

Short Communications

Two recent records of Cassin's Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus africanus* from Imenti Forest, Kenya

Cassin's Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus africanus* is a little-known forest-dependent species that occurs mainly in West and Central Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982). The species was considered a Guineo-Congolian near endemic whose eastern-most distribution was the forests of western Uganda, but some recent reports suggest that it was once more widespread in the highland forests of East Africa (Clark & Edelstam 2001, Jones 2007). The discovery of an adult Cassin's Hawk Eagle in Ndundulu Forest of the Udzungwa Mountains, southern Tanzania, represents the eastern-most confirmed record of this species (Jones 2007). This, along with other observations in the Udzungwa Mountains of species of flora and fauna with Guineo-Congolian affinities, indicates an historical link between the Afromontane forests of southern Tanzania and the lowland Guineo-Congolian forests (Jones 2007). The first record of Cassin's Hawk Eagle in Kenya, a bird collected in the highland forests of Mt Elgon (Clark & Edelstam 2001), suggests a wider link that includes the Afromontane forests of Kenya. Evidence of this historical link was recently substantiated through two further confirmed records from central Kenya. In May 2006 and February 2013, one adult and one juvenile Cassin's Hawk Eagle respectively were photographed in Imenti Forest (0°05'N, 37°37'E; 1400–2200 m) on the northern flank of Mt Kenya, approximately 3 km west of Meru Town. ST, and later Bill Clark, positively identified both records from these photographs. Rob Davies further confirmed the identity of the 2013 bird as a Cassin's Hawk Eagle. Both records were subsequently accepted by the East African Rarities Committee (N. Hunter, pers. comm.).

The first observation was on 16 May 2006 during a tour led by BF. A large black-and-white raptor flew low across a clearing and disappeared into the forest. Some



Figure 1. Adult Cassin's Hawk Eagle in forest clearing, Imenti Forest, Kenya, 16 May 2006 (photo B. Finch).

minutes later it was relocated perched at the edge of an area cleared by illegal charcoal producers. The bird was initially distinguished by its size and shape, which resembled that of an African Hawk Eagle *Aquila spilogaster* (Fig. 1). But with the exception of Ayres's Hawk Eagle *A. ayresii*, it differed markedly in proportion from other black-and-white forest raptors. It was bulky, with a medium length tail and thick legged, which ruled out Great Sparrowhawk *Accipiter melanoleucus* and Augur Buzzard *Buteo augur*. The underparts from the throat to the legs were white, and the leg feathers were covered with small black spots, which helped to further eliminate the above two species. The bird had black flanks, which is inconsistent with most Ayres's Hawk Eagles, which show irregular black blotches. The tail was of medium length, but was only seen from below. The terminal band was broad, but the remaining few complete tail bands were very narrow.

On 28 February 2013, a raptor was spotted by PW perched at the top of a tall tree adjacent to the Nanyuki–Meru Highway. The bird was large, with heavy vertical streaking on its breast, enormous talons and feathered legs (Fig. 2). Its head was brown with a large bill and no obvious crest. It was



Figure 2. Four photographs of the same individual juvenile Cassin's Hawk Eagle in the tree canopy along a busy roadside, Imenti Forest, Kenya, 28 February 2013 (photos S. Kapila). 2a. Front view showing dark eye colour, dark streaking on the throat and chest. 2b. Front view showing very thick tarsus, spotting on legs, and size of talons. 2c. Lateral view showing the buffy white-tipped upperwings and secondaries, and the grey-brown tail tipped with white. 2d. View of white undertail coverts with brown spotting, large feet and talons, and medium length tail.

later identified from photographs as a juvenile Cassin's Hawk Eagle, based on the laterally compressed bill, large feet and eye, short and massively thick tarsus, and wing to tail length ratio.

The only previous record of a Cassin's Hawk Eagle in Kenya came from a museum specimen collected in 1926 by the Dr H. Granvik Expedition (Clark & Edelstam 2001). The specimen was lying in the Malmö Naturmuseum in Sweden, and was originally incorrectly identified as a Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennata*, but later identified as a juvenile Cassin's Hawk Eagle that had originated from the forests of Mt Elgon on the western border of Kenya (Clark & Edelstam 2001). The extraordinary gap of 80 years between this record and the present sightings is presumably indicative of the difficulty in observing

this species in its dense forest habitat, and also of the limited ornithological surveys that have been conducted in Kenyan forests.

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