

Angola's mountain endemics emerge



CALLAN COHEN (2)

The rocky slopes above Kumbira Forest, habitat of the Angola Cave Chat.

As the curtain of Angola's three decades of civil war lifts, one of Africa's most exciting hotspots of bird endemism is again accessible to birders and conservationists pursuing its forest specials.

The poorly known Western Angola Endemic Bird Area is home to 14 range-restricted species, four of which are Endangered, and ranks as one of the most critical conservation priorities in Africa. Most famous is the area around Gabela in Cuanza Sul Province, where the calls of near-mythical species such as Red-crested Turaco still echo across forested valleys. Following the alluring reports of our colleagues Ian Sinclair and Peter Ryan (Africa – Birds & Birding, June/July 2003), in October 2003 we decided to visit this region to explore more widely.

After initially visiting Rio Longa Lodge, south of Luanda and ideally situated to bird the coastal thickets and where we recorded the near-endemic White-fronted



Monteiro's Bush-Shrike, distinguished from Grey-headed Bush-Shrike by the white encircling the eye, is a poorly known species of the Angolan escarpment forests.

Wattle-eye and Golden-backed Bishop, we headed up to the forested escarpment. We were able to explore more widely the forested seaward slopes of Njelo Mountain, south of Gabela, that Ian and Peter had visited. This patch of natural forest extends up through montane grassland into rocky gorges, where we were elated to discover Angola Cave Chat, the sole member of the genus *Xenopsychus* (meaning 'strange magpie-robin'), and not recorded in this area since before the war. Alongside this pied mixture of chat, robin and wagtail, we found at the forest margin a family party of Angola Slaty Flycatchers, a species not seen for 30 years.

On the lush lower slopes, the forest merges with abandoned and regenerating shade-coffee plantations. Here is concealed Gabela Akalat, a skulking forest robin whose odd demeanour led to it being first described, in 1957, as a flycatcher. We were encouraged to find it not only in relatively pristine forest but also in the

understorey of abandoned plantations, as it had been thought to be among the more sensitive of Angola's endemics to disturbance. Here we also recorded many of Angola's other highland endemics, including Red-crested Turaco, Pulitzer's Longbill, and Gabela and Monteiro's bush-shrikes.

A second target was Mount Moco, Angola's highest peak and known before the war to support good populations of many forest endemics. Frustratingly, our southward explorations down the escarpment were thwarted by landmined roads. Subsequent successful visits to the mountain by other colleagues have, however, yet to reveal the endemic Swierstra's Francolin, not recorded for over three decades. Establishing the conservation status of this francolin poses an exciting challenge, and many intriguing discoveries no doubt remain to be made by birders as Angola recovers from its decades of conflict.

The findings of the past year are encouraging, but the forests' future remains bleak unless immediate conservation action is taken. Up to 95 per cent of the original forest was cleared in the years preceding the war, although many of the original canopy trees were spared to provide shade for coffee. Although it is a relief that all the threatened species tolerate regenerating coffee plantations, Angola's economy is growing at an impressive rate, and plans are reportedly afoot to revive commercial agriculture along the escarpment. A survey of all available forest patches is the urgently needed first step towards a conservation strategy for Western Angola. The area has tremendous ecotourism potential and local communities are sure to benefit from the inevitable flow of birders to the core sites.

CALLAN COHEN, MICHAEL MILLS & CLAIRE SPOTTISWOODE

A full report is available on www.birdingafrica.com
We are grateful to Wings of Africa for their essential logistical assistance.



KEITH BARNES

The Shoebill is one of the important birds of Uganda's Nabugabo wetland.

New Ramsar site for Uganda

Uganda has listed a second IBA as a Ramsar site. Nabugabo wetland is an important site for the conservation of a number of Globally Threatened and Near-threatened species, including the Blue Swallow *Hirundo atrocaerulea* and Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex*, as well as large congregations of migrant species. The wetlands are also a refuge for fish species that have been eradicated from Lake Victoria as a result of the introduction of the Nile perch.

The IBA consists of Lake Nabugabo (approximately 3 500 hectares), a shallow freshwater lake of about 8x5 kilometres, and extensive swamps and small forests to the north, east and south, where Sango Bay adjoins. Three much smaller satellite lakes, Birinzi (formerly Kayanja), Manywa and Kayugi are located to the north-west at a slightly higher altitude.

Nabugabo is separated from Lake Victoria by an arm of the Lwamunda swamp and a sandbar. The lakes have been isolated from Lake Victoria for about 3 700 years, during which time the cichlid fauna has undergone speciation. Lake Nabugabo is a popular resort, especially at weekends and public holidays.

A complete species list for the birds of Nabugabo is not available, but more than 180 species have been recorded. The scarce Papyrus Canary *Serinus koliensis* is among the species of the Lake Victoria Basin biome that are present. Two additional species of global conservation concern, Great Snipe *Gallinago media* and Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, were recorded in December 2000 on seasonally flooded grassland. Green Hylia *Hylia prasina* and Shining-Blue Kingfisher *Alcedo quadibrachys* occur in the forested areas close to the lake.

Expanding tourism developments along the north end of the western shore, burning of the swamp, and overfishing are all potential threats to this IBA. The site has been proposed as a Ramsar site and the district has already endorsed this proposal which is now being considered at national level. Local people receive spiritual attributes of all the three satellite lakes and this will serve as a temporary protection for them.

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ROD CASSIDY

The legendary Angola Cave Chat has only recently been rediscovered.