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PLUMAGE

FIRST RECORD OF EPOMIDIS MORPH BURCHELL'S COUCAL *CENTROPUS BURCHELLII*

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Dark morphs of birds, often referred to as epomidis or melanistic forms, have been recorded in various species, such as coucals (Zimmerman *et al.* 1999), francolins (Roy, 2010), Osprey *Pandion halieatus* (Clark, 1998), and harriers (Olson and Osborn, 2000).

Epomidis forms of Senegal Coucal *Centropus senegalensis* have been recorded in humid coastal west Africa (Payne, 2005; Zimmerman et al. 1999). Demey et al. (2001), however, stated that these birds do not occur more than 200 km from the coast. No confirmed records have been recorded for the other coucal species.

On 24 October 2014 at 17h50, I observed a Burchell's Coucal *Centropus burchellii* in Port Alfred (S33° 36' 05.5" E26° 52' 41.1"), Eastern Cape, South Africa. It was calling, producing the iconic call of this species. This coucal was then joined by what I first thought was a Black Coucal *Centropus grillii*, due to its completely black chest. This soon seemed incorrect, owing to its red eye, the fact that it was not completely black, and that it seemed to have responded to the first coucal, which gave the typical Burchell's Coucal call.

The sighting was brief and no further detail could be observed. Following further research on the distribution of various coucals, I noted that there are no records of Black Coucal or Senegal Coucal anywhere near Port Alfred, making it highly unlikely that the individual in question was either of these (SABAP2 website http://sabap2.adu.org, consulted October 2014).

***Figure 1**: Dark morph Burchell's Coucal seen in Port Alfred, clearly showing the dark throat, red eye and rufous body © Jacques de Klerk.*

The following days were spent at the same locality trying to find and record the bird I spotted, with no luck, although I could hear and see Burchell's Coucals in the area. Four days later, on the evening of 28 October, I spotted the same bird in the distance and could get some record images (Figures 1 and 2) and a 21 second video of it calling (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL2Y27INiT0&feature=youtu.be)

***Figure 2**: Full view of the bird with some barring visible on the rump above the tail. ©Jacques de Klerk.*

Looking closely at the images, it was clear that the specific bird showed definite barring on the rump (Figures 3 and 4), which eliminated Senegal Coucal (Erritzøe et al. 2012, Vernon & Dean 2005). Still not being entirely sure what species the bird could be, I sent images to Trevor Hardaker for assistance with identification.

After debate and discussion with a group of experts, and taking all aspects mentioned above into consideration, it was concluded that the bird was indeed a dark morph of Burchell's Coucal, and with that, the first proven record of this morph occurring in Burchell's Coucal (T Hardaker pers. comm.).

To my knowledge the bird has not been spotted again.

***Figure 3**: Barring clearly visible on the rump of the bird, pointing identification to Burchell's Coucal ©Jacques de Klerk.*

Figure 4*: Image indicating the size of the bird. Barring on the rump clearly visible. ©Jacques de Klerk.*

Acknowledgements

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