

# Larking about in East Africa



PETER RYAN

*Pink-breasted Lark habitat, northern Tanzania, below the cloud-wreathed Usumbara Mountains.*

The semi-arid zones of north-eastern and south-western Africa are the world's major centres of lark radiation. Some 70 of the world's 90 lark species occur in Africa, with more than 45 species endemic to north-eastern and south-western Africa. For the past few years, researchers at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute have been studying the relationships among southern African larks. Now we are spreading our wings and examining the larks of north-east Africa.

The new project is being spearheaded by Keith Barnes. After a three-year spell with the Avian Demography Unit, during which he was responsible for the Important Bird Areas programme and revising the South African Red Data Book for Birds, Barnes is returning to the Fitztitute in 1998. Thanks to a prestigious doctoral bursary from the Foundation for Research and Development, he will be comparing the radiation of larks in north-east Africa with that in south-west Africa.

An alarming 20 per cent of Africa's larks are currently considered globally threatened or near-threatened, suggesting that the group merits considerable conservation attention. The world's globally threatened larks are all African endemics restricted to either north-eastern or south-western Africa. The majority of these highly specialized, localized lark species are threatened by current agricultural practices and poor management of the sensitive arid systems in which they exist.

There is a danger that populations will further decline as a result of continued habitat degradation which will go unnoticed due to the lack of knowledge and inadequate pro-active conservation. Barnes's work will further contribute to understanding the requirements of many of these poorly-known species.

In order to get the project off to a flying start, Barnes visited Tanzania in November with supervisor Peter Ryan and well-known birder Ian Sinclair. With the expert assistance of

Neil and Liz Baker, Barnes was able to collect samples from eight lark species from the arid plains around Kilimanjaro and Mount Meru. Dave Moyer, from Iringa in central Tanzania, supplied a further two species. The most exciting finding from the recent trip was that the isolated Tanzanian Spike-heeled Lark population seemed to be so different both mensurally and behaviourally to southern African birds, that it might be recognized as a full species. Should this be confirmed by genetic analysis, this bird, with a global population estimated at only 200 individuals, will immediately become one of Africa's rarest and most threatened bird species, necessitating immediate conservation action.

Field work will continue in 1998, with a long field trip planned for the second half of the year.

*Anyone interested in sponsoring equipment or supplies for the field work should please contact Keith Barnes by fax at (021) 650-3295.* □

## Visit our website

If you are interested in more information about the FitzPatrick Institute, and the projects on the go, why not contact our website at <http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/fitzpatrick>. This provides a brief history of the Fitztitute, outlines research programmes, and gives a listing of staff, students and recent publications. The current news section reports new and ongoing projects, and there is also an overview of the Niven Library and the Conservation Biology MSc programme administered by the Fitztitute.

## Roberts' revision awarded to the Percy FitzPatrick Institute

During 1997 the Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund called for tenders to undertake a revision of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa*, due to be published early next century. The revision will capture for the birding community and the broader public the enormous advances in knowledge about southern African birds since the last edition – the sixth – was published in 1993.

During the December launch of *Roberts* on CD-ROM the Trustees announced that the Percy FitzPatrick Institute has been awarded the project. Watch this space for our plans for the new *Roberts* and details about how you can get involved in the project, including tackling gaps in our knowledge about southern African birds.

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