West African Ornithological Society
Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest Africain

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February / février 2010

Sir,

Macdonald & Taylor's interpretation of my observations is that they refer to two nearby flocks, not one. However, any operational definition of a 'flock' must comprise criteria of spatial and temporal association between members. For 20 minutes, birds at all heights in the vegetation followed the same route. The information needed to assess (i) whether this followed the meeting of two flocks rather than the build-up of one flock by recruitment of individual birds, and (ii) whether any such meeting can be judged 'brief' and 'accidental', could be obtained only by following flocks for much longer periods. It cannot be deduced from series of even briefer observations than mine, on many different flocks.

'Compound' flocks, containing members that normally participate in two or more alternative types of flock, are not unknown. In at least the Guinea savanna of West Africa (Greig-Smith, Ibis, in press) and some temperate habitats (Greig-Smith, continuing study) they can develop by recruitment of individuals, not merging of independent flocks. Although feeding advantages may then be unlikely, the atypical members may still gain any anti-predator advantages that flocking might bestow. Thus, I consider it by no means impossible that A. rufogularis and P. castanea might benefit from the alarm calls of C. cupreus and M. rubricollis, or vice versa.

Macdonald & Taylor find the composition, structure, and activities of the flock to be 'atypical of forest flocks in West Africa', as represented by those in Ghana. The tendencies of particular species to participate in flocks are likely to be widespread, given local conditions conducive to flock formation, but the composition of flocks will be dependent on the nature of the local bird community. It seems unwise to assume that in the fragmented and much modified remnants of forest in most of West Africa, the correspondence between widely-separated communities (and, therefore, between flock composition at different localities) is as close as, for example, in the savanna zones. What can be inferred of the characteristics of the flocks studied by Macdonald & Taylor indicates differences compared with those in Gabon described by Brosset (1969, Biologia Gabonica 5: 29-69). I await with interest the publication of a full account of Macdonald & Taylor's results.

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20 August 1977