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Noteworthy records from Ginak Island, The Gambia

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Summary

Four species new to The Gambia are reported: Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*, Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops*, Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* and Lesser Whitethroat *S. curruca*. The Gambian status of four species, Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*, Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida* and Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis*, is significantly modified by trapping records. Observations of note on 38 other species are presented.

Résumé

Je cite quatre espèces nouvelles pour La Gambie: le Faucon kobez *Falco vespertinus*, le Petit-duc scops *Otus scops*, la Fauvette épervière *Sylvia nisoria* et la Fauvette babillarde *Sylvia curruca*. Le statut pour La Gambie de quatre espèces, la Locustelle tachetée *Locustella naevia*, la Rousserolle effarvate *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, l'Hypolaïs pâle *Hippolais pallida* et la Fauvette orphée *Sylvia hortensis*, se voit considérablement modifié par les données de capture. Sont également fournies des observations ou notes sur 38 autres espèces.

Study Area

Ginak Island is situated in North Bank Division at the mouth of the River Gambia, at 13°34'N, 16°32'W. It is a long, narrow island (10 km by max. 2.5 km), set on a north-south axis, low-lying and sandy on the west coast and separated from the mainland on the east by a mangrove-fringed channel, nowhere wider than 300 m. The highest point is about 4 m a.s.l. Ginak falls within the Guinea savanna zone. Day temperatures vary from 18°C (dawn) to 44°C but 34°C is a more usual maximum. There are shallow pools in October left from the rains and tidal overflows, which gradually dry up by February. Vegetation is lush in October with tall, dense grasses which die back leaving a parched open ground layer by late January. The west coastal strip has a line of low bushes some 200 m wide (*Maytenus senegalensis*, *Tamarix pentandra* and others), with groups of trees of various *Acacia* species and Baobab *Adansonia digitata*.

Methods

These notes summarize records collected from birds trapped and observed at the northern end of Ginak island. Trapping sites were normally within 200 m of the W coast, but observations were made over many km². Trapping operations were carried out mainly during the dry season (November to March) but often including the end of the rains in late September and October (Table 1), by teams of 2–6 ringers, each individual usually staying for two weeks. The first visit was in December 1994 and operations continued through to March 2000. The primary aim was to catch Palaearctic migrants. No attempt was made to census numbers.

Table 1. Trapping coverage.

Year	Period	Trapping days ¹
1994–1995	December	5
	February–April	35
1995–1996	October–April	147
1996–1997	October–April	147
1997–1998	October & November	28
	January–March	71
1998–1999	September–November	30
	January–March	60
1999–2000	September–November	38
	January–March	55

¹One trapping day was approximately 5 hours.

Species are included in this paper only where our records supplement data given in Barlow & Wacher (1997), either as new records for the country or area, modifying the species' status, further records of infrequently recorded species or other interesting observations. All references to current status, in square brackets, are to Barlow & Wacher (1997). Wing measurements were made by the maximum length (flattened and straightened wing) method described by Svensson (1992).

Notes on Species

Accipitridae

Chelictinia riocourii Swallow-tailed Kite. Singles seen Jan 1997 and Jan–Feb 1999. [Uncommon.]

Falconidae

Falco vespertinus Red-footed Falcon. On 3 Nov 1999, Friederike Woog and I had a close view of a male, perched at a distance of less than 10 m for 5 s; it flew off

rapidly, giving a 10-s view of its upper side. It was a small falcon, about the size of Hobby *F. subbuteo*, all black with bright red cere and legs. In flight, the upperparts were all black with the primaries semi-transparent, therefore giving them a lighter appearance. There was no facial pattern. First record for The Gambia, though there have been several in both N and S Senegal (Morel & Morel 1990, Sauvage & Rodwell 1998). [No Gambian records, but likely.]

Phasianidae

Coturnix coturnix Common Quail. One trapped, Jan 1998. [Palearctic migrant, few records.]

Turnicidae

Turnix sylvatica Little Button-Quail. One trapped, Jan 1999. [Infrequent and local, usually further inland.]

Ortyxelos meiffreni Quail-Plover. One seen, 26 Jan 1998. In flight showed bowed wings, lark-like flight and predominantly white upper wing: seen briefly at rest it had sandy-brown mantle with dark mottling, spotted breast-band and creamy-white supercilium. [Two recent previous records.]

Pteroclididae

Pterocles exustus Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. One male and two females seen 16 Feb 1996. One male and one female, Feb 2000. [Rare, with a few recent records upriver.]

Cuculidae

Clamator jacobinus Jacobin Cuckoo. One immature trapped, Oct 1997, was still in juvenile plumage with no sign of any post-juvenile moult. Primaries fully grown, wing 150 mm. Rarely recorded in The Gambia, but N Senegal and S Mauritania are within its breeding range (Urban *et al.* 1988, Morel & Morel 1990). Young birds in this state of plumage do not usually move far from their natal area, but if raised in N Senegal it could have moved rapidly south. [Rare to uncommon.]

C. glandarius Great Spotted Cuckoo. Three trapped, Dec 1995. Not previously recorded on the north bank but frequently seen near the coast on the south bank of the river so its occurrence here is not unexpected. Two were immature, both female on wing-length; the other was adult male. [Frequent in Western Division.]

Strigidae

Otus scops Eurasian Scops Owl. Two caught Jan–Feb 1996 (mentioned by Barlow & Wachter 1997) and one Jan 1998, all determined to be this species by wing-length: 158, 149, 164 mm (the largest *O. senegalensis* is 138mm: Urban *et al.* 1988). First records for The Gambia.

Upupidae

Upupa epops Hoopoe. Eleven caught. Photographs of two show clearly the wing pattern depicted in Fry *et al.* (1988). Although hoopoes are frequently recorded, it is not always easy to separate this species from *U. senegalensis* in the field; in the hand the white subterminal bands on the crown feathers of *U. epops* species are easily seen.

U. senegalensis African Hoopoe. Six caught. A photograph of one does not show the

ends of the primaries; the pattern of the secondaries approaches that shown in Fry *et al.* (1998) for *epops*, but the crown feathers have no white sub-terminal band and the crown colour is cinnamon-rufous, whereas photographs of *epops* show more buffish.

Picidae

Campethera abingoni Golden-tailed Woodpecker. Five trapped: male, 30 Mar 1995; female, 17 Jan 1996; female, 4 Feb 1997; male 25 Jan 1998; female 28 Feb 2000. The first four of these were retrapped and the maximum present within a week was two males in Jan 1998. There were no sight records. Photographs of a male showed ear coverts grey, blotched black, and neck, breast, flanks, belly and under tail coverts buff, heavily streaked black. Photographs of a female show the distinctive large black streaks on flanks and neck. Fine-spotted Woodpecker *C. punctuligera* was common, often with two present within one week. Cardinal Woodpecker *Dendropicos fuscens* was also common, with up to three in a week. All three species were trapped in the same area (less than 1 km x 200 m) where both the common species are known to breed. [Rare.]

Dendropicos obsoletus Brown-backed Woodpecker. One trapped, Nov 1995. [Few records outside Western and Lower River Divisions.]

Alaudidae

Mirafr rufocinnamomea Flappet Lark. One trapped, Nov 1998. [Few records, status poorly known.]

Hirundinidae

Hirundo rustica Barn Swallow. Small numbers during winter, a slight increase in late Feb when a few (mostly immatures) were just finishing primary moult. [Seldom common: usually briefly frequent on passage.]

H. lucida Red-chested Swallow. Regular in small numbers with occasional larger movements which could be a local migration: e.g. 42 trapped on 8 Oct 1995, 53 during Feb 1996, probably representing < 10% of those present on those dates. [Abundant throughout.]

Motacillidae

Anthus cervinus Red-throated Pipit. One caught, Nov 1998: wing 87, hind claw 12 mm. [Uncommon migrant.]

Turdidae

Phoenicurus phoenicurus Redstart. Average caught wintering: 60. One ringed at Ginak on 12 Feb 96 was killed near Ross-on-Wye, U.K. on 6 May 96 (Toms & Clark 1998); one ringed near Rosyth, Scotland on 19 Jul 97 was trapped at Ginak on 23 Oct 97. [Common migrant.]

Sylviidae

Locustella naevia Grasshopper Warbler. Total of 20 trapped (Table 2). Key features were: feathers of crown, mantle, upper wing-coverts and tertials with black-brown centres, broadly fringed and tipped buff. Rump similar but feathers with narrow centres and very broad fringes. Primaries brown-black, narrowly fringed paler on outer webs; secondaries similar but more broadly fringed on outer webs. Throat with

necklace of small, dark spots. Breast rich rufous buff. Belly shading to pale buff of chin. Wing 66.5 mm. One ringed at Ginak on 25 Jan 96 was found dead on a road in NW Germany on 22 Jun 96 (Toms *et al.* 1998). [Limited information, probably under-recorded, likely to be more regular.] Our records confirm this suggestion.

Table 2. Grasshopper Warblers present by month (including retraps).

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Total
January	5	3	2		1	11
February	4		1	2	1	8
March			1	2		3

Acrocephalus schoenobaenus Sedge Warbler. About three caught per year on passage (c. 10% of the number of Reed Warblers). [Uncommon, likely under-recorded.]

A. scirpaceus Reed Warbler. Despite Ginak not having very suitable habitat for the species, an average of 25 were caught on passage each year. One ringed in Hampshire, U.K., 19 Aug 98, was trapped at Ginak on 5 Oct 98; very few of the ringed birds caught in N Senegal were of British origin at this time of year (S. Rumsey pers. comm.). Probably a common but much overlooked wintering species in The Gambia, since in Feb 1994 large numbers were seen in reed beds near Dankunku, Central River Division (pers. obs.) and in Feb 1998 some were caught there. Difficult to separate in the field from African Reed Warbler *A. baeticatus*, for which there are few Gambian records. [Few records.]

A. arundinaceus Great Reed Warbler. Two caught in each of Oct and Dec 1995 and one in Feb 2000. [Few records.]

Hippolais polyglotta Melodious Warbler. Common on autumn passage, a few winter; average 54 per year caught. On arrival in mid-Sep they had just started moult. [Frequent winter visitor.]

H. pallida Olivaceous Warbler. Subspecies *opaca* common on passage, with fair numbers wintering; average 65 caught per year. Main arrivals from early Oct, in moult state ranging from all old primaries to 80% complete. Active moult also recorded Nov (one in interrupted moult), but most later than this were in new plumage. Subspecies *reiseri* is a partial intra-African migrant, easily distinguished in the hand by bill shape, wing length and wing formula. About 16 of this subspecies were caught each year.

Phylloscopus bonelli Western Bonelli's Warbler. Passage migrant in small numbers both autumn and spring with a few wintering. Three records of recurrence in successive years. [Uncommon regular winter visitor.]

P. sibilatrix Wood Warbler. One caught, 30 Mar 1997: a largish *Phylloscopus* warbler (wing 71 mm) with yellow-green upperparts, bright yellow throat and white breast and belly. [Few positive records.]

P. collybita Chiffchaff. Usually a small passage with relatively many wintering (Table

3). Fed in the tops of acacias from Dec when they are in leaf, where highly visible but not easily caught. In the 1995–6 season, exceptionally large numbers were trapped (125 compared with the average for other years of 22). The 1995–96 catch might seem to contradict the suggestion that they are not easily caught after December, since the catching areas did not alter, but the large catch probably resulted from exceptional numbers present that winter (cf. Blackcap *S. atricapilla*). [Frequent winter visitor.]

Table 3. Numbers of Chiffchaffs ringed during December and January.

Year	December	January	Total	Coverage	Birds per day
1995–96	25	56	81	Full, 57days	1.42
1996–97	16	5	21	Full, 50days	0.42
1997–98		18	18	no Dec, 22days	0.81
1998–99		4	4	no Dec, 14days	0.29
1999–2000		9	9	no Dec, 14days	0.64

P. trochilus Willow Warbler. Common on autumn and spring passage, on average about twice as many as Chiffchaffs. Did not winter, none being recorded from early Dec until Feb. [Frequent passage migrant throughout.]

Sylvia nisoria Barred Warbler. One caught, Feb 1999: a very large, grey *Sylvia* (wing 90 mm) with distinct yellow eye and some barring. Forehead crown, nape and mantle flecked brown-grey. Lores and ear coverts grey; no distinct supercilium. Some greyish barring on cheeks and side of throat. Underparts off-white, with some light barring across upper breast. Flanks with faint dark barring. First record for The Gambia. Three previous records in W Africa: Djoudj in Senegal (Rodwell *et al.* 1996), Nigeria and Zaire (Urban *et al.* 1997).

S. hortensis Orphean Warbler. 100 caught of which about 25% were retrapped in the same winter; clearly a fairly common visitor on the coast, largely overlooked because of its skulking habit. Rarely seen by any of our team members in the field. Average numbers caught per month were: Nov 4, Dec 6, Jan 10, Feb 5, Mar 3. [Uncommon, probably under-recorded in coastal scrub.]

S. borin Garden Warbler. Abundant autumn migrant, rarely staying long. Exceptional after early Dec and spring records extremely rare. An average of 105 caught each year. Perhaps moves south and east to Congo, then further south before passing through Congo again then going directly north to Europe, completing a circular migration pattern (see Curry-Lindahl 1981).

S. atricapilla Blackcap. Uncommon but numbers varied widely. In the 1995–6 winter 388 were caught (half on a fruiting fig tree) compared with an average of 50 in other years. Regularly winters in W Africa, with considerable variation in numbers from year to year (Cramp 1992). Two controls of British ringed immatures: one ringed in N Yorkshire 25 Sep 1994, controlled 18 Mar 1995 (Appleton *et al.* 1997); one ringed in Hertfordshire 6 Oct 1996, controlled 19 Dec 1996 (Toms & Clark 1998).

S. communis Common Whitethroat. Common passage migrant in both autumn and spring with some present all winter. About 10% of those trapped were recaptured later during the same winter. Average yearly catch was 182. The late spring passage usually included a few of the eastern subspecies *icterops*, of which many were in active moult.

S. corruca Lesser Whitethroat. Two caught, 18 Jan and 9 Feb 1996: crown brown with grey admixed. Ear coverts darker than crown. Chin and belly white. Flanks and breast-band buffish white. Tertials brown. Legs and bill dark grey. First records for The Gambia (included in Barlow & Wacher 1997). Several caught at Djoudj, N Senegal (Sauvage & Rodwell 1998).

S. cantillans Subalpine Warbler. Common passage migrant in both directions; also wintered in good numbers. About 10% of ringed birds were recaptured later the same winter. Fed high in acacias from Dec, when they are in leaf, where highly visible but not easily caught. Therefore spring catches may underestimate numbers present. Average catch over all years was 221.

S. conspicillata Spectacled Warbler. One caught, 17 Jan 1996. A few caught in N Senegal (Rodwell *et al.* 1996). [Rare winter visitor probably under-recorded.]

Muscicapidae

Muscicapa striata Spotted Flycatcher. Only two caught, on autumn migration. [Uncommon passage migrant.]

Ficedula hypoleuca Pied Flycatcher. Only recorded on autumn passage. This tends to be early and few were caught until 1998 when trapping started earlier than usual, on 22 Sep: 18 were caught by 11 Oct with a further 12 by 22 Oct. A nestling ringed in Cumbria, U.K., 29 Jun 1998, was caught Ginak 25 Sep 1998 (J.A. Clark pers. comm.). [Passage migrant, a few overwintering.]

Remizidae

Remiz parvulus Yellow Penduline Tit. Four caught, one in each year 1997–2000, so seems to be regular in small numbers. [Uncommon to locally frequent resident, not previously recorded in North Bank Division.]

Corvidae

Ptilostomus afer Black Magpie. It is remarkable that none was seen, considering that cattle are present at all times.

Ploceidae

Ploceus heuglini Heuglin's Masked Weaver. One caught, Oct 1995. [Uncommon to rare locally, in coastal areas.]

Quelea erythrops Red-headed Quelea. 16 caught, Oct–Nov 1995, including 6 immature, 6 adult (2 male, 4 female). [Uncommon wet season breeder, most records Jul–Sep.]

Q. quelea Red-billed Quelea. Singles caught Dec 1995, Apr 1997 and Feb 1998, all in eclipse plumage. No others seen. [Uncommon dry season visitor.]

Estrildidae

Lagonosticta rufopicta Bar-breasted Fire-finch. One juvenile trapped, Dec 1996, in primary moult; it was retrapped Jan–Feb 1999, by then adult, and Mar 2000. It

appears that Red-billed Firefinch *L. senegala* juveniles have a complete post-juvenile moult (Goodwin 1982 quoting M.-Y. Morel), and possibly all *Lagonosticta* do this. No other adults were seen. [Uncommon, locally frequent; no recent records from North Bank Division.]

Ortospiza atricollis Quail-Finch. Only two caught, but regularly recorded in small numbers in suitable habitat. [Locally common resident.]

Amadina fasciata Cut-throat Weaver. Regular in small numbers. In Feb 1998 45 were caught (cf. usual annual catch c. 8), all close by an old Village Weaver *Ploceus cucullatus* colony. [Rare at the coast; commonly utilises old weaver nests.]

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