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Short Notes

Is the Thick-billed Cuckoo *Pachycoccyx audeberti* a forest dependent species in West Africa?

The Thick-billed Cuckoo is a rare or sparsely distributed bird of moist woodland, with a wide range covering much of the Afrotropical region (Fry *et al.* 1988). Its habits of calling frequently and of making long, high flights at certain times of year make it a fairly obvious species, so this status assessment is probably accurate.

The Thick-billed Cuckoo is a known brood parasite but the only confirmed host is Retz's Helmet-Shrike *Prionops retzii* (Fry *et al.* 1988). Several other species of helmet-shrike occur in the eastern and southern part of the cuckoo's range. The Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrike *P. scopifrons* is suspected to be a host in East African coastal forests, where it is more common than Retz's Helmet Shrike (Short & Horne 1985, pers. obs.). Other members of the genus *Prionops* may be parasitised, but the White helmet-Shrike *P. plumatus* is ignored as a host (Vernon 1984).

The western subspecies of Thick-billed Cuckoo *P. a. brazzae* occurs throughout W Africa from Zaire to Guinea. It is generally an uncommon bird, being patchily distributed in savanna woodland, gallery and forest edge habitats. The only potential hosts in this region are the Red-billed *P. caniceps* and White Helmet-Shrikes. Since the latter is ignored elsewhere, Colston & Curry-Lindahl (1986) concluded that the cuckoo solely parasitises the former species in this region, stating that it is "..limited by the distribution of its host species". The Red-billed Helmet-Shrike is a bird of closed canopy and gallery forest (Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1973) but has occasionally been recorded in cocoa plantations on the periphery of forested areas (Allport *et al.* 1989). Thus, although the cuckoo is frequently recorded outside forest and is rarely seen within it, it must, nevertheless, be forest dependent as a breeding bird in W Africa.

The Thick-billed Cuckoo was listed as a "Candidate" for inclusion in the African bird Red Data Book (Collar & Stuart 1985) but there was insufficient evidence of threats for the species as a whole to be considered at risk (N.J. Collar pers. comm.). This is a justifiable assessment since its wide range in south and east Africa must guarantee its continued survival. The situation in west Africa, however, gives cause for greater concern. The loss of forest in the Upper Guinea area over the last twenty years has been alarmingly rapid and widespread (Sayer *et al.* 1992), fragmenting the once intact regional populations of forest fauna and flora. Commoner species, which occur at higher densities, such as the Red-billed Helmet-Shrike, are likely to withstand the effects of this reduction of their ranges, but rarer animals, such as the Thick-billed Cuckoo, could now have been reduced to populations which are no longer viable, and consequently risk local extinction.

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A note on the diet of Barn Owls *Tyto alba* at Djoudj, Senegal

A small batch, 155g, of Barn Owl pellets was collected from the car park at "P.C." (Parc Campement), Parc National des Oiseaux de Djoudj, Senegal (*c.* 16°20'N, 16°20'W) on 18 and 23 March 1992. The identity of the predators is certain, as they were visible roosting in the trees there. Skulls and jaws were extracted from each pellet, working "dry", and are presented in Table 1 as Minimum Numbers of Individuals (MNI), that is the highest number in any one category (skulls, left dentaries, right dentaries) needed to explain the total contents of the batch.

Rodent remains were initially identified by reference to Rosevear (1969), and the identities later checked against reference collections in the Mammal Section, British Museum (Natural History). However, the taxonomy of many African rodents is unstable, and there is little correspondence (or cross-reference) between Rosevear (1969) and the recent checklists for Senegal (Hubert *et al.* 1973, Duplantier & Granjon 1992). I have attempted to reconcile these. The identity of non-rodent prey is discussed later.