

ANGOLA opportunities for exploration

TEXT MICHAEL MILLS

SWIERSTRA'S
FRANCOLIN



IT'S 2014. Twelve years have passed since the cessation of the Angolan civil war, and field visits to Angola once again became more than just a dream for ornithologists and birders. At the end of this period of unrest, the 30-year black hole in research and exploration had raised many questions. How had birds and other wildlife fared during the conflict? Was our pre-independence knowledge of threatened, endemic birds precise enough to make informed conservation assessments or was there still much to be learnt? What were the songs and calls of the endemics? And where were the best sites to see the birds?

THE FIRST BIRD-MINDED explorers who came to evaluate the situation have been followed by a steady trickle of visitors, and gradually these questions have been answered. Ornithological surveys across the central escarpment zone and in the montane areas have delivered a more comprehensive picture of endemic bird distributions and abundances. Fortunately, it appears that the war was not detrimental to them and in most cases larger ranges and populations have been revealed than those known pre-war.

It appears that Grey-striped Francolin is less threatened than previously thought and it was downlisted

to Least Concern. The state of the afromontane forests, however, is of grave concern and their rarest inhabitant, Swierstra's Francolin, has been uplisted to Endangered. Fortunately, new and important forest patches have been located, most significantly in the Namba Mountains, where the full suite of Angolan afromontane specials are still to be found; this is particularly welcome news because several appear to be extinct at Mount Moco. New species are slowly being added to the country's documented avifauna. The vocalisations of all endemics have now been recorded and described, and a CD with their songs has been >

The forest-clad hills of the central Angolan escarpment are now relatively well studied but the breeding habits of most endemic bird species there remain a mystery.

MARTIM MELO



TASSO LEVENTIS



top Pulitzer's Longbill is one of four endangered endemics found along the central escarpment.

produced. A network of key birding sites has been identified.

Despite all the progress, opportunities for further discovery are considerable and those birders willing to tolerate some hardships

are likely to be handsomely rewarded. Some special birds have not been seen since the 1970s, even in the better known areas. More has been learnt about some species, raising new questions which now need to be answered. Almost nothing is known about the habits and breeding behaviour of most of the specials. And many sites, including most of the Important Bird Areas (IBAs), have not been revisited since the 1970s. If you feel up for a challenge, read on...

To begin with, we can make our job a little easier by eliminating the enclave of Cabinda from our hitlist. Located at the heart of the oil operations and harbouring an active separatist movement that seeks any opportunity to make a hard-hitting statement, Cabinda's Congo Basin forests,

while admittedly the only example of this habitat in the country, are best left alone at present. There exists a real threat of kidnap or attack by guerrillas, as was experienced by the Togo football team during the 2010 Africa Cup of Nations tournament. Fortunately the birds found here, although interesting in the Angola context, are of less importance in a global setting, as most are fairly widespread across central Africa. One exception is the localised and Vulnerable Loango Weaver, found in palm savanna along the central African coast from Gabon to the mouth of the Congo River.



LOANGO WEAVER



GRIMWOOD'S LONGCLAW

...WHICH AREAS THEN ARE BOTH SAFE AND POTENTIALLY INTERESTING TO VISIT? STARTING WITH THE RECOGNISED IBAs, OF WHICH ANGOLA HAS 18 ... ABOUT HALF ARE IN URGENT NEED OF RE-EVALUATION

A second area can also be eliminated: much of the Lundas of the north-east are unsafe to visit, largely as a result of illicit diamond-mining activities and heavy historical use of landmines. This is more disappointing, as Lunda Norte holds four IBAs and the region is home to the localised Black-tailed Cisticola, a species otherwise found only in the Democratic Republic of Congo. While, with careful planning, trips to this area are possible, you're likely to have dealings with difficult officials and suspicious locals.

To be more optimistic, which areas then are both safe and potentially interesting to visit? Starting with the recognised IBAs, of which Angola has 18 in addition to Cabinda and Lunda Norte, about half are in urgent need of re-evaluation. Of the more accessible ones (that is, those located in the west of the country), Chongoroi along the southern escarpment is one of the few known localities for the Endangered Pulitzer's

Longbill and must be near the northern limit of Cinderella Waxbill, reported to be 'frequent' here. Visitors should concentrate their searches along the escarpment to the east of Chongoroi town, where dry thickets and patches of forest are likely to turn up some interesting species. As is the case with any exploration, use of Google Earth may help pinpoint possible access routes and potentially promising areas of habitat.

Next, Caconda, home of the early collector Bocage, who has several species named after him, has a rich documented avifauna and previously held well-developed stands of miombo woodland. The area now appears to be vastly transformed by human activities, but there is still a need to establish whether species such as Sousa's Shrike, Miombo Pied Barbet and White-winged Babbling Starling persist in remnant patches of miombo in the area.

Then, in the far south, Mupa National Park may hold a breeding population of Wattled Cranes in swamps along broad drainage lines and around lakes. For the more adventurous, Cuele in Cuando Cubango province in the south-east may still hold Grimwood's Longclaw and Congo Moor Chat, while Cutato on the Huambo/Huila/Bie border in the central-west of the country was previously home to Sharp-tailed Starling and Red-capped Crombec. Cameia National Park in the far east is known for White-throated Francolin, Forbes's Plover and perhaps a new species of Masked Weaver at Lake Dilolo.

For those who prefer to chase species rather than explore new areas, perhaps the most baffling post-war absentee is the endemic *leucogaster* subspecies of White-headed Barbet, a taxon that has been mooted as a species in its own right. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rosa Pinto and his collecting team at the former



MICHAEL MILLS

Instituto de Investigação Científica de Angola in Lubango amassed a series of 38 specimens from the surrounds of Lubango and Serra da Neve on the coastal plain, yet so far no one has managed to re-discover the barbet. The areas surrounding Lubango are now largely deforested, but searching around the base of the escarpment to the west of Lubango and around the Serra da Neve range, which rises to 2 489 metres from the surrounding coastal plain at 550 metres, should eventually prove successful. >

The bird skin collection in Lubango is an invaluable resource to Angolan ornithology and holds many important skins, such as these of the endemic *leucogaster* subspecies of White-headed Barbet.



CONGO MOOR CHAT

BAR-WINGED
WEAVER



Two other noteworthy species not to my knowledge seen in Angola during the past 40 years and with most of their ranges in Angola are the scarce Bar-winged Weaver and Data Deficient Grimwood's Longclaw. Both have more easterly distributions, and so little is known about their status and distribution in the country that no proper conservation evaluation can be made of the longclaw. Any relevant information about these species would be invaluable. Of further interest, a particularly puzzling record is the collection of three specimens of Black-necked Wattle-eye from the Gabela area on the central escarpment. This species is otherwise only known from Gabon to Cameroon and, despite months of fieldwork conducted in the general Gabela region, it has not been relocated. Perhaps the specimens were simply mislabelled, but more intensive searches in the area may bring positive results.

Finally, and most enticing of all, there is the prospect of rediscovering the long-lost White-chested

Tinkerbird of north-west Zambia. Several authors have suggested that this species may in fact be a bird primarily of far eastern Angola, where blocks of *Cryptosepalum* forest should be targeted for searches in the Macondo area, if access is possible.

Another set of species is taxonomically mystifying and will require detailed study to unravel. A visit to the Lubango Bird Skin Collection, the country's leading bird museum which holds a collection of 40 000 skins, is likely to play an important role in resolving any of these issues. As in southern Africa, pipits are a particularly puzzling group, with uncertainty surrounding several described taxa. Swifts are also a muddle, and the identity even of those nesting in buildings in Luanda has not been resolved. The endemic brown-rumped Horus Swifts are another enigma that awaits solution.

Cisticolas too require more attention. Examination of the *bulubulu* subspecies of Cloud Cisticola in the Lubango Bird Skin Collection indicates by its short wings and legs that it may be a subspecies of Wing-snapping Cisticola. The anomalous *bailunduensis* subspecies of Rock-loving Cisticola, endemic to the Angolan highlands, has a unique and musical song, totally unlike that of Rock-loving Cisticola elsewhere in its range, and it inhabits forest edge rather than rocky outcrops in savanna. It is likely to be an altogether unrelated species. And finally on the cisticolas, field observations suggest that Chattering and Bubbling cisticolas may be the same species; since Angola is the only country where both species have been reported, this quandary is best resolved here.

Another group of cryptic birds, the greenbuls, provide their own challenge. The endemic *viridiceps* subspecies of White-throated

THERE IS GOOD NEWS ALSO FOR THOSE WHO PREFER TO STICK TO WELL-WORN ROUTES, AS EVEN HERE THERE ARE MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO BE MADE



BLACK-TAILED
CISTICOLA

Greenbul from the northern scarp forests has quite different calls from the nominate subspecies and represents an outlying population that is worthy of further investigation. Finally, the validity of Salvadori's Eremomela as a full species is debatable: it has identical calls and very similar plumage to that of Yellow-bellied Eremomela and as both occur in Angola, it would be an ideal place for such a study.

There is good news also for those who prefer to stick to well-worn routes, as even here there are major contributions to be made. From a South African perspective, it would be interesting to know whether the winter sightings of Booted Eagle and European Bee-eater in Angola represent the South African breeding populations of these species, which otherwise breed only in the Palaearctic region. Perhaps this is another case to crack with the use of satellite-tracking devices? The distribution of Cinderella Waxbill is similarly poorly



RUFOUS-TAILED
PALM THRUSH

established, partly as a result of confusion with the similar Grey Waxbill in the north of its range.

Recently in Luanda, a friend has been studying the breeding habits of a Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush nesting on her veranda. Even for common garden birds in Luanda, such as the palm thrush, the incubation and fledgling periods are hitherto unrecorded. Much remains to be learned about the habits, diets and breeding of most of the endemics. No nest has ever been found of Swierstra's Francolin, Red-crested Turaco, White-fronted Wattle-eye, Gabela Helmetshrike, Monteiro's, Braun's and Gabela bush-shrikes, Pulitzer's Longbill, Gabela Akalat or Golden-backed Bishop, all species within easy reach of good roads and occurring at well-known sites, such as Kumbira Forest and Mount Moco. May the exploration begin! ♦



RED-CRESTED
TURACO

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MICHAEL MILLS first set foot in Angola in 2003 when friends Callan Cohen and Claire Spottiswoode invited him to join them on an exploratory trip. Seeing the obvious need for further ornithological work in the country, Michael followed this up with a solo, three-month visit in 2005, driving up from South Africa in his trusty but rather battered Toyota Hilux.

This trip set the groundwork for Michael's time in the country, although several years of failing to secure further funding almost ended his work here. Fortunately conservation champion Tasso Leventis stepped in and with his support Michael has not looked back. He now divides his time between leading birdwatching tours for Birding Africa and working on Angolan bird and conservation projects in collaboration with the BirdLife network, now under the aegis of BirdLife South Africa. Currently Michael lives in Luanda with his partner Catherine, an Australian international schoolteacher.

'Working and travelling in Angola is highly rewarding at times, but it can also be frustrating, upsetting and even a bit scary,' he says. 'The opportunities for discovery and improving the conservation outlook are many, so any work I do can make a real difference. However, on the back of its oil wealth, the conservation attitude of this rapidly growing country is hard to swallow. Development and expansion are occurring apace, with almost no regard for the environment. As money is now filtering down to grass-roots level, guns and chainsaws are everywhere and as a result the country's forests and mammals are declining rapidly.'

'On the scary side, Angola can be a particularly officious and xenophobic nation. One very long, tiring day I was stopped at 11 police roadblocks for a total of more than three hours, during which I was invariably accused of some or other misdemeanour, such as driving with sunglasses on (which is not against the law)! I've also had my passport confiscated a couple of times by officials wanting to flex their muscles ... figuring out what is going on is not always easy when speaking broken Portuguese. On the whole, however, Angolans are friendly, welcoming people, who make it a pleasure to travel and work in this beautiful country.'

