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## ICBP CAMEROON MONTANE FOREST SURVEY\*

by S.N. Stuart

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An expedition of seven ornithologists, led by the author, worked in the field from late November 1983 to April 1984. Other members were C.G.R. Rowden, M.O. Fedden, M.E. Gartshore, F.P. Jensen, H.L. Macleod and H. Tye. The aim of the project was to assess the conservation status of the montane forest avifauna along the mountain chain of western Cameroon. This is a particularly important area for rare birds, and seven species to be included in the forthcoming ICBP African Red Data Book are to be found here: the Cameroon Mountain Francolin *Francolinus camerunensis*, Bannerman's Turaco *Tauraco bannermani*, Green-breasted Bush-shrike *Malaconotus gladiator*, Kupe Mountain Bush-shrike *M. kupeensis*, White-throated Mountain Babbler *Lioptilus gilberti*, Banded Wattle-eye *Platysteira laticincta* and Bannerman's Weaver *Ploceus bannermani*.

The expedition started its work on Mt Cameroon, spending one week on the eastern slopes above Buea and five weeks on the southern slopes facing the sea. The slopes of Mt Cameroon are still heavily forested although clearance is continuing in the vicinity of Buea where there is a large human population. The low altitude forests on the southern slopes are probably at risk following the construction of a new road along the coast. Unfortunately, it was not possible to survey the western and northern sides of the mountain but, because these areas are difficult to reach, it is considered unlikely that large-scale clearance is taking place there. The expedition found the Cameroon Mountain Francolin (which occurs only on Mount Cameroon) to be common on the upper slopes, occurring as low as 850 m a.s.l. on the southern side. This is encouraging news because previous reports had suggested it to be in severe danger of extinction as a result of hunting. Although hunting continues, it appears that the species is able to withstand the existing hunting pressure. On the southern slopes of the mountain the Green-breasted Bush-shrike was found in a narrow altitudinal band between 900 and 1,400 m where it was very rare. The species occurs on most of the western Cameroon mountains but is everywhere most uncommon. Several other interesting species were found on Mount Cameroon, including the Cameroon Mountain Greenbul *Andropadus montanus*, Rufous-cheeked Robin-chat *Cossypha bocagei*, Grey-necked Picathartes *Picathartes oreas* and the Black-throated *Apalis Apalis jacksoni*.

We then worked for two weeks on Mt Kupé, a small mountain rising to 2,100 m. Forest conservation on Mt Kupé remains good, mainly because the Bakossi people avoid the mountain as a result of local taboo. Human interference is, therefore, minimal, in terms of disturbance to the vegetation and hunting. Perhaps our biggest disappointment was failure to locate the Kupé Mountain Bush-shrike, only known from Mt Kupé. The species has not been seen since 1951 and was described then as being very rare. Attempts were made to track it down by following likely calls, but all turned out to

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be of other species. In late April, two expedition members returned to Mt Kupé for another effort to locate it and heard a call that could have been it; unfortunately, they were unable to find the bird responsible. Clearly the Kupé Mountain Bush-shrike is very rare, if it survives at all. If it is extinct, that is probably due to natural causes since virtually no forest clearance has taken place within its limited range. By contrast, the White-throated Mountain Babbler was found to be reasonably common on Mt Kupé from 950 m up to the summit, and will probably survive if the forest is adequately conserved. Other interesting species found there include the Green-breasted Bush-shrike, Grey-necked Picathartes and Ursula's Mouse-coloured Sunbird *Nectarinia ursulae*.

From Mt Kupé the expedition moved to Mt Manengouba, a much drier area in which forest clearance is very severe. These forests are being fragmented as a result of fire, overgrazing by cattle and woodcutting. Mt Manengouba is an important site for the rare Bannerman's Weaver which is still reasonably common in the more open parts of the forest. A certain amount of forest disturbance is probably beneficial for this species, but unfortunately the long-term effects of both fire and overgrazing are leading to an expansion of grassland (in which Bannerman's Weaver cannot survive) at the expense of forest. Mt Manengouba is also an important site for the Cameroon Mountain Greenbul which has similar habitat requirements.

Some useful work was carried out on Mt Nlonako, not far from Kupé and Manengouba. Nlonako is situated very close to the large town of Nkongsamba and the northern slopes of the mountain, facing the town, have now been largely cleared. However, extensive areas of well-preserved forest survive over the rest of the mountain and this is probably not under any immediate threat. Mt Nlonako had not been studied previously by ornithologists and the expedition located 23 montane species here, including the Green-breasted Bush-shrike, Rufous-cheeked Robin-chat, White-throated Mountain Babbler and Grey-necked Picathartes.

The expedition worked for one week in the Rumpi Hills to the west of the main Cameroon mountain chain. A large area of undisturbed montane rain-forest survives here although much of it is degraded around the villages as a result of shifting cultivation. Much of this area is still unexplored and inaccessible; it would repay more intensive study by ornithologists and other biologists. Among the more interesting species to be found there are the Cameroon Mountain Greenbul, Green-breasted Bush-shrike, White-throated Mountain Babbler and Ursula's Mouse-coloured Sunbird. We were unfortunately not able to find the White-naped Pigeon *Columba albinucha*, the Rumpi Hills being its only known West African locality.

Work finished with two weeks in the Bamenda Highlands at the northern end of the Cameroon mountain chain. Several areas were visited and the forest conservation problems were found to be particularly severe. Throughout the highlands the forests have become fragmented as a result of fire and overgrazing. In many areas the forest undergrowth has been removed and replaced with subsistence crops. In other areas, overgrazing within the forests is so severe that no natural regeneration is taking place. It seems inevitable that most of the Bamenda forests will have been destroyed by the end of this century and the only area where there is any hope of establishing a sizeable forest reserve is Mt Oku. Even here the forest is under very severe threat, but reasonably extensive areas still survive. The two bird species endemic to the Bamenda forests, Bannerman's Turaco and the Banded Wattle-eye, are still common in areas of suitable habitat. However, in view

of the severe conservation problems in the area, both species must now be considered as critically endangered. Other interesting species found by the expedition in the Bamenda Highlands include the White-headed Wood Hoopoe *Phoeniculus bollei*, Cameroon Mountain Greenbul, Green-breasted Bush-shrike, Black-collared *Apalis Apalis pulchra*, Black-throated *Apalis A. jacksoni* and Bannerman's Weaver. Another rare bird, of uncertain taxonomic status, the Bamenda *Apalis Apalis sharpii bamendae*, was found by the expedition at about 1,400 m above sea-level near Bali. This is a bird of thickets and riparian growth at middle elevations, rather than of montane forest. It is not clear to what extent the habitat of this bird is under threat.

The ICBP Cameroon Montane Forest Survey is now producing a detailed report of its findings which will be available early in 1985. It will include a study of avian altitudinal zonation on the southern slopes of Mount Cameroon. ICBP is now planning two follow-up projects in Cameroon. One is envisaged as a two-year project on Mt Oku, devising a conservation management plan for the area. We also hope to send another expedition to Kupé, Nlonako, the Rumpi Hills and the ornithologically-unexplored Bakossi Mountains (near Mt Kupé). A principal aim of the project would be to relocate the Kupé Mountain Bush-shrike.

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