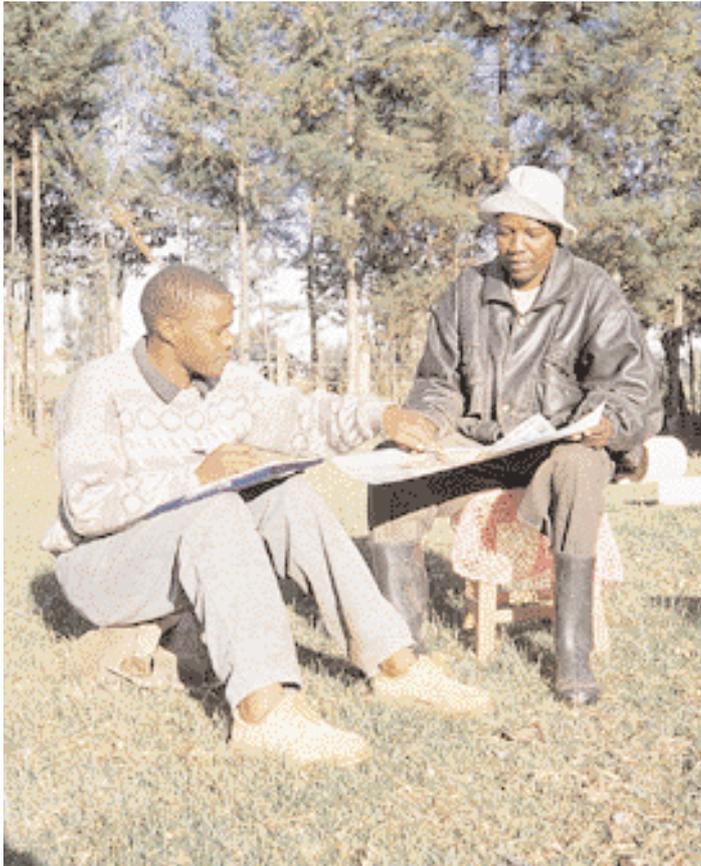


# NEWS FROM THE PERCY FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE



PAUL NDANG'ANG'A (2)

Sharpe's Longclaw *Macronyx sharpei*, restricted to three high-lying grassland areas in Kenya, has been classified as Endangered in the most recent Red Data Book. This classification is largely based on the threat that the conversion of land to agricultural use poses to this range-restricted species – it is resulting in the loss of habitat that can support a viable Sharpe's Longclaw population.

Paul Kariuki Nding'ang'a, an MSc student in Conservation Biology, has recently completed a study in which he has developed a predictive model of grassland decline and its implications for the conservation of Sharpe's Longclaw.

The Kinangop highland grasslands serve as the key stronghold of this species, and the area is almost entirely under the private ownership of small-scale farmers. As a result of the human population in the grasslands increasing, the mean acreage of land holdings is decreasing and the remaining grassland is being converted to other uses. Nding'ang'a obtained historical land subdivision information, existing human population data and current land-use data from a subset of 162 farms. This allowed him to extrapolate the past and future extent of Sharpe's Longclaw's habitat throughout the grassland landscape on Kinangop Plateau.



Insectivores (Pearl-breasted Swallow, above) figure prominently among African migrants, whereas frugivores (Crested Barbet, right) are almost entirely sedentary.

Farm size emerged as a key determinant of grassland cover within individual farms. It was estimated that in the year 2000, grasslands covered 50 per cent of the area, but only half of this consisted of the preferred habitat of the longclaw, namely tussock grasslands. Moreover, larger farms are rapidly being subdivided, and more than half of the remaining tussock grasslands are likely to be found on farms that are too small to support viable longclaw territories.

Predictions from this study show that within the next decade tussock grasslands will cover a mere one-sixth of Kinangop, and all farms that are still currently large enough to act as longclaw reserves are likely to have been subdivided into sub-

optimally small units. It is clear that land subdivision and the intensive use of small farms presents a major challenge for the conservation of the Kinangop grasslands.

To meet this challenge, Nding'ang'a proposes the urgent prioritisation of a network of farms larger than 30 hectares in extent for conservation action, as this is where the greatest conservation impact is likely to be made. In addition, he suggests that awareness of the plight of the Kenyan highland grasslands should be raised at the local schools, as in this way a better understanding of the consequences of land subdivision is likely to reach members of households representing the entire range of farm sizes. □

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