Crow, Common Bulbul, Blue Flycatcher, Yellow-fronted Canary, Village Weaver and Vieillot's Black Weaver: see Appendix 1 for Latin names) were recorded on every occasion. Several other species which we failed to record on only a few occasions (e.g. Golden-rumped Tinker Bird, Red-billed Wood-dove, Little Greenbul) were almost certainly permanently present. Bronze and Red-backed Mannikins, both common species, were normally present in groups of 20–30, but in February and March 1994 we failed to record a single individual of either species, which meant that they had almost certainly moved elsewhere during that period. They were however present, though in reduced numbers, during the corresponding period in 1995.

Fotso (1994) lists some 350 species recorded in the Yaoundé region between 1987 and 1992, and refers to some 30 other species previously recorded but which he did not see. From these records, it would appear that the following species from our list are new for Yaoundé: Plain Nightjar, Cassin's Honeyguide, Black-throated Apalis, Western Black Flycatcher, Red-billed Quelea, Blue-billed Firefinch. The first three of these are forest species, known from other locations in southern Cameroon, and would be expected near Yaoundé. The latter three, on the other hand, are savanna species whose appearances in Yaoundé represent range extensions. Their occurrence continues the trend noted by Fotso, who between 1987 and 1992 recorded 26 savanna species new to the Yaoundé area (and only 13 savanna species that had been recorded previously in the area) — a trend he thought perhaps related to the changing habitat of the region as population pressure leads to the destruction of the forest cover. This could also explain why we found the Black-crowned Waxbill considerably more common than the very similar Black-headed Waxbill (as it is in the Yaoundé area generally), whereas in most of the forest area to the south of Yaoundé the Black-headed Waxbill predominates.

Breeding Activity

We recorded breeding activity in the Village and Vieillot's Black Weavers (which appeared to breed all year round) and in 35 other species as detailed in Appendix 1. In addition, the occurrence of immature birds of the following species indicated recent breeding, though we could not say that it had taken place in the study area: Gymnogene, Red-necked Buzzard, Black Kite, Black Sparrowhawk, Speckled Mousebird, Senegal Kingfisher, Black-crowned Waxbill, Common Waxbill, Orange-checked Waxbill, Bronze Mannikin, Red-backed Mannikin.

Klaas's Cuckoo. One young fed by female Vieillot's Weaver, Nov.

Vieillot's Barbet. On 27 Dec 1993, a pair was seen investigating possible nesting holes in a large mature tree. In March 1994, a pair, possibly the same one, took up

residence in a hole c. 5–6 m above ground in a dead secondary trunk of a smaller tree, c. 100 m from where the first pair was observed. On 12 Apr 1994 an adult was seen carrying food into the hole and on 26 Apr both adults were seen to carry fruit into it. On 17 May a fledged juvenile was sitting on the branch outside the hole and a second was inside looking out. On 31 May two adults and two fledged juveniles were seen in a group in a tree nearby. On 1 Jan 1995, two further juveniles were seen entering and leaving the same nest hole. Five individuals — the two juveniles and 3 adults — were seen on that occasion. On 9 Feb 1995, 6 birds, including two juveniles, were in the vicinity. Although Vieillot's Barbets have been recorded previously in the Yaoundé area, these appear to be the first breeding records.

Black-headed Batis. On 11 Jan 1994, a pair was seen building a nest among the outer branches of a bare tree, some 15 m from the ground. On 25 Jan and 1 Feb, the female was sitting on the nest, apparently incubating, and being fed by the male. But on 8 Feb there was no sign of the nest. It may have been attacked by Pied Crows which frequented nearby trees. A male was observed near the site on 5 Apr 1994.



Figure 1. Yellow-chinned Sunbird *Anthreptes rectirostris* and nest.

Yellow-chinned Sunbird. On 6 Dec 1994, a Tit-hylia was observed flying from a nest c.1.5 m above the ground in a tangle of dead vegetation hanging from a liana. The nest contained a single egg. However, the Tit-hylia's presence was probably coincidental as on 11 and 16 Dec the nest was occupied by a female Yellow-chinned Sunbird, apparently incubating (see Fig. 1). On 1 Jan 1995, there were two nestlings in the nest, being fed by both parents at intervals of c. 5 mins. On 10 Jan the nest was abandoned and there was no sign of either the parent birds or their young.

Migration

The occurrences of both Palearctic and intra-African migrants were typical for the region (see Appendix 1), but there was a curious difference between the occurrences of the Red-headed Quelea (recorded on nine occasions between July and October) and the Red-billed Quelea (three sightings between December and February). Both species congregate in huge flocks during the grain harvest time in northern Cameroon (September to December) but disperse in smaller groups at other times of the year. The pattern we recorded suggests that while the Red-headed Queleas move south during the rainy season in the North, the Red-billed Queleas do so during the dry months immediately after the northern harvest, although southward "early-rains" migrations would be expected in June–July (Ward 1971).

A number of other species not normally regarded as migratory were recorded solely or principally in the main dry season between November and March: Black Sparrowhawk, Yellow-throated Tinkerbird, Black-crowned Tchagra, Green-backed Eremomela, Ash-blue Flycatcher, Black-headed Batis, Magpie Mannikin. This seasonal occurrence pattern is presumably indicative of some sort of local migration.

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Species	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Tot	Breed
Muscicapidae														
<i>Melaenornis edolioides</i>	4	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1		2	2	26	
Western Black Flycatcher														
<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1	1										2	
Pied Flycatcher														
<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	3	2	2	2						2	2	3	32	
Spotted Flycatcher														
<i>M. epulata</i>	2	1	1		1	1	1	1	2	2	4	2	30	
Little Grey Flycatcher														
<i>M. caerulescens</i>	1	2											1	3
Ashy Flycatcher														
<i>M. comitata</i>											1	1	3	
Dusky Blue Flycatcher														
<i>M. infuscata</i> Sooty Flycatcher	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	1				16	
<i>Myioparus plumbeus</i>									1				1	2
Lead-coloured Flycatcher														
Platysteiridae														
<i>Bias musicus</i>			1	1	2	2	2		2	2	1	2	11	
Black and White Flycatcher														
<i>Batis minor</i>	2	2		1									6	N1;B2
Black-headed Batis														
<i>Dyaphorophya castanea</i>						1							1	2
Chestnut Wattle-eye														
<i>Platysteira cyanea</i>	6	6	10	7	6	3	8	6	3	8	6	5	69	Y7;Y8;
Scarlet-spectacled Wattle-eye														Y1
Monarchidae														
<i>Erythrocerus mcalli</i>				1		2							2	
Chestnut-capped Flycatcher														
<i>Elminia longicauda</i>	7	6	10	7	6	3	8	7	5	6	7	8	70	Y7;Y10
Blue Flycatcher														
<i>Tersiphone viridis</i>	2	5	4	4	5	2	3	3	2	3	2	2	50	
Paradise Flycatcher														
Remizidae														
<i>Anthoscopus flavifrons</i>			1	1									2	
Yellow-fronted Penduline Tit														
<i>Pholidornis rufiae</i>						4	2	3		2	2	1	8	Y5;N11;
Tit-Hylia														B12
Nectariniidae														
<i>Anthreptes rectirostris</i>	4	1										2	4	CC12-1
Yellow-chinned Sunbird														
<i>A. collaris</i> Collared Sunbird	3	2	3	3	4	1	3	2	3		5	1	37	Y11

Species	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Tot	Breed
<i>E. astrild</i> Common Waxbill	4	1	3	A	4	A	1	A	8	3		2	29	
<i>E. nonmala</i>	A	10	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	65	
Black-crowned Waxbill														
<i>E. atricapilla</i>		8						2					3	
Black-headed Waxbill														
<i>Lonchura cucullata</i>	A	A	8	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	63	
Bronze Mannikin														
<i>L. bicolor</i>	8	6	5	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	58	
Red-backed Mannikin														
<i>L. fringilloides</i>	6	5											4	
Magpie Mannikin														
Viduidae														
<i>Vidua macroura</i>	A				7	3	7	9	10	3	2	3	31	
Pin-tailed Widow														
Fringillidae														
<i>Serinus mozambicus</i>	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	70	Y8;N8;
Yellow-fronted Canary														Y11

Appendix 2

Other species which have been recorded from the Parcours Vita, but which were not observed during the current project.

- Ciconia abdimii* Abdim's Stork
- Strix woodfordii* Wood Owl
- Trachyphonus purpuratus* Yellow-billed Barbet
- Jynx torquilla* European Wryneck
- Hirundo fuliginosa* Forest Swallow
- Sylvietta denti* Lemon-bellied Crombec
- Nectarinia preussi* Northern Double-collared Sunbird
- Nectarinia coccinigaster* Splendid Sunbird
- Oriolus nigripennis* Black-winged Oriole

Species recorded elsewhere on Mont Fébé but not yet on the Parcours Vita.

- Melierax gabar* Gabar Goshawk
- Treron waalia* Bruce's Green Pigeon
- Buccanodon duchaillui* Yellow-spotted Barbet
- Andropadus latirostris* Yellow-whiskered Greenbul
- Baeopogon indicator* Honeyguide Bulbul
- Terpsiphone rufocinerea* Rufous-vented Paradise Flycatcher
- Oriolus brachyrhynchus* Western Black-headed Oriole
- Malimbus rubricollis* Red-headed Malimbe