

## Does the Ethiopian Swallow *Hirundo aethiopica* occur in Tanzania?

Britton (1980) states that *H. aethiopica* is, "common and apparently resident in open country along the coastal strip south to Tanga, typically nesting under coral overhangs, but also on buildings" and that "there are recent sight records from Moshi and Mtwara in eastern Tanzania." There are no references given in support of these statements. Concerned about the lack of data on this bird, Baker (2001) requested information from the East African birding community but none was forthcoming.

*Hirundo aethiopica* breeds in buildings in central Kenya but in the southeast it is confined to seacoasts with coral cliffs for nesting (Grant & Lewis 1984). If the species does indeed occur south into Tanzania, it will surely be an expansion of this population and most unlikely to occur many kilometres inland, on buildings.

The 'recent sight record' from Moshi is actually a nest record card dated April 1966 which I have a copy of. Only the scientific name *H. aethiopica* is given and the numbers of pairs as 'numerous'. The Lesser Striped Swallow *Cecropis abyssinica* (Abyssinia being the old name for Ethiopia) is a common breeding species throughout northern Tanzania. The observer agrees that this was most likely a simple transcription error (C.F. Mann, pers. comm.), which unfortunately continues to be propagated in the literature (Keith *et al.* 1992). Turner & Rose (1989) even stating, "but there are now numerous records as far as eastern Tanzania".

The 'recent' record from Mtwara is also a nest record card dated May 1976. The observer was W.G. Dyson, on a visit to Masasi, which is 140 km from the coast (not Mtwara which is a coastal town) who noted, "other occupied nests nearby on the walls of hotel". I have been unable to find out much about Mr Dyson, but a search suggests he was a forester based in Kenya. I cannot locate any other nest record cards by him nor find him in the ornithological literature. He was most likely in Masasi on a short-term consultancy and would probably have been unfamiliar with the birds in southeastern Tanzania.

The Wire-tailed Swallow *H. smithi* is a locally common and widespread species throughout Tanzania and is often mistaken for *H. aethiopica* by inexperienced observers. I would strongly suggest that this was simply an identification error on the part of Mr Dyson.

Sclater (1930) gives, "south to the Pangani River in Tanganyika Territory for the range of *H. aethiopica*" and from this Britton (*op. cit.*) derived "south to Tanga".

Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1955) simply follow Sclater (1930) without comment. There are no notations in Grant's personal copy of Sclater (1930) which he used when compiling the texts and maps for Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1955) (NEB's private collection). Given that the intervening years cover the period (1928–1946) when R.E. Moreau was resident in northeastern Tanzania, this is a striking absence of records. Sclater & Moreau (1933) do not mention this species and I cannot trace any mention of *H. aethiopica* in the numerous (more than 90) papers of R.E. Moreau that I have been able to access, although seemingly, he spent little time on the coast and his collections do not include any coastal waders. That he and his collectors missed such birds as Usambara Eagle Owl *Bubo poensis vosseleri*, Sokoke Scops Owl *Otus irenae*, Swynnerton's Robin *Swynnertonia swynnertoni* and East Coast Akalat *Sheppardia gunningi* in the forests of the East Usambaras testifies to the restrictions placed on his time, especially during the war years.

In a long series of papers by N.R. Fuggles-Couchman (1936, 1939, 1946, 1951, 1953, 1954, 1957, 1958, 1962) dealing mostly with northeastern Tanganyika, there is no mention of *H. aethiopica*. Fuggles-Couchman & Elliott (1946) do not mention *H. aethiopica* but their area of concern – north-central Tanganyika – did not include the northeastern coast.

Reichenow (1894) wrote:

“L. 140, F. 105–110 mm. Oberseits glänzend blauschwarz; Stirn rothbraun; Unterseite Weiss, bei jüngeren Individuen theilweise rostfarben verwaschen, mit einem blauschwarzen, in der Mitte unterbrochenen Kropfband; Schwanzfedern mit weissem Fleck auf der Innenfahne. – Bagamoyo.”

Translation by Friedemann Vetter: Shiny blue-black on top; Forehead red-brown; White underside, partly washed rust-coloured in younger individuals, with a blue-black crop band, interrupted in the middle; Tail feathers with white spots on the inner vane. – Bagamoyo”.

There is no reference to a specimen or a collector. I cannot find any other reference to Bagamoyo in the literature and have not traced any specimens in German museums, but I have not undertaken an exhaustive enquiry.

There is a specimen in the Natural History Museum in Tring whose label states that it was collected by R.M. Meinertzhagen (RMM) on 3 August 1916 at Korogwe on the Pangani River. It is well known that RMM was in northeastern Tanganyika (now Tanzania) during the First World War but there are strong doubts that he was in Korogwe in August 1916. During the 1920s, RMM had already established a bona fide reputation in ornithological circles and Sclater (*op. cit.*) would not have considered questioning this record. It was not until much later that RMM was shown to be a fraud, and his specimens are now under close review and have been withdrawn from general circulation (Knox 1993). It now appears quite likely that RMM was not in Korogwe on that date and that this specimen was either collected by him elsewhere or was stolen and relabelled. We may never know, but this specimen should surely not be the sole reason for Ethiopian Swallow to be included in the avifauna of Tanzania.

A photograph (Fig. 1) of the specimen in Tring is included. It has been examined by Angela Turner who confirms its identification as *H. aethiopica*.





**Figure 1.** Single specimen in the collection at Tring (photos: Mark Adams).

There has been the occasional record submitted to the Tanzania Atlas, but none has withstood close scrutiny. ebird was accessed on 1 September 2019 when there were 13 records for Tanzania; eight of these are from a single observer who chooses not to engage with any East African birding organization or reply to questions about any of his many sightings. These eight claims of multiple birds with a maximum of eight individuals and one other ebird claim are from a stretch of coast south of Pangani with sandy beaches and no coral cliffs. Other observers who are very familiar with this area have not reported Ethiopian Swallow. There is a single claim from Amani Nature Reserve, a well-watched site with no other claimed observations. There are two claims from Peponi, to the north of Pangani, one of which has since been withdrawn. There is an intriguing claim from the Uмба River just to the north of Lunga Lunga in south-eastern Kenya that requires clarification as this is from atypical riverine habitat. There are no claims from the area of Vanga in extreme south-eastern Kenya, but small numbers are well known from Shimoni, 26 km north-northeast of Fish Eagle Point, c. 20 km north-northeast of Tanga.

If this coastal population existed in Tanzania, then birds would surely occur close to Fish Eagle Point only 17 km south of the Kenyan border where suitable coral cliff habitat exists. However, despite many visits by experienced field birders over several years, there has not been a single claim from this area.

I believe it would be prudent to remove this species from the avifauna of Tanzania until a well-supported claim has been submitted to, and approved by, the EARC. This note has been approved for publication by the East African Rarities Committee.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I thank Mark Adams for providing images and details of the specimen in the British Museum at Tring; Angela Turner for confirming the identification of the specimen; Clive Mann for corresponding on the Moshi Nest Record Card; and Friedemann Vetter for the translation of the German text.

## References

- BAKER, N.E. 2001. Information requested: Tanzania localities in Britton (1980) for Kenrick's Starling *Poeoptera kenricki*, Iringa Akalat Sheppardia *lowei*, Ethiopian Swallow *Hirundo aethiopica* and Southern Rock Bunting *Emberiza capensis*. *Scopus* 2001: 68.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1936. Notes on the nesting habits of some Tanganyika birds. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 1: 61–76.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1939. Notes on some birds of the Eastern Province of Tanganyika Territory. *Ibis* 14 3(1): 76–106.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1946. Further notes on nesting habits and the breeding seasons of some Tanganyika birds. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 21: 85–103.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1951. The habitat distribution of birds of northern, eastern and central Tanganyika, with field keys. Part I – Birds of the seashore. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 33: 48–59.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1953. The habitat distribution of birds of northern, eastern and central Tanganyika, with field keys. Part II – Birds of cultivations and townships. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 35: 14–37.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1954. The habitat distribution of birds of northern, eastern and central Tanganyika, with field keys. Part III – The birds of the deciduous woodland and bushland. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 37: 71–114.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1957. The habitat distribution of birds of northern, eastern and central Tanganyika, with field keys. Part IV – Birds of thorn-bush. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 46: 32–68.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1958. Notes from Tanganyika. *Ibis* 100(3): 449–451.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. 1962. The habitat distribution of birds of northern, eastern and central Tanganyika, with field keys. Part V – Birds of lakes, rivers and swamps. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 58 & 59: 67–97.
- FUGGLES-COUCHMAN, N.R. & ELLIOTT, H.F.I. 1946. Some records and field-notes from north-eastern Tanganyika Territory. *Ibis* 88: 327–347.
- GRANT, L. & LEWIS, A.D. 1984. Breeding of the Ethiopian Swallow *Hirundo aethiopica* in Interior Kenya. *Scopus* 8(3): 67–72.
- KEITH, S., URBAN, E.K. & FRY, C.H. (EDS.) 1992. *The Birds of Africa*. Vol. IV. London: Academic Press.
- KNOX, A.G. 1993. Richard Meinertzhagen – A case of fraud examined. *Ibis* 135: 320–325.
- MACKWORTH-PRAED, C.W. & GRANT, C.H.B. 1955. *African Handbook of Birds*. Series 1. *Birds of Eastern and North Eastern Africa*. Vol. II. London: Longmans.
- REICHENOW, A. 1894. *Die Vögel Deutsch-Ost-Afrikas*. Geographische Verlagshandlung Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- SCLATER, W.L. 1930. *Systema Avium Ethiopicarum*. A systematic list of the birds of the Ethiopian Region. Part II. British Ornithologists' Union. London: Taylor and Francis.
- SCLATER, W.L. & MOREAU, R.E. 1933. Taxonomic and field notes on some birds of north-eastern Tanganyika Territory – Part IV. *Ibis* 13 3(2): 187–219.
- TURNER, A. & ROSE, C. 1989. *A handbook to the Swallows and Martins of the World*. London: Christopher Helm.

## N.E. Baker

P.O. Box 396, Iringa, Tanzania. Email: [tzbirdatlas@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:tzbirdatlas@yahoo.co.uk)

*Scopus* 40(2): 84–87, July 2020

Received 9 April, 2020