

HIGHLANDS FLING

The world of Abyssinian endemics

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The highlands of Ethiopia and Eritrea are home to a host of endemic birds. The confiding nature of the birds, coupled with the soft, mountain light, wonderful scenery and intriguing alpine plants, make for a photographer's paradise. Here we highlight some striking portraits of the region's montane specials.



*A Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis* roosting among the stunning alpine vegetation. Although not strictly endemic, the Abyssinian population is placed in its own subspecies, *dilloni*, which is browner and more barred below.*



Above The Moorland or Alpine Chat *Cercomela sordida* is another near-endemic to the Abyssinian highlands, but also occurs in the highlands of Kenya and Tanzania.

Above right The immature Ethiopian or Black-headed Siskin lacks the distinctive black head of the adult male, and could be confused with the highly localised Ankober Serin but for the yellow wash on its belly.

Opposite With its prodigious Roman nose and white yarmulke, the Thick-billed Raven looks at home among the many religious sites that dot the highland countryside. Despite its fearsome-looking bill, it is primarily a scavenger.



black bird that has a remarkably restricted range in the south of Ethiopia. Inexplicably, it is only found in the triangle between Yabelo, Arero and Mega, an area less than 100 kilometres across. Within this area it is common, often found in mixed flocks with Superb *Lamprotornis superbus* and White-capped starlings *Spreo albicapillus*. It was only described in 1938, and has usually been placed in the crow family Corvidae, allied to the Asian ground-jays. However, it also has several starling-like features, and although sceptics would probably say this is the result of convergent life-styles, the latest volume (6) of *Birds of Africa* has included it in the Sturnidae. But in terms of palate structure the bird differs markedly from both crows and starlings, and some researchers have even placed it in its own family, the Zavattariornidae. More work is needed to resolve this particular conundrum!

Other Abyssinian endemics may be less intriguing in terms of their relationships, but many are equally impressive birds to see. Top of the list is the Thick-billed Raven *Corvus crassirostris* with its amazing bill that puts a Helmet Vanga *Euryceros prevostii* to shame! The Wattled Ibis *Bostrychia carunculata* and Spot-breasted Lapwing *Vanellus melanocephalus* are also striking birds, often seen in the same grassland areas as Blue-winged Geese. Other widespread grassland endemics are Abyssinian Longclaw *Macronyx flavicollis*, Ethiopian Siskin *Serinus nigricaps* and Erlanger's Lark *Calandrella erlangeri*, a recent split from Red-capped Lark *C. cinerea*.

In the highland forests, more colourful endemics include Yellow-fronted Parrot *Poicephalus flavifrons*, Black-winged Lovebird *Agapornis taranta*, Banded Barbet *Lybius undatus* and Ethiopian Oriole ▷

The independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia not only cut off Ethiopia's access to the sea, but also deprived it of its claim of being home to more endemic birds than any other country in Africa. Twenty-five of the region's 30 or so endemic bird species are restricted to the Abyssinian highlands, which occur largely within Ethiopia but extend north into Eritrea. However, such political niceties should only detract from the joy of birding the highlands if the ongoing border dispute between the two countries escalates beyond the immediate border region.

A striking feature of the Abyssinian endemics is the high proportion of large and relatively 'unique' species. Of the total of 25 highland endemics, 11 are non-passerines, and three are monotypic genera. This makes for some fascinating and rewarding birding. One of the fun things to do is to try and pick a closest relative for the oddball species.

For example, consider the Abyssinian Catbird *Parophasma galinieri*. It superficially resembles the Grey Catbird of North America, which has a mewing, cat-like call, hence its common name. But the Abyssinian version is renowned for its liquid song, which is extremely variable and has been likened to that of the Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*. To African birders, the Abyssinian Catbird probably

recalls the Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler *Parisoma subcaeruleum*, having a similar shape and mostly grey plumage with a rufous vent. The conventional thinking is that it is related to the babblers, with close affinities to the Bush Blackcap *Lioptilus nigricapillus* of South Africa or the *Kupeornis* babblers of central Africa. However, Sibley and Ahlquist's reorganisation of the passerines places the babblers in the Sylviidae, together with the tit-babblers and parisomas, so the resemblance to a tit-babbler may be more than coincidence.

The other two monotypic genera are equally peculiar. The Blue-winged Goose *Cyanochen cyanopterus* is a shelduck-like bird with a stubby bill which appears to have affinities to *Chloephaga* geese of South America, and is often said to be the African counterpart of the Andean Goose *C. melanoptera*. Quite how it arrived in the Abyssinian highlands remains unexplained. Rouget's Rail *Rougetius rougetii* has no clear affinities at all. It probably is close to *Rallus*, but its plain, unbarred plumage and white undertail are peculiar. Recent researchers have, for want of a better place, listed it between the Corn Crane *Crex crex* and Snoring Rail *Aramidopsis plateni* of Sulawesi!

But perhaps the oddest of the Ethiopian oddballs is not a highland species at all. Stresemann's Bush-Crow *Zavattariornis stresemanni* is a starling-sized, grey-and-





Above The Wattled Ibis is a common species of montane grasslands. Its throat wattle is inconspicuous relative to its striking white wing coverts and pale iris.

Right Although Rouget's Rail is listed as near-threatened, it remains locally common. At higher elevations it occurs well away from water and is remarkably confiding.

Opposite A stunning Chestnut-naped Francolin *Pternistes castaneicollis* takes in the early morning view from atop an everlasting bush.



Oriolus monacha. Less overtly eye-catching but nonetheless enjoyable are White-backed Tit *Parus leuconotus*, the Abyssinian Slaty-Flycatcher *Dioptrornis chocolatinus* and the Abyssinian or Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dendropicos abyssinicus*, a close relative of the Cardinal Woodpecker *D. fuscescens* which even responds to a tape of this species' call.

The final major habitat where endemics occur is the rocky cliffs and gorges. Here one finds Rüppell's Black Chat *Myrmecocichla melaena*, White-winged Cliff-Chat *Thamnolaea semirufa* and the striking White-billed Starling *Onychognathus albirostris*. White-collared Pigeons *Columba albitorques* also occur in this habitat, but they have adapted to city life and you are likely to see them in Addis Ababa even before you venture

out into the countryside.

Another feature of several Abyssinian endemics is their very restricted distribution. Harwood's Francolin *Pternistes harwoodi* only occurs along the upper tributaries of the Blue Nile, north of Addis Ababa. It is best known from the Jemma Valley, where it can be seen in the early morning. Recent surveys have found it at several new sites, but it is absent from many seemingly suitable areas. Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii* is equally localised, being restricted to the juniper forests along the southern fringe of the south-east highland massif.

But the most interesting of the localised endemics are the canaries. The Ethiopian Siskin is widespread throughout the highlands, but the other three endemic species are poorly known and apparently ▽



Above A head-on view of a pair of Spot-breasted Lapwings, showing their striking breast markings and neat black bibs.

Right Blue-winged Geese stepping it out across the alpine turf.

Opposite The Bale Mountains National Park offers, in addition to most of the montane endemic birds, spectacular scenery and a host of special mammals, including the rare Simien wolf.



highly localised. Ankober Serin *Serinus ankoberensis* was only discovered in 1976 and until recently was known from just a few sites on the western scarp of the Rift Valley around Ankober. It has recently been found much further north in the Simien National Park, but its total range remains only a few hundred square kilometres. The Yellow-throated Canary *Serinus flavigula* and Salvadori's Seedeater *S. xantholaemus* have similarly restricted ranges on either side of the Rift Valley.

Visiting the Abyssinian highlands is like stepping back in time. The area has been settled for several millennia, and it seems as though the lives of rural people have been little altered by technological advances. Despite the high density of people, many birds remain fairly common and remarkably tame, thanks to the strict religious mores of the country's Muslims and orthodox Christians. Both sects forbid the eating of wild

birds. Without this protection, it is likely that some of the larger species, such as the Blue-winged Goose, might well have become extinct or severely threatened. As it is, the main limiting factor is the availability of suitable habitat: ongoing habitat loss and degradation threaten several endemic birds, including Rouget's Rail, Blue-winged Goose, Abyssinian Longclaw, Yellow-throated Canary and Ankober Serin.

Of course, the endemics are only the tip of the birding iceberg. Ethiopia sits at the junction of the Afrotropics and Palearctic, and has a total list of more than 800 species. In a two- to three-week trip you could realistically expect to see some 400 species, including most of the endemics. If you haven't already done so, take the opportunity now to visit Ethiopia and enjoy its amazing array of highland endemics.

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