

## Preliminary checklists for two Important Bird Areas of Ethiopia: Sof Omar and Shek Husein in the Bale eco-region

Ethiopia harbours 837 bird species, 18 of which are endemic and a further 14 near endemic (shared with Eritrea) (Ash & Atkins 2009). To promote the conservation of these birds and their habitats, 69 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) were identified for Ethiopia (Fishpool & Evans 2001). These important areas were selected based on the following criteria: the presence of globally threatened birds (red data species; criterion A1), the presence of range-restricted species (whose distribution occurs within 5000 km<sup>2</sup>; criterion A2), the presence of species characteristic of specific biomes (criterion A3) and lastly, the presence of congregations (criterion A4) (Fishpool & Evans 2001). In many of these IBAs however, there is a distinct lack of adequate knowledge of avifauna assemblages and their significance (EWNHS 1996). Sof Omar and Shek Husein are two of these IBAs.

Sof Omar (6°54' N, 40°47' E; 1150–1450 m) and Shek Husein (7°50' N, 40°35' E; c. 1200 m) are situated in the Bale Zone of the Oromia Regional National State, in the south-eastern semi-arid lowlands of Ethiopia. Sof Omar is dominated by *Commiphora-Kirkia-Acacia* woodland and bushland and Shek Husein by mixed *acacia* and deciduous woodland. Both sites are significant places of worship which attract pilgrims from all over the country and are increasingly popular with tourists. Security problems and relative inaccessibility has meant that these areas, especially Shek Husein, were rarely visited in the past by birders, even in 1996 when the IBAs were being identified (EWNHS 1996). Both sites were selected as IBAs based on criterion A1 with Sof Omar also meeting criterion A3. It is only now, more than a decade later, that these sites have begun to be visited for their birding interest (Ash & Atkins 2009, Behrens *et al.* 2010, Spottiswoode *et al.* 2010)

In July 2007 and October 2008 AA visited both sites. Birds were recorded from a slow-moving vehicle while travelling from Robe town to Sof Omar caves and on a return trip from Ginir town to Shek Husein. Active bird searching was also conducted in the valley area of Sof Omar from the Cave's entrance to exit, and in and around the village of Shek Husein, for two to four hours each during both visits. All observations started and ended in the site specific characteristic habitats.

Appendix 1 provides an updated species list for both sites. Previous reports gave 65 species for Sof Omar (EWNHS 1996; Ash & Atkins 2009; Behrens *et al.* 2010; Spottiswood *et al.* 2010) and 48 for Shek Husein (EWNHS 1996, Ash & Atkins 2009). Of these, we were able to list 35 of the Sof Omar species and 14 from Shek Husein. We also added 12 new species for Sof Omar and 15 for Shek Husein.

In Sof Omar, newly documented species included the near threatened Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* and Eurasian Roller *Coracias garrulus*. In addition we found three species of which there are few Ethiopian records: Scarce Swift *Schoutedenapus myoptilus* (which belongs to the Afrotropical Highlands biome), White-headed Mousebird *Colius leucocephalus* and Blue-capped Cordon-bleu *Uraeginthus bengalus*. In July 2007, nine Scarce Swifts were observed flying over the vegetation covering the escarpment of Sof Omar Cave. They were more slender than other swifts, and darker than African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus* with slightly paler throat. Ash & Atkins (2009) gave only five previous Ethiopian records, the last being in 1990. Although

White-headed Mousebird is common in Somalia, the only published record from Ethiopia concerns a 1973 sighting on the Somali border, also (as for our observation) in an area where the Speckled Mousebird *C. striatus* occurs (Ash & Atkins 2009). There are only two previous Ethiopian reports of Blue-capped Cordon-bleu, also near the Somali border, the last of these in 1973. We now have 70 species listed for Sof Omar, including 26 belonging to the Somali-Masai Biome and two to the Afrotropical Highlands biome. Three species reported for Ethiopia for just the sixth, third and second time respectively, two are near threatened and one is an Ethiopian endemic.

Newly reported species for Shek Husein include the vulnerable White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis* and again the elusive White-headed Mousebird. This brings the total number of species documented to 56, including 21 species belonging to the Somalia-Masai Biome, one endemic, one endangered, one vulnerable and one near threatened species.

It is clear, given the diversity, rarity and the number of globally important species occurring, that both sites are correctly considered IBAs and have potential as popular Ethiopian avitourism sites. It is also clear that further visits are required at other times of year to obtain comprehensive species checklists. Serious consideration should be given to conservation of these areas given the high levels of human use. The tentative nomination of Shek Husein for World Heritage Site listing is a major step forward.

### Acknowledgements

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**Appendix 1.** Provisional revised checklists for Sof Omar and Shek Husein.

|   | Sof Omar       |             | Shek Husein    |             |
|---|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
|   | Present record | Past record | Present record | Past record |
| Black-shouldered Kite <i>Elanus caeruleus</i>                             |                | x           |                |             |
| Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans aegyptius</i>                                | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| Bearded Vulture <i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>                                  |                |             | x              | x           |
| Egyptian Vulture <i>Neophron percnopterus</i>                             |                |             | x              | x           |
| Hooded Vulture <i>Necrosyrtes monachus</i>                                | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| White-headed Vulture <sup>b</sup> <i>Trigonoceps occipitalis</i>          |                |             |                | x           |
| African White-backed Vulture <sup>c</sup> <i>Gyps africanus</i>           |                |             | x              | x           |
| Pallid Harrier* <sup>c</sup> <i>Circus macrourus</i>                      |                | x           |                |             |
| African Harrier Hawk <i>Polyboroides typus</i>                            | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Eastern Chanting Goshawk <sup>†</sup> <i>Melierax poliopterus</i>         | x              |             | x              |             |
| Augur Buzzard <i>Buteo augur</i>  | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Tawny Eagle <i>Aquila rapax</i>   | x              |             |                | x           |
| Crested Francolin <i>Francolinus sephaena</i>                             | x              | x           |                |             |
| Kori Bustard <i>Ardeotis kori</i>   | x              | x           |                |             |
| Speckled Pigeon <i>Columba guinea</i>                                     | x              |             |                | x           |
| Red-eyed Dove <i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>                            | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| Ring-necked Dove <i>S. capicola</i>                                       | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Laughing Dove <i>S. senegalensis</i>                                      | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| Blue-spotted Wood Dove <i>Turtur afer</i>                                 |                | x           |                |             |
| African Orange-bellied Parrot <sup>†</sup> <i>Poicephalus rufiventris</i> | x              |             | x              |             |
| White-bellied Go-away-bird <sup>†</sup> <i>Corythaixoides leucogaster</i> | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| Scarce Swift‡ <i>Schoutedenapus myoptilus</i>                             |                | x           |                |             |
| Speckled Mousebird <i>Colius striatus</i>                                 | x              | x           | x              |             |
| White-headed Mousebird <sup>†</sup> <i>C. leucocephalus</i>               |                | x           |                | x           |
| Narina Trogon <i>Apaloderma narina</i>                                    | x              |             | x              |             |
| Eurasian Hoopoe* <i>Upupa epops</i>                                       |                | x           | x              |             |
| Black-billed Wood-hoopoe <sup>†</sup> <i>Phoeniculus somaliensis</i>      | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Abyssinian Scimitarbill <sup>†</sup> <i>Rhinopomastus minor</i>           | x              |             | x              |             |
| Eurasian Roller* <sup>c</sup> <i>Coracias garrulus</i>                    |                | x           |                |             |
| Northern Red-billed Hornbill <i>Tockus erythrorhynchus</i>                | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Hemprich's Hornbill <i>T. hemprichii</i>                                  | x              | x           |                |             |
| Von der Decken's Hornbill <sup>†</sup> <i>T. deckeni</i>                  | x              |             | x              |             |
| Black-throated Barbet <sup>†</sup> <i>Tricholaema melanocephala</i>       | x              | x           |                |             |
| Lesser Honeyguide <i>Indicator minor</i>                                  | x              |             |                | x           |
| Mountain Wagtail <i>Motacilla clara</i>                                   | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Fork-tailed Drongo <i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>                              | x              |             | x              | x           |
| Brown-tailed Rock-Chat <sup>†</sup> <i>Cercomela scotocerca</i>           | x              |             | x              |             |
| Dwarf Raven <sup>†</sup> <i>Corvus edithae</i>                            |                |             |                | x           |
| Northern Grey Tit <sup>†</sup> <i>Parus thruppi</i>                       | x              |             |                |             |
| White-rumped Babbler <sup>†</sup> <i>Turdoides leucopygius</i>            | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Common Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>                                  | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| Northern Brownbul <i>Phyllastrephus strepitans</i>                        | x              |             | x              |             |
| White-winged Cliff-chat‡ <i>Thamnolaea semirufa</i>                       |                | x           |                |             |

|  | Sof Omar       |             | Shek Husein    |             |
|--|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
|  | Present record | Past record | Present record | Past record |
| Pygmy Batis† <i>Batis perko</i>                            | x              |             |                |             |
| Grey-headed Batis <i>B. orientalis</i>                     | x              |             | x              |             |
| Boran Cisticola† <i>Cisticola bodessa</i>                  |                |             | x              |             |
| Somali Long-billed Crombec† <i>Sylvietta isabellina</i>    | x              | x           |                |             |
| Grey-backed Camaroptera <i>Camaroptera brachyura</i>       | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Grey Wren-Warbler† <i>Calamonastes simple</i>              | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Little Rock Thrush <i>Monticola rufocinereus</i>           | x              |             | x              |             |
| African Grey Flycatcher† <i>Bradornis microrhynchus</i>    | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Northern Black Flycatcher <i>Melaenornis edolioides</i>    | x              | x           |                |             |
| Lead coloured Flycatcher† <i>Myioparus plumbeus</i>        | x              |             |                |             |
| Common Fiscal <i>Lanius collaris</i>                       |                | x           | x              |             |
| Red-napped Bush-shrike† <i>Laniarius ruficeps</i>          | x              |             |                | x           |
| Rosy-patched Bush-Shrike† <i>Rhodophoneus cruentus</i>     | x              |             | x              |             |
| Black-crowned Tchagra <i>Tchagra senegalus</i>             | x              |             |                | x           |
| Three-streaked Tchagra† <i>T. jamesi</i>                   | x              |             | x              | x           |
| Grey-headed Bush-shrike <i>Malaconotus blanchoti</i>       | x              | x           |                |             |
| Abyssinian white-eye† <i>Zosterops abyssinicus</i>         | x              |             | x              |             |
| Greater Blue-eared Starling <i>Lamprotornis chalybaeus</i> | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| Superb Starling <i>L. superbus</i>                         | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Fischer's Starling† <i>L. fischeri</i>                     | x              |             |                |             |
| Shelley's Starling <i>L. shelleyi</i>                      | x              |             | x              |             |
| Golden-breasted Starling <i>L. regius</i>                  | x              |             |                |             |
| Bristle-crowned Starling† <i>Onychognathus salvadori</i>   | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Collared Sunbird <i>Hedydipna collaris</i>                 | x              |             |                |             |
| Hunter's Sunbird† <i>Chalcomitra hunter</i>                | x              |             |                |             |
| Shining Sunbird† <i>Nectarinia habessinica</i>             | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| Grey-headed Sparrow† <i>Passer griseus gongonensis</i>     | x              | x           |                | x           |
| White-headed Buffalo-weaver† <i>Dinemellia dinemelli</i>   | x              | x           |                |             |
| White-browed Sparrow-weaver <i>Plocepasser mahali</i>      |                |             |                | x           |
| Speke's Weaver† <i>Ploceus spekei</i>                      | x              | x           |                | x           |
| Red-billed Quelea <i>Quelea quelea</i>                     |                |             |                | x           |
| Northern Red Bishop <i>Euplectes franciscanus</i>          |                | x           |                | x           |
| Red-collared Widowbird <i>E. ardens</i>                    | x              | x           | x              | x           |
| Black-and-White Mannikin <i>Spermestes bicolor</i>         |                | x           |                |             |
| Purple Grenadier† <i>Uraeginthus ianthinogaster</i>        | x              |             | x              |             |
| Crimson-rumped Waxbill <i>Estrilda rhodopya</i>            | x              |             |                |             |
| Red-checked Cordon-bleu <i>Uraeginthus bengalus</i>        | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Blue-capped Cordon-bleu† <i>U. cyanocephalus</i>           |                |             |                | x           |
| Village Indigobird <i>Vidua chalybeate</i>                 |                | x           |                | x           |
| Eastern Paradise Whydah <i>Vidua paradisaea</i>            | x              |             | x              |             |
| Straw-tailed Whydah† <i>V. fischeri</i>                    | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Salvadori's Seed-eater† <i>Serinus xantholaemus</i>        | x              | x           | x              |             |
| Somali Bunting <i>Emberiza poliopleura</i>                 | x              |             | x              |             |
| Total  | 65             | 47          | 48             | 29          |

\* = Palaearctic migrant; a = Endangered; b = Vulnerable; c = Near-threatened; † = Somali-Masai biome; ‡ = Afrotropical Highlands Biome