

## EDITORIAL

It was a great pleasure, as always, to be back in Port Elizabeth at the start of the year and to have the privilege of talking to the club at the January meeting. That evening, I pointed out that I had received no material at all, other than sightings, for the coming *Bee-eater* but am pleased to say that following a subsequent plea for articles from our chair, we now have what I hope you will agree is an interesting read. In addition to a variety of articles and observations there is also a review of the new Roberts Field Guide.

Sadly, at the end of last year and at the beginning of this, the Eastern Cape lost two of its finest ornithologists. Both André Boshoff and Norbert Klages made major contributions to the study of birds in this province and will be sorely missed but they leave a rich legacy behind, particularly in the study of raptors and seabirds.

It has been a summer to remember for rare birds, especially for those in the Western Cape, but the Eastern Cape has also had its share of unusual sightings, including a glut of Honey Buzzard records and an obliging Bateleur in the Alexandria district.

My thanks as always go to all those who contributed articles, sightings and photographs, and to Jean Munro for putting it all together.

*Phil Whittington*

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## NAMING THE MOUNTAIN PIPIT – AN UNOFFICIAL HISTORY

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Soon after I arrived in the Eastern Cape in the 1980's, I spent a few days in the Rhodes area with a collecting party from Durban Museum. John Mendelsohn and Ian Sinclair were on this trip, and a wide range of birds was collected at different altitudes from the valleys to the mountain tops. On the basis of the information recorded, they concluded that the pipits breeding in summer at high altitude in the Drakensberg were distinct from the lowland birds, then known as Richard's Pipit. John, an excellent field ornithologist, wrote a short account of the behaviour and other characteristics of these pipits (Mendelsohn 1984).

The pre-eminent bird taxonomist in southern Africa at the time was Philip Clancey, director of Durban Museum, and thus John and Ian's boss. He epitomised the old museum ornithologist tradition, in which fieldwork consisted of collecting specimens, which would then be studied in a museum in comparison with other material and the published literature. An artist whose rather stiff bird studies have become something of a collector's item, Clancey relied very heavily on differences in colour to discriminate between different bird populations. He described numerous sub-species based on differences in colour and size, although only in later years condescending to list sample sizes and provide an indication of the average size and range of measurements. His opinions were often expressed in the style of authoritarian "decrees", and critical opinions were treated with disdain. However, many people have argued that a major re-assessment of the sub-species which he has named will be needed!

Clancey agreed that these large, rather dark pipits with much reduced white on the outer tail feathers should be recognised as a separate species, and assigned to them the name *Anthus hoeschi* (Clancey 1984). He had arrived at this name by the following route: Jack Vincent, for many years Director of the Natal Parks Board, had described pipits breeding in the high mountains of Lesotho as a distinct sub-species of Richard's Pipit, under the name *Anthus richardi editus* (Vincent 1951). There was also a series of large, dark pipits from Zambia which Charles White, a colonial officer in what was then Northern Rhodesia, had named *Anthus richardi lwenarum* as another sub-species of Richard's Pipit (White 1946). Finally, there were two specimens collected in Namibia by Walter Hoesch, a German collector who sent both preserved specimens and live animals back to Europe, which Erwin Stresemann, curator of birds at the Berlin Museum, had described as a new species *Anthus hoeschi* (Stresemann 1938). Clancey decided that *editus*, *lwenarum* and *hoeschi* could not be distinguished from

each other nor from the birds collected by the Durban Museum expedition, and thus represented members of the same species. Then according to the rules of biological nomenclature, the oldest name takes precedence, and thus the correct scientific name to use would be *Anthus hoeschi*. This all seems logical and above board – but there may have been a hidden agenda.

It was well known that Clancey had a long-standing feud with Jack Vincent, who had always refused him permission to collect birds in any Natal Parks Board reserve. On one occasion Vincent got wind of a planned collecting trip by Clancey to a site adjoining a reserve, and suspected that he would slip across the border to collect in the protected area also. Consequently Vincent sent a field ranger there with orders to arrest Clancey if he set foot in the reserve. This duly happened, and Clancey was charged in court with illegal hunting, fined, and his guns confiscated. Staff members at the museum were thus quite sure that Clancey had deliberately searched for an older name so that Vincent's *editus* would not be used for the new species of pipit. Apparently Clancey also disliked Charles White, which led him beyond *Iwenarum* to the birds which Stresemann had described as *Anthus hoeschi*. Now although Clancey had seen the specimens of *editus* and *Iwenarum* in the British Museum, the birds in Berlin were on the east side of the Berlin Wall and not readily accessible. He was sent a black-and-white photograph of *Anthus hoeschi* and a set of measurements taken by a German colleague; hardly the most informative details on which to make such a decision.

So now there were summer specimens of breeding pipits from the Drakensberg in the Eastern Cape, collected by the Durban Museum team, and from Lesotho, collected earlier by Vincent. There were also non-breeding birds from western Zambia (collected by White) and northern Namibia (collected by Hoesch). Hence Clancey postulated that after breeding in the high mountains, Mountain Pipits migrated to the north-west, and ended up in western Zambia, northern Namibia and perhaps southern Angola. This interpretation always seemed unlikely to me, especially in conjunction with the suspicion that Clancey had unscientific motives for lumping together the three names *editus*, *Iwenarum* and *hoeschi*. I became increasingly irritated as bird books began to describe this migration as though it was an established fact, without the caveat that it was an interpretation based on one taxonomist's decision to treat four sets of specimens as belonging to the same species.

When I lived in Germany and visited Berlin in the 1970's the wall seemed like a fixture, and the re-unification of Germany an unrealistic pipedream. So I was deeply moved when on TV I watched the wall come down, and people move across freely. However, I did not return to Berlin until 2006, when I first visited the collections in the Museum für Naturkunde. My focus at that time was weavers and starlings, but I had a quick look at the pipits, and noted that Walter Hoesch had collected a whole lot of other pipits in Namibia at the time when he had sent Stresemann the specimens of *Anthus hoeschi*. Clearly I would need to look at a lot of pipits to make sense of this story, and I decided that this was a project for another time.

It was not until my final sabbatical leave (I am now officially retired from Rhodes University) in 2015 that I planned a proper investigation of the Mountain Pipit. This started in Berlin, where my son Andrew and his wife Sasha joined us for a while. Every weekday I walked to the museum and worked, and then in the evenings we explored the restaurants and drank wonderful beer. Next we went to England, where we were able to attend Andrew's graduation in Oxford. Afterwards I spent a few days in the British Museum bird collection in Tring, where I could examine Vincent's specimens of *editus* and the birds which White had named *Iwenarum*. Meanwhile in South Africa I looked at pipits in Pretoria, Bloemfontein and East London, and borrowed all the specimens from Durban. In 2016 I returned to Berlin. This time most of my work was in the archives, involving historical research, but I was able to borrow from the museum in Bonn some birds collected in Botswana, which had been described as Mountain Pipits. By the time I had examined, measured and checked for moult > 250 museum specimens of pipits, I felt that I could comment on Clancey's decision to use the name *hoeschi* for the Mountain Pipit.

Erwin Stresemann was one of the most significant figures in ornithology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

and I had great confidence in his judgement. At first glance, the two specimens of *hoeschi* do look quite different to the other Namibian pipits – larger and darker. However, a closer inspection suggested that all their distinctive features (large size, dark plumage, a small area of white restricted to the outermost tail feather) are to be found in other Namibian pipits from the Grassveld (now 'African') Pipit population. They are not a good match for any of the birds from the Drakensberg, nor for the birds from Zambia named as *lwenarum*. The birds from Botswana are most like *hoeschi* and differ in their measurements from the Drakensberg pipits. No-one seemed to have mentioned that the second specimen of *hoeschi* is a very unusual individual, with a largely white head! Moreover, although Clancey stated that it was collected in October, the date on the label is 1 November, and it is coming into breeding condition (Walter Hoesch usually drew a little picture of the size of the ovary or testes on the labels of the birds which he collected). This suggests a bird which would breed on site or nearby, not fly > 1400 km to the Drakensberg before breeding.

So my conclusion is that *Anthus hoeschi* has nothing to do with the Mountain Pipits which breed in South Africa and Lesotho. I am not certain whether it is a “good” species, or whether these are just two unusual individuals of the local Grassveld (African) Pipit population, which bears the imposing scientific name *Anthus cinnamomeus bocagii*. [José Vicente Barbosa du Bocage was the curator of Zoology at the national museum in Lisbon during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century]. Perhaps these two birds, and the similar pipits from Botswana, represent visitors from a population to the north – in Angola? A visit to the bird collection in Lubango (Angola) might clarify this. Although the birds from Zambia which White named *lwenarum* are similar to the Drakensberg pipits in their measurements, they are not a good match in other respects, and I think that we can discount any migration of Mountain Pipits to distant countries to the north-west of South Africa. This takes us back to Vincent's name *editus*, and the latest checklist of the birds of South Africa produced by BirdLife has accepted this interpretation, so that the Mountain Pipit has become *Anthus editus*. Meanwhile toepad samples from these museum specimens have been sent to a laboratory for DNA analysis, and if this is successful, we will have an independent picture of their relationships.

Where do Mountain Pipits go after breeding if they are not international travellers? I have always suspected that they may simply move to lower altitudes, and pass unnoticed among the many similar pipits which seem to be quite nomadic in winter. Faansie Peacock has also suggested this, and his fieldguides provide the best information which we have on identifying this group of birds (Peacock 2006, 2012). There are five museum specimens of Mountain Pipits away from the breeding areas: a bird from Kimberley, Northern Cape (April), two from Jakobsdal, Free State (April) one from Philippolis, Free State (October) and one from Somerville, Transkei (October). This suggests movement to the west and south, with no records to date from KwaZulu-Natal to the east of the breeding areas. But we know too little about this bird to be dogmatic; hopefully more observations from dedicated pipit-watchers will start to fill in the gaps!

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