



JULIET MILLS

# helping hands

Angola is the African country with the largest number of biomes within its borders – ranging from the Namib desert to the Congolian rainforest. It also holds one of the most important avifaunas of Africa. Until recently this was one of the least known, by virtue of almost four decades of armed conflict (see *African Birdlife*, September/October 2014).

The Percy FitzPatrick Institute led some of the first expeditions to the country shortly after the dust of war had settled. The first efforts focused in what remains today the highest priority: Angola's only Endemic Bird Area (EBA: Western Angola), comprising some of the most isolated afro-montane forests on the continent and the uniquely Angolan escarpment forests. Among the 19 mainland Africa EBAs, Angola's ranks fifth in number of range-restricted species (at least 14), but unfortunately it also ranks second in the number of these species that are Endangered (no fewer than six species).

With no NGO in Angola working for bird conservation, and the protected

*A nursery has been started at Mount Moco to help restore previously forested areas.*

areas network inadequate to safeguard the country's unique avifauna, Angola's birds required a helping hand. This came in the form of Michael Mills, who set up a conservation programme combining the collection of solid data on species distributions, habitat use, and threats, with the implementation of practical conservation measures. This was essential because Angola's habitats face unprecedented threats. Some of the oldest and best preserved examples of miombo woodlands are being transformed into charcoal, and the fertile land comprising Angola's EBA was being resettled by farmers who cleared the forests to plant cassava, corn or bananas.

Ten years ago, BirdLife International issued a directive: protect Angola's afro-montane and escarpment forests and you will protect its threatened bird species. This was frighteningly simple for the montane forests: less than 200 hectares were estimated to remain, with half of these on Mount Moco, the country's highest peak, and they were under severe threat due to deforestation. Fortunately, Michael and his collaborators found additional montane forests in the remote Namba mountains, more than trebling the

known area of afro-montane forest. But the challenge remains to conserve these precious fragments.

When it came to the lower-elevation scarp forests, the lack of current knowledge made it difficult to identify the best sites to target for conservation. Extensive surveys were made across the central escarpment to identify key sites and from this Kumbira Forest emerged as the clear favourite as it supported significant populations of three of the Endangered endemics: Gabela Bush-shrike, Gabela Akalat and Pulitzer's Longbill. However, the socio-political situation is extremely complex, with private and communal land intertwined and a burgeoning human population putting additional pressure on the already depleted natural resources. Two other Endangered endemics are even more difficult to protect: Gabela Helmet-shrike is confined to dry forests below the escarpment, a zone under threat from charcoal production, and Braun's Bush-shrike is restricted to the northern escarpment, where the forests are under threat from commercial logging.

Initial conservation efforts focused on the montane forests, with a forest-restoration project started in conjunction with the local community of Kanjonde at Mount Moco. A nursery of indigenous forest trees was established and previously forested areas are being slowly restored. The community has been provided with fuel-efficient stoves to reduce their need for firewood, the key threat to the remaining forests. At Kumbira, Aimey Cáceres is now in the third year of her PhD examining habitat needs of the endemic birds, using point count surveys and radio telemetry. Her results have been used to advise the receptive local government on the most effective ways to get some of this forest designated as a forest reserve before it's too late.

The Angolan Bird Conservation Programme is led by Michael Mills, with the support of BirdLife South Africa, the Leventis Foundation and the Percy FitzPatrick Institute. It includes participants from ISCED (Lubango) and CIBIO (Portugal).

For more information, contact  
The Director, Percy FitzPatrick  
Institute of African Ornithology,  
University of Cape Town,  
Rondebosch, South Africa 7701.  
E-mail [fitz@uct.ac.za](mailto:fitz@uct.ac.za),  
tel. +27 (0)21 650 3291 or  
visit [www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za](http://www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za)

