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February / février 2010

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Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla,* new to The Gambia, with notes on seven other species

Unless otherwise stated the records below refer to Kartung (13°12´N, 16°45´W) in the south of The Gambia, in 2001. Previously known Gambian status, as given by Barlow *et al.* (1999), is given in square brackets. All bird measurements are in mm.

***Turnix sylvatica* Little Button-Quail.** One trapped on 16 Mar, having been seen for a few days previously. After this, up to six were present for several days. [Infrequent and local.]

***Porzana pusilla* Baillon's Crake.** At about 8h00 on 22 Feb, Stella Beavan and I were walking around some pools, when she spotted a small crake. We watched it for more than 2 h with binoculars and a telescope, down to <7 m, and concluded, using Barlow *et al.* (1999), that it must be a Baillon's Crake. It was feeding in a fairly extensive area of sparse, grassy growth, up to 30 cm high, in shallow water on the edge of a bed of *Typha* reeds. It walked around, making rapid pecks, occasionally with short, darting runs, preferring the denser parts of the vegetation. It was small, dumpy and brown, clearly striped and spotted, and smaller and with shorter legs than nearby Black Crakes *Amaurornis flavirostris*. The forehead and top of the crown were chestnut brown, the nape slightly paler forming a slight collar. The back was blackish, streaked white, with the sides of the back chestnut brown with black streaks. Scapulars, wing-coverts and primaries carried some white spotting. The sides of the face, chest and flanks were plain slate grey, the belly and rear flanks boldly striped white and blackish. The dark-centred remiges were broadly edged and tipped buff, emphasising a V effect at the sides of the back. The tail projected a short way beyond the

primaries. The upper tail-coverts were rich buffish chestnut, without spots, and under tail-coverts dark blackish, spotted white. The eye was clear red, the bill grey-greenish, without red, and the legs greenish, with lower part of tarsus and feet pinkish.

On the evening of 13 Mar, two unidentified crakes were seen at the same place by Jerry Lewis and Ron Clevely. The next day, good views of these and another crake were obtained, and they were identified as two Baillon's and one Little Crake *P. parva*. One Baillon's walked into one of the Ottenby walk-in traps that were set in the late afternoon, and was photographed. Baker (1993) was not available at the time, but subsequent reference indicated that the bird was probably a first-winter (mantle feathers black with chocolate fringes and white flecking and edging) female (wing 89, outer primary 12<wing tip, longest toe excluding nail 36, tail 46, weight 32.4 g).

These are the first records of Baillon's Crake for The Gambia. It has previously been recorded and trapped at Richard-Toll (Morel & Morel 1990) and Djoudj (Barlow *et al.* 1999) in N Senegal.

***Porzana parva* Little Crake.** One trapped and photographed on 14 Mar. It was identified by: upperparts dark brown with paler streaks; underparts grey, extending onto sides of face and forecrown, rear flanks and vent slightly darker, tipped and barred white (grey-white effect rather than black-white of Baillon's); remiges brown, no white on outer primary; tertials black with paler brown edging; greater coverts brown, medium coverts with blackish centres and broad, brown edging and tipping; tail black with browner edging; eye dark red; bill pale green with red area at base; legs and feet dull greenish; wing 105; outer primary 18<wing tip; bill to skull 19.5; tarsus 36.8; tail 53.2; weight 42.7 g. The grey underparts and tertial pattern (black with paler brown edging) indicate that the bird was an adult male (Baker 1993). There are many records in N Senegal (Morel & Morel 1990, Rodwell *et al.* 1996), but this is only the second for The Gambia. [One, 1998 near Sapu.]

***Indicator maculatus* Spotted Honeyguide.** One trapped on 27 Feb, along with a Greater Honeyguide *I. indicator*, and photographed. [Sporadic sightings, all in Western Division; a few Senegal records in Basse-Casamance and one in Niokola-Koba (Morel & Morel 1990).]

***Luscinia svecica* Bluethroat.** One first-year male ssp. *cyanecula* trapped on 2 Mar. Previously trapped at Ginak, Nov 1995, Feb 1996, Feb 1997 and three between Nov 1999 and Feb 2000. Evidently more regular than previously thought, though in small numbers. [Rare-uncommon winter visitor.]

***Turdus pelios* African Thrush.** Large movement on 12–15 Mar: 15 trapped, as compared with 11 caught during the remainder of 30 trapping days.

***Phylloscopus trochilus* Willow Warbler.** None present in Oct 2000. The first appeared 12 Mar; in the succeeding ten days 28 were trapped. [Most numerous Oct–Nov and Mar–Apr.]

***Spermophaga haematina* Western Bluebill.** One female trapped in open scrubland, 10 Nov, and retrapped four days later. [Uncommon: forest thickets.]

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†Sadly, Michael King died before this note could be published. An obituary was published in *Ringers Bull.* 10(10): 84 (spring 2002). I thank Lincoln Fishpool and Derek Toomer for their assistance in providing this information.

Ed.

Hartlaub's Ducks *Pteronetta hartlaubii* feeding on elephant dung

Hartlaub's Duck *Pteronetta hartlaubii* is a large forest duck that is common in the rivers, streams and smaller lakes of central Africa. It is valuable to skin collectors (F. Duckworth, pers. comm.) and is large-bodied enough to warrant being hunted for food: it is classed as Near-threatened (BirdLife International 2000). Little is known of its habits: a nest has never been found, although BaAka pygmies in Central Africa say that it builds its nest on the ground on the edges of small streams in thick vegetation. It is thought to feed mostly on insects and other animal material, although seeds have also been reported (Brown *et al.* 1982). This note describes Hartlaub's Ducks using elephant dung as a food source.

The vegetation of the region where these observations were made is Guineo-Congolian rainforest (White 1983). Small, often swampy, forest clearings are found scattered throughout this forest, especially along river courses. They are characterised by short herbaceous vegetation, usually dominated by Cyperaceae (*e.g.* Leonard 1951). In areas protected from poaching, many large mammals, including Forest Elephant *Loxodonta africana cyclotis*, use these clearings to feed on the vegetation and to ingest mineral-rich water and soil (Klaus *et al*. 1998, Houston *et al*. 2001). The activities of elephants maintain a short sward and in some cases ("elephant-dominated" clearings), create large areas of bare soil in the centre. Several of the elephant-dominated clearings (locally known as *bais*) in two adjoining National Parks,