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## **BIRD RINGING IN THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS, 2016**

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SAFRING Ringer 1222

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## AFRING NEWS

### BIRD RINGING IN THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS, 2016

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As a consequence of my four voluntary ringing visits to the Kuzeydoga migration ringing stations in eastern Turkey over the past 6 years, I formed a positive relationship with the founder and leader of the project, Dr. Cagan Sekercioglu, Assistant Professor of the Biology department of the University of Utah, USA. This led to my being invited to head up a team carrying out the field work for another project, namely an annual two-month survey of the birds of the montane rain-forest of the Ethiopian Highlands, and in particular the Hareenna forest within the Bale Mountain National Park.

The objective of the project was to monitor population changes and altitudinal movements of forest species within this biome. The 2016 field work was year six of a 12 year-plus project and ran from October 23<sup>rd</sup> through December 13<sup>th</sup>. This period ran from the last days of the main rainy season into the winter dry season.

The logistics of the project were quite arduous, in that ringing took place at 5 forest sites, with two days of ringing at each site, making a complete circuit of 10 days (Fig. 1). These 10-day circuits were repeated 5 times during the span of the project, and, as a measured effort system of 20 12metre 4-shelf nets was used at each site, this meant either setting up or taking down nets and campsites 50 times in 50 days, in addition to the travel on very bad roads between the five sites, spanning a distance of 134 kilometres between the top site – Dinsho, and the lowest site – Chiri.

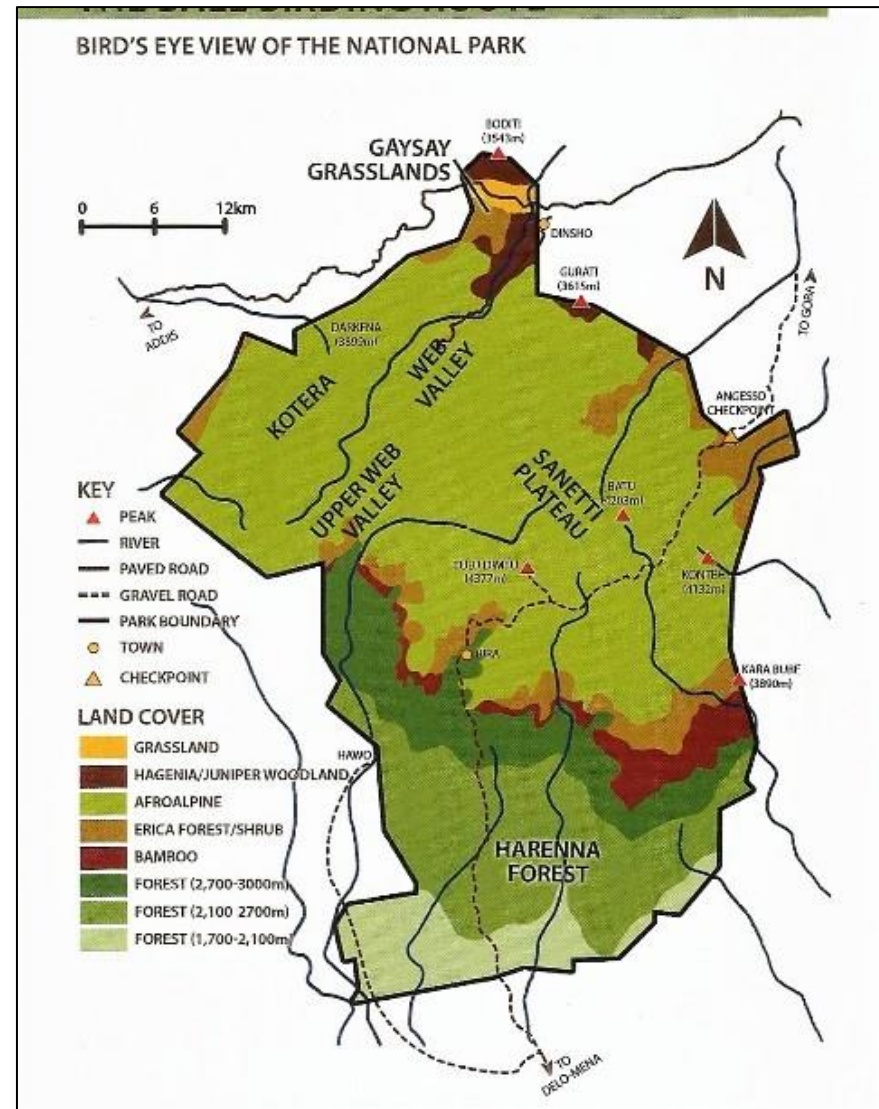


Fig. 1. Location of Hareenna forest in the Bale Mountain National Park

The project team consisted of 6 people – myself as ringer, plus 5 Ethiopian helpers – a driver, a cook, 2 assistants and an Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority monitor (Fig. 2). All team members spoke reasonable English and were experienced, very friendly and helpful in all respects. Transport consisted of a hired Toyota Land Cruiser, which type of vehicle certainly was necessary in view of the atrocious state of the Forest and Plateau road, especially during and immediately after the rainy season (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Bogged down.

Accommodation consisted of basic dormitory rooms at Dinsho and Katcha (Bale Mountain Lodge), and camping in Hareenna forest. The latter was a unique experience for me, as we simply pulled off the

road, walked into the forest, found a clearing and made camp, being totally self-sustaining and unprotected in habitat well known for forest Lion (Fig. 4) and Leopard, as well as a range of other mammals such as Hyaena, Golden Jackal, Genet, Civet Cat, Giant Forest Hog, Mountain Nyala, Melenik's Bushbuck, Colobus Monkey and Olive Baboon, all of which were observed at some stage of the stay. Thankfully, there were no snakes and no mosquitoes.



Fig. 3. The expedition team.

Ringing took place at each site from half an hour before dawn until dusk on day one, and from half an hour before dawn until noon on day two, with the second afternoon being used to break camp, move



to the next site and set up there. As it was thick forest habitat, ringing was fairly slow, with maximum catches between dawn and mid-morning, dwindling down to very little after that. It was noticeable that daily catches increased from very low rates at the highest altitudes to quite busy levels at the lowest forest, namely the shade-coffee forest at Chiri.



Fig. 4. Forest Lion in Haremma forest.

Over the 50-day period a total of 432 new birds were ringed, plus 149 re-captures from the previous five seasons – a grand total of 581 birds of 42 species. Of those species 24 were new to me, the other 18 being species that I had ringed previously in southern Africa, or in Turkey in the case of the two palaeartic migrant species captured,

namely Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*, and Common Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* (see table 1).

For me, the most interesting species ringed were the Abyssinian endemics, namely Abyssinian Catbird *Parophasma galinieri*, Brown-rumped Seedeater *Serinus tristriatus*, Abyssinian Slaty-flycatcher *Melaenornis chocolatinus* and Abyssinian Oriole *Oriolus monacha*. Other interesting species included the white-winged race of African Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis*, African Hill-babbler *Pseudoalcippe abyssinica*, and the Abyssinian cousin of our Victorin's and Knysna Warblers, the Cinnamon Bracken-warbler *Bradypterus cinnamomeus*.

There was an element of frustration in being surrounded each day by a number of noisy and exotic canopy-dwelling species that never came down to net-level and were thus never ringed. These included Yellow-fronted Parrot *Poicephalus flavifrons*, Black-winged Lovebird *Agapornis taranta*, Banded Barbet *Lybius undatus*, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill *Bycanistes brevis*, Sharpe's Starling *Pholia sharpie* and White-cheeked Turaco *Tauraco leucotis*.

At the completion of each circuit in the low-altitude shade-coffee forest at Chiri, we then undertook the long, slow drive of 134 kilometres back to Dinsho to start the next round. This grinding, mainly up-hill journey was made more interesting by our transit of the Sanetti Plateau, a high altitude region of afro-alpine meadow and home to a number of endemic animals and birds, the most famous of which is surely the endangered Ethiopian Wolf *Canis simensis*, which we were fortunate enough to see six times during our 10 transits (Fig. 5). This cold and desolate treeless plateau is a favourite hunting ground for many species of raptors due to the large numbers of rodents inhabiting the alpine meadows. My observations list for the plateau included 16 raptor species, ranging from the omni-present Augur Buzzard *Buteo augur* to the magnificent Golden Eagle *Aquila chrystatos*, and the Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*.

Additionally, a number of habitat-specific endemics were to be seen, such as Blue-winged Goose *Cyanocheu cyanoptera*, Black-headed Siskin *Serinus nigriceps* and Spot-breasted Lapwing *Vanellus melanocephalus*. The most southerly breeding population of Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* were also easily seen on the small ponds scattered across the plateau.



Fig. 5. Ethiopian Wolf.

Whilst the ringing work was challenging and living conditions were rather basic, this two-month adventure in Ethiopia was completely different to any ringing project I have undertaken in the past, and our ability to ring birds and observe the wildlife in the mainly unspoilt and pristine habitat of the Bale Mountain National Park was a privilege afforded to very few, and for which I will always be grateful.

### Acknowledgements

Dr Cagan Sekercioglu, Assistant Professor of Biology, University of Utah, USA.

Muluken Abayneh, Ecologist, Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority.

Table 1. Bale Mountain Project 2016 Season, Total Birds Processed by Site and Species (New-Recaptures-Total).

| Species                     | Latin                           | Dinsho  | Katcha  | Magano  | Manyate  | Chiri    | Total    |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|----------|----------|----------|
| Abyssinian Ground Thrush    | <i>Zoothera piaggiae</i>        |         | 4-16-20 | 11-4-15 | 15-11-26 |          | 30-31-61 |
| Mountain Thrush             | <i>Turdus abyssinicus</i>       | 14-1-15 | 14-6-20 | 3-0-3   | 5-1-6    | 32-4-36  | 68-12-80 |
| Tambourine Dove             | <i>Turtur tympanistria</i>      |         |         | 7-0-7   | 20-0-20  | 17-1-18  | 44-1-45  |
| Montane White-eye           | <i>Zosterops poliogastrus</i>   | 4-1-5   | 3-1-4   | 2-0-2   |          | 17-13-30 | 26-15-41 |
| Olive Sunbird               | <i>Nectarinia olivacea</i>      |         | 0-4-4   | 10-8-18 | 5-7-12   | 5-7-12   | 20-26-46 |
| Dark-capped Bulbul          | <i>Pycnonotus tricolor</i>      |         | 5-0-5   |         |          | 11-0-11  | 16-0-16  |
| Lemon Dove                  | <i>Aplopelia larvata</i>        |         | 5-0-5   | 4-0-4   | 3-0-3    | 4-0-4    | 16-0-16  |
| Abyssinian Crimsonwing      | <i>Cryptospiza salvadorii</i>   |         | 10-5-15 | 10-4-14 |          |          | 20-9-29  |
| Green Twinspot              | <i>Mandingoa nitidula</i>       |         |         |         | 16-2-18  | 6-3-9    | 22-5-27  |
| Chiffchaff                  | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>   | 2-0-2   | 14-1-15 |         |          |          | 16-1-17  |
| African Pygmy Kingfisher    | <i>Espidina picta</i>           |         |         |         | 2-0-2    | 12-10-22 | 14-10-24 |
| African Dusky Flycatcher    | <i>Muscicapa adusta</i>         | 1-0-1   | 1-3-4   | 2-1-3   | 2-0-2    | 7-4-11   | 13-8-21  |
| Ruepell's Robin-chat        | <i>Cossypha semirufa</i>        | 2-0-2   | 5-5-10  | 4-0-4   | 6-4-10   |          | 17-9-26  |
| Grey-backed Cameroptera     | <i>Cameroptera brachyura</i>    |         |         | 2-1-3   | 2-2-4    | 4-0-4    | 8-3-11   |
| Streaky Seedeater           | <i>Serinus striolatus</i>       | 2-0-2   | 4-4-8   |         |          |          | 6-4-10   |
| Brown-rumped Seedeater      | <i>Serinus tristriatus</i>      | 9-1-10  |         |         |          |          | 9-1-10   |
| Brown Woodland Warbler      | <i>Phylloscopus umbrovirens</i> | 3-2-5   | 4-0-4   | 1-0-1   |          |          | 8-2-10   |
| Red-capped Robin-chat       | <i>Cossypha natalensis</i>      |         |         |         |          | 5-4-9    | 5-4-9    |
| Abyssinian Slaty-flycatcher | <i>Melaenornis chocolatinus</i> | 5-3-8   | 3-0-3   | 3-0-3   |          | 1-0-1    | 12-3-15  |
| African Hill-babbler        | <i>Pseudoalcippe abyssinica</i> |         | 2-1-3   | 7-2-9   |          |          | 9-3-12   |
| African Paradise Flycatcher | <i>Terpsiphone viridis</i>      |         | 3-0-3   |         | 1-0-1    | 4-2-6    | 8-2-10   |
| Cinnamon Bracken Warbler    | <i>Bradypterus cinnamomeus</i>  |         | 3-0-3   | 2-0-2   |          |          | 5-0-5    |
| Yellow-bellied Waxbill      | <i>Coccygia quartina</i>        |         | 4-0-4   |         |          |          | 4-0-4    |
| European Blackcap           | <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>       |         | 1-0-1   |         |          | 6-0-6    | 7-0-7    |
| Common Fiscal               | <i>Lanius collaris</i>          |         |         |         |          | 3-1-4    | 3-1-4    |
| Abyssinian Oriole           | <i>Oriolis monacha</i>          |         | 0-2-2   | 1-0-1   |          | 1-0-1    | 2-2-4    |

| Species                   | Latin                         | Dinsho  | Katcha    | Magano   | Manyate   | Chiri      | Total              |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|-----------|----------|-----------|------------|--------------------|
| Narina Trogon             | <i>Apaloderma narina</i>      |         |           | 2-0-2    | 3-0-3     |            | 5-0-5              |
| African Thrush            | <i>Turdus pelios</i>          |         |           |          |           | 5-0-5      | 5-0-5              |
| Lesser Honeyguide         | <i>Indicator minor</i>        |         | 1-0-1     | 2-0-2    |           |            | 3-0-3              |
| Tawny-flanked Prinia      | <i>Prinia subflava</i>        |         | 1-1-2     |          |           |            | 1-1-2              |
| Scaly-throated Honeyguide | <i>Indicator variagatus</i>   |         |           | 1-0-1    | 1-0-1     |            | 2-0-2              |
| Northern Black Flycatcher | <i>Melaenornis edolioides</i> |         |           |          |           | 2-0-2      | 2-0-2              |
| Northern Puffback         | <i>Dryoscopus gambensis</i>   |         |           |          |           | 3-0-3      | 3-0-3              |
| Tacazze Sunbird           | <i>Nectarinia tacazze</i>     |         | 2-0-2     |          |           |            | 2-0-2              |
| African Goshawk           | <i>Accipiter tachiro</i>      |         | 1-0-1     |          |           |            | 1-0-1              |
| Swainson's Sparrow        | <i>Passer swainsonii</i>      |         | 1-0-1     |          |           |            | 1-0-1              |
| Abyssinian Catbird        | <i>Parophasma galinieri</i>   | 0-1-1   | 1-0-1     |          |           |            | 1-1-2              |
| Brown-throated Wattle-eye | <i>Platysteira cyanea</i>     |         |           | 1-0-1    |           |            | 1-0-1              |
| White-rumped Babbler      | <i>Turdoides leucopygia</i>   |         |           |          |           | 1-0-1      | 1-0-1              |
| Mountain Wagtail          | <i>Motacilla clara</i>        |         |           |          |           | 1-0-1      | 1-0-1              |
| Ethiopian Boubou          | <i>Laniarius aethiopicus</i>  |         |           |          |           | 1-0-1      | 1-0-1              |
| Black-and-white Mannikin  | <i>Spermestes bicolor</i>     |         |           |          |           | 1-0-1      | 1-0-1              |
| Total 42 species          |                               | 42-8-50 | 85-45-130 | 75-20-95 | 81-27-108 | 149-49-198 | <b>432-149-581</b> |
| Species per site          |                               | 9 ssp   | 25 ssp    | 19 ssp   | 13 ssp    | 23 ssp     | <b>42 ssp</b>      |