

A 'grey-mutant' paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone* sp. from western Uganda

Chapin (1963) discussed in some detail the supposed 'grey mutants' of the African Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis* occurring in southwestern Uganda, eastern DR Congo and the coastal region of Gabon, from where several paradise-flycatchers with black, crested heads, and with bodies, wings and tail wholly or almost wholly dark-bluish-grey had been collected. Such birds were originally treated as either 'melanistic mutants' or as a grey-backed colour phase of *Terpsiphone viridis*.

While there was no mention of these birds in Britton (1980), Friedmann & Williams (1970) commented on a small series of paradise-flycatchers collected in November 1969 from the Kalinzu Forest of southwestern Uganda which included two females with the entire upperparts, wings and tail dark bluish grey, one of which was seen together with, and appeared to be following,, a red-backed, long-tailed male. The series the authors felt, illustrated the polymorphic nature of the African Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis ferreti*.

While birding in Uganda back in 2017, local guide Brian Tuhaise had mentioned to me an all-grey, forest-dwelling paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone* sp. that lived in the Maramagambo (Imaramagambo) Forest, in the southern sector of Queen Elizabeth National Park close to the Jacana Safari Lodge. On 20 June 2019 during a return visit to Uganda, and within 50 m from the Safari Lodge, I soon located the distinctive calls of paradise-flycatchers and had my first distant glimpses of the bird, which, true to Brian's information, was entirely grey with a darker sooty head. They were not immediately cooperative towards my photographic attempts but after a few hours I got lucky when I walked right into a male bird that had been sitting quietly. As I fired my shutter, the bird became incredibly excited and performed the most stunning tail-fanning display for 20 s before heading off into the forest. It was quite magical!



The bird was entirely blue-grey with no suggestion of rufous or white; its long central tail streamers eliminated Bedford's Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone bedfordias*, which is endemic to nearby DR Congo. The head of the male was darker, matt sooty-grey and more in keeping with the African Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis*, and

not glossy black as one might expect for a variety of Red-bellied Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone rufiventer*. The eye-ring and extensive gape flange were vibrant blue. The vent was paler grey than breast and belly but not white or rufous.

The call was typical for a *Terpsiphone*, but different from other *viridis* I have encountered in East Africa. The bird responded to playback of *viridis* but ignored playback of *rufiventer*, neither of which were seen at this location.

I am inclined to believe that this undescribed form could possibly qualify for species status using the Tobias criteria, although I am also open to the idea that it could qualify as a subspecies of *viridis* if the parameters for that species were changed, or even as a *stable* hybrid between *viridis* and *rufiventer* as suggested in recent documentation of a near identical-looking bird from southeastern Nigeria that lacked tail streamers (Barshep *et al.*, 2020).

As discussed with Nik Borrow, Gael Vandeweghe and a few others, the only way to conclude any debate would be for DNA testing to be performed, but this should be part of a much larger, pan-African study of all *Terpsiphone* taxa as there are several 'species contenders' that may not be as worthy, and vice versa.

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