

The revision of Britton (1980) and the need to keep pace with all on-going ornithological research and publications

Thirty years ago Britton's *Birds of East Africa: their habitat, status and distribution* was a landmark publication covering all known bird species occurring in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. It was at the time the definitive work of its type for a region of outstanding biodiversity. It was the work of ten authors, all of whom had particular interests and areas of experience and expertise.

Since then our knowledge of East African birds has increased considerably and, together with the advances in DNA sequencing, our understanding of avian systematics and taxonomy is continually moving forward. As a result, there are now hundreds of recommended changes from that first review of East African birds back in 1980. In addition, there have been several major field guides, bird atlases and checklists published in the last twenty years, all designed to assist in the identification of the birds of our region. While the forthcoming revision of Britton cannot list in minute detail the distribution of any species over such a vast area, readers are urged to consult the on-going atlas projects for each of the three countries for more detailed overviews of individual species distribution.

As our knowledge of bird species and families increases, there is need to be more aware of the importance of avian taxonomy, systematics and nomenclature. All bird species are known by the name given to it by the person who first described it. Vernacular names will vary the world over and while there is no hope of any consensus within the English-speaking world in this respect, all our common vernacular names are merely for regional use only. However, it is always best to follow a recognized and authoritative publication when deciding on any vernacular name. In my revision, all scientific names will follow those used in the forthcoming revision of Dickinson (2003), while English names will follow those used in our local field guides and checklists. The revision will also contain full details of all type specimens collected in East Africa from 1824 to the present time.

The most influential work on avian systematics to date was, without doubt, that undertaken by Charles Sibley and his collaborators using DNA-DNA hybridization applied to a wide range of avian taxa. Despite much criticism, some of the higher level relationships revealed have stood the test of time, and have been substantiated by later methods. However, others have not, and therefore caution is urged to all who may prefer to blindly follow the classification proposed in Sibley & Ahlquist (1990), and Sibley & Monroe (1990, 1993). Their resulting classification advocated many changes to the more conventional familiar groupings, but to date only a very few authors have incorporated the more radical aspects of that Sibley & Monroe assemblage.

All taxonomic debates centre around the definition of species and subspecies. The two major species concepts today are the Biological Species Concept (BSC) and the Phylogenetic Species Concept (PSC). The traditional Biological Species Concept as advocated by Mayr (1963, 1970) and long used in East Africa (Britton 1980, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996) treats species as groups of interbreeding populations that are reproductively isolated from other groups. Initially it was felt that hybridization by two taxa when in contact with each other indicated that they represented a single species. This was later modified to allow for the acceptance of stable hybrid

populations when interbreeding regularly occurred between two accepted species (Short 1969, Mayr 1982).

However, I must again urge caution in the blind acceptance of all that is published today. While the Phylogenetic Species Concept cannot totally replace the Biological Species Concept, we must all remind ourselves that species cannot be defined simply on phylogenetic evidence alone, and while it is good to publish these results, there is the need for a caveat that, while such results may suggest a relationship, they do not necessarily prove one. Vocalizations are also an important tool in helping to determine whether certain species are closely related or not and, as such, should always be taken into consideration when determining a relationship between differing forms.

The taxonomic level at which an avian population is recognized often has a significant impact on the conservation status that is given to it and, as a consequence, the resources that flow on from this. A current topic of debate is whether some forms should be treated as species in order to assist with conservation efforts, even when other evidence does not support such a status. An example is the several endemic subspecies within the Eastern Arc Mountains of eastern Tanzania and south-eastern Kenya that have been proposed as species in order to attract greater conservation attention and protection.

To date, all East African lists have been based on the published works of Britton (1980), Zimmerman *et al.* (1996), and the six-volume *Birds of Africa* (1982–2004), with modifications following Dickinson (2003) and periodic BOU Taxonomic Recommendations published in *Ibis*. The forthcoming Systematic and Taxonomic Revision of East African birds will look closely at all published material and subsequent taxonomic recommendations, but will rely largely on peer-reviewed publications. It will also draw heavily on the recommendations contained in the forthcoming 4th edition of the *Howard & Moore Complete Checklist of Birds of the World* (Dickinson & Remsen *in prep*). In cases where taxonomic decisions are either pending or unresolved, then a conservative approach will be made until further evidence is forthcoming.

It must always be remembered that there is no single correct list of birds for any country or region of the world, as levels of understanding vary between authors and regional authorities. Therefore any list should be treated as a provisional classification that hopefully will be revised at regular intervals as new studies and data become available. However, with the speed of published taxonomic recommendations reaching unprecedented levels, a word of caution must also be urged when considering some seemingly authoritative recommendations. Many molecular studies are often limited in scope, while others are often poorly researched, resulting in some highly questionable results.

East Africa continues to be one of the major areas of biodiversity in Africa, and particularly in Tanzania many new discoveries continue. Sadly, in Kenya we are witnessing a devastating decline in some of our most precious of natural resources, due largely to a growth in human population that is already showing signs of becoming unsustainable. As a result we have already lost a number of bird species, and others, particularly forest and grassland species are declining rapidly. All species that are in decline will be highlighted in my revision with current Global and Regional Threat levels indicated.

While all species accounts are currently in a second draft stage, all are open for review and revision and additional data are always welcomed from interested people.

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Swallow-tailed Bee-eater *Merops hirundineus*: first record for Kenya

On 21 May 2000, while birding around the extensive pools of the Sand Quarry in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest near the Gede forest station mid-morning with Tansy Bliss, she suddenly noticed a small bird sail out from the top of a tree and return to it with an insect. As it perched on an exposed branch we found ourselves looking at the back of a largely green bee-eater with a striking long blue and very deeply forked tail with extensive white tips. It was a species I was not familiar with so we therefore took detailed field notes of it. We watched it for about four minutes including seeing it fly from the first perch to another one lower down and set against the darker background of dense foliage. It still had its back turned to us but it moved enough to briefly show a narrow, darkish breast band below a bright yellow throat and the broad, black eye-stripe looking like a mask. It was quite vocal, giving a typical bee-eater high-pitched trilling call though not particularly loudly. It stayed long enough for us to watch it for a total of 3 to 4 minutes after which it took off and flew up and away over the trees to the east, still calling. In spite of trying to follow it, the bird was not seen or heard again.

When we reached home and consulted the literature, it was very easily identified by the long blue, forked tail as a Swallow-tailed Bee-eater *Merops hirundineus*. I immediately informed John Fanshawe before heading back up to the swamp armed with camera and 500 mm lens. I spent a further two hours around the same area and