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February / février 2010

Bannerman, D.A. (1953). The Birds of West & Equatorial Africa. Volume 2. London. Oliver & Boyd.

***p.43(line 12.) Five birds observed carrying food into the tunnel, 26th July. Ed.

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ON BIRDS FEEDING ON RIPE FRUITS OF THE OIL-PALM, PARTICULARLY THE CASE OF THE WHITE-THROATED BEE-EATER.

Antony Pettet.

In a previous number of this Bulletin Fry(Bull.N.O.S. 3 : 16) recorded the presence of fibres of Oil-Palm nuts Elaeis guineensis in the gizzards of a number of White-throated Bee-eaters Aerops albicollis collected at Ibadan in April 1964. In the absence of any observations on their methods of obtaining this food he presumed the birds had stripped the epicarp from the fruits in the trees, rather than having descended to fallen fruits on the ground. What actually happens I discovered whilst studying the feeding habits of the birds in the grounds of the University of Ibadan during the dry season of 1967/68, and the explanation is stranger, perhaps, than the somewhat improbable suggestion made by Fry.

Throughout most of the dry season bee-eaters were seen consuming large quantities of strips from the oil-palm nuts, so much so that these must have made up a very substantial proportion of their diet during this period. The bee-eaters actually obtained this by exploiting the feeding habits of the Red-less Striped Squirrel Funisciurus anerythrus. When feeding on oil-palm nuts these squirrels sat on the frond bases, often more or less hidden from below, and stripped off the outer layers of the fruits to get at the more fleshy mesocarp below. The rejected outer layers usually dropped from the palm crown and these were intercepted by the bee-eaters before they reached the ground. On catching such strips the bee-eaters usually returned to nearby perches to hammer them, much in the manner they handle the larger insects which they normally feed on. A feeding squirrel, busy stripping nuts usually attracted up to a dozen bee-eaters which were conspicuous by the alacrity and competitive manner with which they collected the falling fibres, rarely seen when they are feeding on more orthodox prey.

Although most of the observations were made on birds wintering in the vicinity of the Fish Pond of the University, similar behaviour was seen in another group of birds wintering in the Botanic Gardens. Here, in addition to Funisciurus, another squirrel of similar habits, Heliosciurus gambianus, may also have been involved but I was never able to prove this owing to the difficulty of seeing the animals well in the tree tops. This feeding association between bee-eater and squirrel is likely to be more widespread than these rather localized records suggest and it probably will be found wherever the bee-eater, squirrel and oil-palm occur.

Bee-eaters were not the only birds exploiting the feeding habits of the squirrels. The Chestnut and Black Weaver Melanopteryx nigerrimus, Grey-crowned Negrofinch Nigrita canicapilla and, less frequently, the Blue-billed Mannikin Spermestes poensis have all been seen in attendance of feeding squirrels. In the case of these birds the pieces of nut epicarp were picked up from the frond bases where they lodged sometimes after being dropped by the squirrels. In addition I frequently saw weavers of several species, negrofinches and mannikins searching the crowns of palm-trees after the squirrels had left the area. On several occasions I found bee-eaters intercepting fibres disturbed by weavers feeding on piles of these left on the frond-bases by the squirrels. Squirrels appear to be an important part of the "chain" between oil-palm and bird.

The Chestnut and Black Weaver has also been seen exploiting the feeding activities of the Red-headed Malimbe Malimbus rubricollis in a similar manner. The malimbes are abke to dislodge nuts from the inflorescences and strip off the outer layers. Unlike the squirrels, they r rely finish stripping the nuts, usually leaving them on the frond-bases or letting them fall. The weavers have

been seen taking any detached pieces and pecking at the nuts left on the frond-bases.

A Grey Kestrel Falco ardiosaceus, present in the University grounds during the dry season of 1967/68 was also seen taking ripe nuts from oil-palm inflorescences on two occasions and eating them. As this has been recorded once before from the same locality some years ago (Wells Bull.N.O.S. 2 : 110) it would seem that this species takes oil-palm nuts more frequently than would be expected of a bird of prey. Black Kites Milvus migrans also have been seen taking oil-palm nuts in the University grounds during the dry season.

Much of the information above has been taken from a more detailed note to be published in Ibis. I suspect the feeding association between the squirrel and bee-eater occurs throughout much of the wintering range of the bird in S.Nigeria and may have been overlooked because of the frequent difficulty of seeing squirrels amongst the bases of the palm fronds. In view of its possible importance in the dry season diet of the bird, I would be interested in hearing of any other records of such an association, together with details of locality, date and frequency.

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A LONG-LEGGED BUZZARD Buteo rufinus IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA.

Antony Pettet.

An immature Long-legged Buzzard Buteo rufinus spent much of the 1967/68 dry season on the farm of Ibadan University. It was first seen on 3rd January, 1968 and thereafter on many occasions until 23rd March. As far as I am aware this is only the second time this species has been recorded for Nigeria. The first was at Malamfatori, Lake Chad by Hopson in December 1964 and January 1965 (Bull.N.O.S. 4 : 15-16). In plumage and habits the bird seen at Ibadan was rather similar to that at Malamfatori but there are a number of small differences and the details, I think, are worth giving fully.

The bird seen at Ibadan was almost inevitably to be seen perched on a small tree, ca. 15feet high, near the small fish pond of the farm. It roosted in one of two trees, ca.60 feet and ca.80 feet high. On one occasion, when kept off its favourite tree by a party of people it spent an hour sitting on ploughed ground of a nearby field. When perched it allowed a close approach of 20-40yards, sometimes nearer, before flying off low to another tree. It was never seen to hunt or eat, although it must have done so, and its generally lethargic nature made it a rather dull bird to watch (and an easy one to overlook). On all occasions it was possible to compare the bird with Black Kites Milvus migrans and on several visits with an immature and an adult Red-tailed Buzzard Buteo auguralis present in the University grounds at the same time.

GENERAL APPEARANCE: Perched it looked superficially like a heavy version of the Black Kite although on closer inspection it had an almost eagle-like appearance with heavily streaked underparts and dark-brown, streaked, upperparts. In size it was obviously bigger in build than either Black Kite or Red-tailed Buzzard, and direct comparison suggested 1¼ - 1⅓ the size of a Black Kite. When flushed, it usually flew with a heavy somewhat laboured flight, low over the fields, often gliding up into another tree with shallowly V-ed wings. In flight, the general impression above was dark brown lightened at the shoulders with a buff-brown "mottling"; below there was a conspicuous, predominantly paler pattern. The primaries and secondaries were whitish with black-brown tips to the primaries and two narrow lines parallel to the wing edge. The coverts were fawn-brown. The body was streaked below with a conspicuous dark-brown bilobed patch across the belly and flanks. The tail was, as noted by Hopson, proportionately longer than that of auguralis which also, in comparison, had a lighter, more buoyant flight.

UPPERPARTS: Head brown, streaked with cinnamon-brown and heavily so on the forehead; nape and hind neck paler with dark cinnamon-brown streaks. Face paler brown, faintly streaked with fine streaks and separated from the top of the head by a heavy "brow" of dark-brown. Back and upper-tail dark earth-brown, the latter with no conspicuous bars above. Wings, when folded, with dark-brown primaries and secondaries; the secondary coverts also dark-brown but with a paler, narrow edging; the upper wing coverts dark brown with "mottlings" of a paler buff-brown at the carpal joint; bastard-wing pale buff (front view of sitting bird only).