New birds are still being discovered in Africa and elsewhere, proof that one of the secret dreams of most birders can still be realized. This article deals specifically with African discoveries and excludes nearby Madagascar. African discoveries have ranged from the cedar forests of northern Algeria, site of the discovery of the Algerian Nuthatch (above), all the way south to the east coast of South Africa.

Some of the recent bird discoveries in Africa have come from explorations of poorly-known areas, such as the remote highland forests of eastern Zaire. Other new species have been described by applying modern molecular techniques capable of detecting major genetic differences between birds that were previously thought to be races of the same species. The recent ‘splitting’ of the Northern and Southern black korhaans *Eupodotis aferoides/afera* of southern Africa is one example.

In terms of ornithological discovery, these two ways of describing species are subtly different: the former involves the discovery of birds we did not even know existed, the latter to birds that we did know about but did not recognize for what they were!

This article is concerned with ‘exploratory discoveries’, and, in this category, Africa has yielded many surprises in the last 50 years, averaging almost one new species a year. Some of these have come from unexpected places – the Ibadan Malimbe was found on lands immediately adjacent to Ibadan University! Another, the Algerian Nuthatch, was discovered in 1976 within the boundaries of the western Palearctic – the first species to have been discovered in this region since 1886.

Not all ‘new’ species that have been described have survived the depredations of sceptical taxonomists or, in one case, of their discoverer. In 1972, the late Dr Alexandre Prigogine described a new species of greenbul from Nyamupé in eastern Zaire, which he named *Andropadus hallae*. The bird has never been seen or collected since and Prigogine himself subsequently decided that the specimen was of a melanistic *Andropadus virens*, a species with a wide distribution in equatorial West and central Africa.

Interestingly, and rather surprisingly, the Liberian Bulbul (right) was described from a mummified specimen found near Zwedru, Liberia, in 1984. It is also under severe threat and has not been seen in recent years.
AFRICA was given the scientific name *Hirundo perdita* during the discovery of the Red Sea Cliff Swallow was the result of a single specimen that died when it flew into a lighthouse in the Red Sea, off the coast of Sudan. Among the resident birds, forest-dwelling species have figured prominently, comprising 61 per cent of the total. Some of these are very poorly known indeed – Prigogine’s Nightjar and the Kibale Ground Thrush, for example, have not been seen since the original specimens were collected. The one and only specimen of Congo Bay Owl was collected in the Itombwe Mountains of Zaïre in 1951. Apart from a possible sight record from Burundi in the 1970s and a record of an unknown owl call in Rwanda in early 1990, this species was not recorded again for 45 years. It was ‘rediscovered’, and one female was caught, ringed and released, in the Itombwe Mountains in May 1996. In contrast to these, some recently discovered species are locally quite common. These include the White-throated Mountain Babblers of highland Cameroon, the Gola Malimbe and the Udzungwa Forest Partridge – although the partridge may already be threatened by specimen collecting.

Surely, however, one of the most bizarre tales of recent discovery must be that of the Bulo Burti Boubou from Somalia. This bird was first observed in the grounds of a hospital at Bulo Burti on the Shabeelle River, Somalia, in August 1988. On 5 January it was caught in a mist-net and taken into captivity. It was subsequently transported to Germany when the person caring for the captive bird was evacuated because of civil unrest. More than a year later, in March 1990, the bird was returned to Somalia, and was released back into the wild on 23 March in the Baclad Nature Reserve: neither it, nor any other Bulo Burti Boubou, has been seen since. The boubou made additional ornithological history in being the first instance in which a bird species has been described with DNA and a few feathers as the type material.

The geographical distribution of the 46 species described since 1946 is far from even. Ninety-three per cent of discoveries have been in the tropics, and 70 per cent of the total have been from within 10 degrees latitude of the Equator. The country that has contributed most to new discoveries has been Zaïre, with eight, followed by Liberia, Cameroon and Ethiopia, each with four. Somalia, Kenya, Uganda and Angola have each contributed three, Nigeria a further two, and another nine countries have contributed one species each. Most new birds have come from the east of the continent, with an impressive contribution of no fewer than six new species from in and around the Itombwe Mountain forests of eastern Zaïre. Nearly all the new discoveries have been of resident, rather than migratory species, with two exceptions. The Mascarene Shearwater was described from a beached specimen collected in Durban, South Africa, but its breeding grounds almost certainly lie well to the north-east of the record of the presumably migratory Red Sea Cliff Swallow.

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The tendency for birds to evolve into new species is greatest when populations become isolated from one another. Island populations are classic examples: the majority of the world’s highly range-restricted species are found on islands. Worthy of note here is that the major of species which have become extinct in the last 400 years were island species.

One could therefore predict that highly range-restricted species on the mainland will be found in situations which are analogues of islands, such as forested mountain peaks and isolated wetlands. The new birds of the last 50 years support this conclusion – two or more new birds have been found on Mount Nimba in Liberia, Mount Kupé in Cameroon, the Itombwe Mountains of eastern Zaïre and the Udzungwa Mountains of southern Tanzania. Intensive searching (or a bit of luck!) in the highlands of Ethiopia is also likely to produce at least one or two new species. A swamp adjoining the Kilombero River in Tanzania is a good example of an ‘island’ wetland. The site of the discovery of the Kilombero Weaver as recently as 1990, this swamp is geographically isolated and is unusual in that even though it is more than 300 kilometres from the coast, it lies at an altitude of only 250 metres above sea level. The same swamp is thought to contain two new, but as yet undescribed, species of cisticola.

It is probably a reasonable assumption that new species found in the future (by exploration rather than in the laboratory) will be highly range-restricted. A glance at the map of recent discoveries indicates a startling lack of new birds from the forested regions of the Congo Basin, even though this area is flanked by new species on three sides. In 1976, Leon Lippens and Henri Ville (Les Oiseaux de Zaïre) wrote ‘we are convinced that new species of birds still remain to be discovered in Zaïre’. Right they were.
The White-chested Tinkerbird is an enigma among recent discoveries. It was found in the Mayau region of Zambia and is still known to science only from the type specimen. Repeated searches have failed to find any trace of the bird, even though the habitat in which it was caught is widespread.

Further to the east, recent discoveries in the Udzungwa Mountains of southern Tanzania raise the likelihood of undescribed species still to be found in the hills of northern Mozambique, between the Zambezi and Ruvuma Rivers. There are some definite ornithological affinities between the two areas. For example, the Long-billed Tailorbird Orthotomus moreni is known only from the eastern Usambura Mountains in Tanzania and from the Njesi Plateau in northern Mozambique. There has only been one recent record of the species in Tanzania; this was in 1992, after several previous attempts to locate the bird had failed. The Njesi Plateau has not been visited since 1945.

Further south in Mozambique, Mount Gorongosa is another good example of a mainland ‘island’. It supports the only known population of Green-headed Oriole Oriolus chloropterus in southern Africa, as well as an endemic subspecies of Greater Double-collared Sunbird Nectarinia atra amicitia. The nearest populations of Greater...
Double-collared Sunbird are in the Soutpansberg, South Africa, and on the Nyika Plateau in northern Malawi. Genetic work may yet reveal the Gorongosa population to be specifically distinct. Although I think Gorongosa is probably sufficiently well known that it is unlikely that new species will be discovered there in future, the same cannot be said of northern Mozambique: here, surely, new birds await the pioneering ornithologist.

There are several ‘new’ birds that have been sighted in Africa in recent years but as yet remain undescribed to science. An undescribed Sheppardia robin has been seen in the lowland forests of eastern Zaïre, to the north of the Virungu Mountains. Around Iranga, also in eastern Zaïre, there have been several recent sightings of an undescribed large spinetail and, further east, above the Kazinga Channel in south-western Uganda, there have been reports of rockfowl (Picathartes). The latter are so far from the rockfowl populations of West Africa that they may well be an unknown species. A small oxpecker has been seen in association with buffaloes in the Tai Forest of western Ivory Coast: if this was a new species, it may already have become extinct, along with its buffalo hosts.

In October 1958, a thrush-sized bird with a bright red bill and reddish tail was seen briefly on Mount Wogra in north-western Somalia. Even given the scanty views, the observer was confident that what he saw did not tally with any known species. More recently (October 1984), a pair of small weavers was seen at Beyla in north-eastern Guinea. Although the male superficially resembled a male Slender-billed Weaver (Ploceus luteolus), it is thought that this too is an undescribed species.

Based on the recent track record, it is going to be many years before Africa’s avifauna is fully known – there are still plenty of areas sufficiently remote or unvisited that will undoubtedly yield new species to science. There may even be one in the semi-arid regions of South Africa, which, ornithologically, is one of the best-known countries on the continent. Over the last eight years there have been at least five independent sightings of a canary that resembles no other known in the region, or indeed in Africa. It most closely resembles either African Citril (Serinus citrinelloides) or Black-faced Canary (Serinus capistratus), but occurs in completely different habitat to either of these two. If a new bird can be found in the western Palearctic in the 1970s, surely anything is possible on the dark continent!

If this article has inspired any readers to set off for remote corners of Africa in the hope of discovering new species, remember that before a new bird can be described to science, a specimen is required (the Bulo Burti Boubou being the only exception to date). It is also worth considering that because new species are likely to be highly range-restricted and rare, the old adage of ‘what’s hit is history and what’s missed is mystery’ might bear some re-examination.

There is a strong case to be made, supported by recent history, that some attempt should be made to assess the population status of the ‘new’ species before any specimens are collected to satisfy taxonomic curiosity. Whichever route is to be followed, locating the bird is the first step in the process. Always expect the unexpected; but when it happens, make sure that you take down as detailed a description as you possibly can and inform conservation agencies, such as BirdLife International, about what you have found.

All four of the new larks described since 1946 have come from the arid north-east – namely (from left to right) Sidamo, Williams’, Ash’s, and Degodi. More new species await formal description from the arid south-west of Africa.

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