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More bird records from Rio del Rey estuary, Cameroon

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Summary

Twenty-three new bird species are reported from the Rio del Rey estuary, Cameroon, and new information is given for several other previously reported species. The mangrove area and tidal mudflats are described.

Résumé

L'auteur fait état de 23 nouvelles espèces d'oiseaux pour l'estuaire du Rio del Rey au Cameroun, et ajoute des données pour plusieurs autres déjà connues. Il décrit la mangrove et les vasières intertidales.

Introduction

The Rio del Rey estuary is an area of mangrove swamps on the Cameroon coast west of Mount Cameroon, contiguous with the Cross River estuary of Nigeria. The estuary in Cameroon is part of Ndian Division, Southwest Province, administered from Mundemba (Fig. 1). Until 1986, access to Mundemba was by boat from Ekondo Titi, through the mangrove creeks and up the Ndian River to the head of navigation at Bulu Beach near Mundemba. Thomas (1995) has reported on birds seen along this route during several boat trips in 1978-79 and 1983. While working at Korup National Park during 1991-94, I visited the estuary 13 times at all seasons between mid-September and mid-May. Nine trips were to the smaller creeks in central and western Rio del Rey. From 1993 I made four boat trips to the broad channels in the southeastern area of the estuary, to assess bird-watching potential for tourists. These trips were on 1 and 26 Mar 1993, 28 Nov 1993, and 30 Jan 1994. The tidal mudflats of the Andokat Channel proved to be exceptional birding areas during the Palaearctic winter. Unrest amongst the inhabitants of the estuary (resident Cameroonian and migratory Nigerian fishermen) precluded trips there in mid-rainy season 1993. On Christmas Day 1993, Nigerian soldiers invaded the Bakassi Peninsula, and I made only one further trip to the estuary.

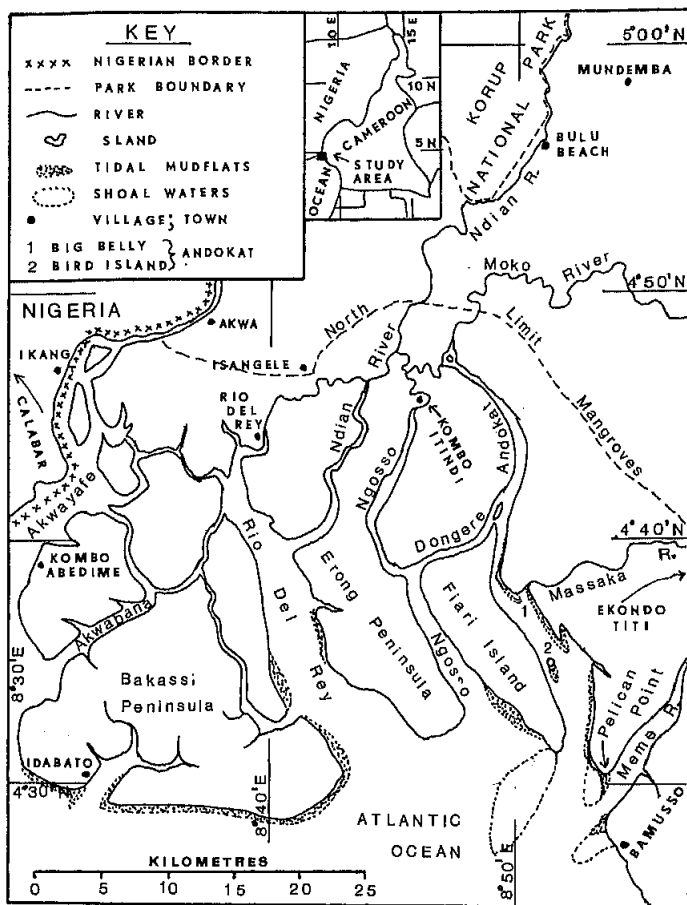


Figure 1. Sketch map of the Rio del Rey estuary (1100 km²), Cameroon.

More rainy season observations are needed for the Apr-Oct period to establish whether some birds are resident.

Study area

The Rio del Rey estuary (1100 km²) is centred at 4°40'N, 8°40'E. It comprises mangroves, brackish water creeks and channels, small islands of higher land, and tidal mudflats. The Bight of Bonny is to the south, and evergreen Atlantic coastal forest (including swamp forest and lowland rainforest) lies to the north and east. The fresh water swamp forest to the north is not treated here as part of the estuary. From east to west the principal rivers entering the estuary are Meme, Moko, Ndian/Mana and Akwayafe/Korup. Ninety percent of the woody vegetation of the estuary is made up of red mangrove trees *Rhizophora racemosa* growing to 25 m high along the creeks, but somewhat shorter farther back. White mangrove *Avicennia nitida* also occurs, and *Pandanus candalabrum* trees are common along the creeks (Sayer *et al.* 1992).

The estuary harbours a diverse fish fauna of some 40 species (predominantly marine). Nile Crocodiles *Crocodylus niloticus* and Slender-snouted Crocodiles *C. cataphractus* are not uncommon. Broad-snouted Crocodiles *Osteolaemus tetraspis* are frequently found in freshwater streams north of the estuary. Mammals of the estuary include Otter Shrew *Potamogale velox*, Marsh Mongoose *Atilax paludinosus*, Manatee *Trichechus senegalensis* (still present), and Mona Monkey *Cercopithecus mona* (frequently seen in trees along creeks). Presence of Sitatunga *Tragelaphus spekei* is yet to be proven, although it is found in swamp forest to the north (Anonymus 1988).

There are vast shoals south of Fiari Island and Pelican Point. Aquatic birds gather in large numbers on the tidal mud-flats along the lower estuary channels and the seaward sides of islands, with the greatest aggregations in the lower Andokat Channel. Thomas (1995) refers to "Big Belly", the area of Andokat Channel with its mud-flats near the mouth of Massaka River. Topographical maps made in the 1960's show a large shoal in the channel 6 km south of Big Belly. Today there is a 2 km-long mud-flat at this site, with a small tree-covered island at the north end (which we call "Bird Island"). The largest gatherings of birds seen in the estuary in 1993 and 1994 were at Bird Island. Pelican Point is 10 km south of Bird Island at the mouth of the Meme River. In March 1993 I found great numbers of birds on the bar extending south from Pelican Point, but a 2 km-wide shoal blocked my approach from the west. It is about 65 km and 2 hours travel time between Bulu Beach and Bird Island. Ekondo Titi to the east is much closer.

Climate in the estuary is similar to that found to the north in Korup National Park (Rodewald *et al.* 1994). Although rain often falls in December and February and may also occur in January, the main rainy season is March-November, with heaviest rainfall occurring late July to October.

Methods

I travelled in the estuary by small boat with 40 hp outboard motor. Observations in the creeks were generally made on the move while on Korup National Park business. Occasional outboard motor failure permitted observations which would otherwise have been missed. On the four trips to Andokat Channel, I was able to stop and move in closer to the mud-flats for observations. I used 8 x 36 binoculars; spotting scopes were used only on 28 Nov 1993.

Results

The annotated list below contains 23 new species for the area (indicated by asterisks) and new information on a number of birds reported by Thomas (1995). Thomas's list also includes a few species found north of the estuary along the upper Ndian/Mana River, an area whose avifauna is also covered by Thomas (1991), Rodewald *et al.* (1994), and Green & Rodewald (1996).

Time limitations did not permit any census of birds. A sample count of Ardeidae made on a portion of beach at Bird Island (what could easily be seen at one stop from the boat 100 m off the beach) on 28 Nov 1993 gave: 17 *Egretta alba*, 17 *E. garzetta*, 1 *E. intermedia*, 7 *Ardea cinerea*, and 4 *Ardeola ralloides* (for English names see annotated list, below). Some species, when found in the channels, showed a clear preference for shoreline mudflats and were never seen at Bird Island (*Butorides striatus*, *Ardea goliath*, *Ciconia episcopus*, *Haliaetus vocifer*). Some birds may travel between estuary mud-flats and areas beyond the estuary, such as the Mana River and streams of Pamol oil palm plantation near Mundemba.

Taxonomy and sequence of species follow Elgood *et al.* (1994). Status is indicated when known: PM Palearctic migrant; AM intra-African migrant; LM subject to local movements; R resident. Scale of abundance: rare (few records over many years), uncommon (few records per year), frequent (not recorded every day), common (1-10 seen/heard daily), abundant (11-100 daily), and very abundant (more than 100 daily). Examples of abundance are often given for Big Belly (BB) and/or Bird Island (BI), and one should keep in mind that this is only a fraction of the number to be seen on the mud-flats along Andokat and Ngosso channels and at Pelican Point. C. Bowden and W. Quantrill assisted me on my trip of 28 Nov 1993. Some additional records have been provided (pers. comm.) by J. Culverwell (JC) of Korup National Park, who visited the estuary several times during Aug-Apr 1994-95.

Phalacrocoracidae

Phalacrocorax africanus Long-tailed Cormorant. R, common in creeks, abundant in channels; 50+ at BI, 30 Jan 1994.

Anhingidae

Anhinga melanogaster Anhinga. R, frequent, widespread. Average sighting one per day, but three seen 26 Mar 1993.

Pelecanidae

Pelecanus rufescens Pink-backed Pelican. LM, erratic in channels. Two dozen seen in Andokat Channel, Mar and Nov 1993; four at BI, 30 Jan 1994. JC recorded 35 at BI, Mar 1995. He noted that soldiers stationed in the estuary for the Bakassi campaign were shooting pelicans during 1994-95.

Ardeidae

**Tigrionis leucolophus* White-crested Tiger Bittern. Two records, near creeks in northwestern part of the estuary, Apr 1991, Apr 1993.

Ardeola ralloides Squacco Heron. PM, very abundant in channels; several hundred at BB and BI, Nov-Mar. Recorded to 25 May 1978 (Thomas 1995). Unrecorded SE Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1994), but it must surely occur in Cross River estuary.

Butorides striatus Green Heron. R, common to abundant (singly) in creeks, seen on all trips. Less common on channel shoreline mud-flats; absent BI.

Egretta gularis Western Reef Heron. Common to abundant in channels. Few at BB; 15-20 at BI, Nov-Mar. According to Louette (1981), only present coastal Cameroon Mar-Sep.

E. garzetta Little Egret. R, common (singly) in creeks; seen on all trips. Very abundant in channels, Nov-Mar; up to 25 at BB and hundreds at BI.

**E. intermedia* Yellow-billed Egret. Abundant in channels, Nov-Mar; ten at BB and several tens at BI, 30 Jan 1994. Not mentioned by Louette (1981) for coastal Cameroon but reported there by Martínez *et al.* (1996), and well known in coastal Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1994).

E. alba Great Egret. R and LM, uncommon in creeks, very abundant in channels Nov-Mar; at BI, 1000+ on 28 Nov 1993, many hundreds 30 Jan 1994, 1 and 26 Mar 1993. Erratic near Mundemba, where occurs off and on in all months except Sep-Oct (Rodewald *et al.* 1994).

Ardea cinerea Grey Heron. R and PM, uncommon in creeks, very abundant (many hundreds) in channels, Nov-Mar (maximum 28 Nov 1993). Erratic throughout the year near Mundemba but more common in rainy season.

A. melanoccephala Black-headed Heron. AM, two records: one on a mud-flat 2 km north of BI, Nov 1994 (JC); previous record, one on 5 Jul 1983 (Thomas 1995).

A. goliath Goliath Heron. LM, uncommon to frequent, in channels, Nov-Mar (absent BI). Seen on one-half of boat trips, rarely more than one per day.

Ciconiidae

Ciconia episcopus Woolly-necked Stork. AM, common to abundant in channels, Nov-Mar; absent BI; at BB, 12 on 28 Nov 1993, 20+ on 30 Jan 1994.

Threskiornithidae

Threskiornis aethiopica Sacred Ibis. AM, common to abundant in channels, with 12-30 at BI and others at BB, Nov-Mar.

Phoenicopteridae

Phoeniconaias minor Lesser Flamingo. AM, erratic, channel mud-flats. At BI, 20+ on 1 Mar 1993. Next sighting 60 in Andokat Channel, 13 Aug 1994, where they remained until late Sep 1994 (JC). Thomas (1995) recorded them on several occasions, with 500+ at BB on 13 Feb 1979.

Pandionidae

Pandion haliaetus Osprey. PM, uncommon in channels, Nov-Mar; seen on half of the trips to Andokat Channel.

Accipitridae

Milvus migrans Black Kite. AM, abundant, widespread, Oct-May.

Haliaetus vocifer River Eagle. R, uncommon in creeks, common in channels (up to four seen per day); absent BI.

Heliornithidae

Podica senegalensis Finfoot. R, common in creeks (average sighting four per day).

Recurvirostridae

Recurvirostra avosetta Avocet. PM, abundant in channels, Nov-Mar; usually 20-30 at BB and BI, but 200 at BI on 28 Nov 1993. Also recorded Oct 1994 and Apr 1995 (JC).

Charadriidae

**Charadrius hiaticula* Ringed Plover. PM, abundant in channels, 1 and 26 Mar 1993 (several tens at BB/BI), but unrecorded Nov 1993 and Jan 1994. Flock size and abundance are greatest in coastal Nigeria at passage Sep-Oct and Mar-Apr (Elgood *et al.* 1994).

C. marginatus White-fronted Plover. PM, very abundant in channels, 1 and 26 Mar 1993 (many at BB and hundreds at BI), but unrecorded Nov 1993 and Jan 1994. Thomas (1995) found them at BB also Feb and Apr in 1970s.

**Pluvialis squatarola* Grey Plover. PM, abundant in channels. At BI, many hundreds on 1 and 26 Mar 1993, 100+ on 28 Nov 1993, 50+ on 30 Jan 1994.

Vanellus albiceps White-headed Lapwing. LM, frequent in channels, Nov-Feb, but common at BI, 1 and 26 Mar 1993. Seen on sandbars in upper N'dian River near Bulu Beach in dry season and early wet season, but these sandbars are under water for much of the rainy season.

Scolopacidae

**Calidris minuta* Little Stint. PM, very abundant in channels, 1 and 26 Mar 1993 (hundreds BB/BI); absent 28 Nov 1993; abundant (a few tens) at BI, 30 Jan 1994.

**C. ferruginea* Curlew Sandpiper. PM, uncommon in channels, Nov-Mar 1993-94. At BI, 200 on 9 Apr 1995, but none before or after (JC).

**Limosa limosa* Black-tailed Godwit. PM, one record: up to 20 scattered on BI, 11 Dec 1994 (JC). Singles frequently reported in Nigerian coastal mud-flats at Bonny and Lagos (Elgood *et al.* 1994).

Numenius phaeopus Whimbrel. PM, uncommon in creeks (seven in a tree at Moko-Andokat confluence 30 Jan 1994); common to abundant in channels; at BI, few on 1 and 26 Mar and 28 Nov 1993, but 50+ on 30 Jan 1994.

**N. arquata* Eurasian Curlew. PM, common in channels. JC found 10 to 20 (singly) each visit to Andokat Channel, mid-Aug to mid-Dec 1994, but none thereafter. Singles occur on Nigerian coastal mud-flats (Elgood *et al.* 1994).

**Tringa totanus* Common Redshank. PM, common to abundant in channels; at BB, up to 20 on 1 and 26 Mar 1993, ten on 28 Nov 1993, few on 30 Jan 1994; absent BI.

**T. stagnatilis* Marsh Sandpiper. PM, abundant in channels, 30 Jan 1994 (several tens at BI), absent 1 and 26 Mar and 28 Nov 1993. A single bird at BI, 11 Dec 1994 (JC).

T. nebularia Common Greenshank. PM, abundant in channels; at BI, nearly 100 on 28 Nov 1993, fewer on 30 Jan 1994, a few tens on 1 and 26 Mar 1993.

T. glareola Wood Sandpiper. PM, very abundant in channels, Jan-Mar; at BI, up to 100 on 30 Jan 1994, 1000+ on 1 and 26 Mar 1993; absent 28 Nov 1993.

Actitis hypoleucos Common Sandpiper. PM, common in creeks, Oct-May and probably longer (present north of the estuary, late July to May); abundant (singly) in channels.

Sternidae

Sterna maxima Royal Tern. AM, abundant to very abundant in channels. Several flocks in Dongere, Ngosso and Andokat in channels, 1 and 26 Mar 1993; about 300 in lower Andokat Channel, 28 Nov 1993. Only about 60 in northern Andokat Channel, 30 Jan 1994. JC recorded it on most visits to the estuary, mid-Aug 1994 to mid-Apr 1995.

**Sterna sandvicensis* Sandwich Tern. PM, common to abundant in channels, 1 and 26 Mar 1993 (small flocks in Dongere, upper Ngosso and upper Andokat in channels; not observed farther south in broader parts of the in channels towards the sea). Not seen 28 Nov 1993 or 30 Jan 1994.

**Sterna albifrons* Little Tern. LM, common to abundant in channels, 1 and 26 Mar 1993 (small flocks in Dongere and mid-Andokat in channels; not observed farther south in broader parts of the in channels towards the sea). Not seen 28 Nov 1993 or 30 Jan 1994.

Rynchopidae

**Rynchops flavirostris* African Skimmer. LM, one record: about 24 skimming over the water around BI, 28 Nov 1993.

Columbidae

Treron calva Green Pigeon. R, frequent in mangroves in creeks, recorded most trips.

**Turtur tympanistria* Tambourine Dove. R, frequent in mangroves in creeks (often heard when stopping for outboard motor repairs).

**Streptopelia semitorquata* Red-eyed Dove. R, common in mangroves in creeks; heard calling at Isangele in Sep 1992 and at Kombo Itindi in Mar 1993.

Psittacidae

Psittacus erithacus Grey Parrot. R, common in mangroves in creeks, flocks often seen flying overhead.

Musophagidae

Corythaëola cristata Great Blue Turaco. R, frequent in creeks (encountered on about one-third of trips).

Cuculidae

**Oxylophus levaillantii* Levaillant's Cuckoo. AM, one record: one crossing the lower Ndian River, 26 Mar 1993.

**Cuculus solitarius* Red-chested Cuckoo. Uncommon in creeks; heard calling at Isangele, Sep 1992.

**C. clamosus* Black Cuckoo. R, one record: one encountered while repairing outboard motor in lower Ndian River, 1 Mar 1993.

Apodidae

Cypsiurus parvus Palm Swift. R, frequent in creeks, more common at villages (Isangele, Sep 1992; Kombo Itindi, Mar 1993).

Apus apus Eurasian Swift. PM, uncommon. Flocks seen 1 and 26 Mar and 28 Nov 1993, but not 30 Jan 1994.

Alcedinidae

**Halcyon malimbica* Blue-breasted Kingfisher. R, widespread, common to abundant in mangroves.

H. senegalensis Woodland Kingfisher. R, widespread, abundant in mangroves, creeks and villages.

Ceyx picta Pygmy Kingfisher. R, frequent in mangroves in creeks.

Corythornis cristata Malachite Kingfisher. R, rare in creeks and villages. One at Isangele, Sep 1992. Previous record by Thomas (1995).

Alcedo quadribrachys Shining Blue Kingfisher. R, widespread, common (up to eight seen per day).

Megaceryle maxima Giant Kingfisher. R, widespread, common (daily sightings; three on 24 Apr 1993, west of the old Rio del Rey steamship jetty).

Ceryle rudis Pied Kingfisher. R, widespread, uncommon; seen on about a quarter of boat trips.

Bucerotidae

Tockus fasciatus Pied Hornbill. R, frequent in creeks; seen on one-half of boat trips.

Ceratogymna fistulator Piping Hornbill. R, frequent in creeks; encountered on about two-thirds of boat trips.

C. atrata Black-casqued Wattled Hornbill. R, widespread, uncommon; seen on about one-quarter of boat trips.

C. elata Yellow-casqued Wattled Hornbill. R, widespread, frequent; seen on half of boat trips.

Picidae

**Dendropicos goertae* Grey Woodpecker. One record: an excellent view of one in the outer mangroves, Apr 1995 (JC). Also occurs in mature mangroves at Lagos, Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1994).

Hirundinidae

Hirundo nigrita White-throated Blue Swallow. R, widespread, common; most common along lower Ndian River. Even more common on large rivers north of the mangrove zone than in the estuary itself.

H. rustica Barn Swallow. PM, widespread, abundant Oct-Apr, with many seen daily and large flocks gathering in March prior to migration.

Pycnonotidae

**Thescelocichla leucopleura* White-tailed Greenbul. R, uncommon in creeks (sightings 26 Mar, 24 Apr, and 2 Oct 1993). Common in swamp forest along the upper Ndian River north of the estuary.

Sylviidae

**Apalis flavida* Yellow-chested Apalis. R, uncommon in mangroves in creeks. Also in mangroves in Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1994).

Muscicapidae

Muscicapa cassini Cassin's Grey Flycatcher. R, abundant in creeks; on low branches over water in small in creeks as well as along the Ndian and Akwayafe rivers.

Nectariniidae

Anthreptes gabonicus Brown Sunbird. R, uncommon in mangroves in creeks.

Plocidae

**Ploceus aurantius* Orange Weaver. R, uncommon in creeks, seen occasionally along the lower Ndian River and at Isangele. Also found north of the estuary where swamp forest borders the upper Ndian River.

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