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MISCELLANEOUS TAXONOMIC NOTES ON AFRICAN BIRDS

XLV

by

P. A. CLANCEY

(Director, Durban Museum, Durban)

THE RACES OF THE WHITETHROAT *SYLVIA COMMUNIS* LATHAM REACHING THE SOUTH AFRICAN SUB-REGION

Following the findings of Stresemann and Stresemann, *Journ.f. Ornith.*, vol. cix, 3, 1968, pp. 303 - 314, nominate *Sylvia communis* Latham, 1787: Kent, England, is currently not considered to reach the South African Sub-Region during its non-breeding sojourn in Ethiopian Africa, the two races wintering in the Sub-Region being *S.c. volgensis* Domaniewski, 1915: Saratov, Volga R., U.S.S.R., and *S.c. icterops* Ménétries, 1832: Talych=Talyshskiye Gory, south-eastern Azerbaydzhan, U.S.S.R. I have recently researched the races of *S.communis* to be admitted to the South African list and conclude on the basis of material from Rhodesia and Botswana, in addition to specimens from Zambia and southern-western Tanzania, that while it is true enough that most specimens are clearly attributable to both *volgensis* and *icterops*, some elements of *S.c.communis* do reach the drier interior of southern Africa during their non-breeding stay in Africa, where they moult, and that the exclusion of this taxon from the list is indefensible.

While much of the material available is in a seriously abraded and insolated condition, a sufficiency of moulting or completely moulted

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saturated Pinard Yellow from breast to vent, and black spotting over lower fore-throat generally denser and more extensively distributed; sides and flanks more dusky olivaceous. Nuptial dress: not readily distinguishable from *P.f.nubilosa*, but pectoral band apparently poorly developed, as in the case of *ansorgei*, judging from the few breeders seen. Sexes almost alike in size.

Measurements: Wings of 7 ♂♂ 50,5 - 56 (54,7), SD 2,00, SE 0,75, tails 68 - 78 (71,0), SD 3,79, SE 1,43 mm.

Wings of 6 ♀♀ 51 - 55 (53,4), SD 1,74, SE 0,71, tails 70 - 74 (71,7), SD 1,47, SE 0,60 mm.

Material examined: 18 (*Angola:* Cuito-Canavale (Cuando-Cubango), Longa (Cuando-Cubango); *Zambia:* Lungwebungu R., S. Kasiji R., S. Lueti R.).

Range: Huila north of the range of nominate *P.flavicans* to northern Bié, east to Cuando-Cubango and Moxico, Angola, and western Zambia on the Lungwebungu and South Kasiji Rivers, western Balovale, south the Liuwa Plain and S. Lueti R., Kalabo.

Remarks: Very dark upper-parts, the back strongly tinged olive, and the poorly developed pectoral band in nuptial dress characterise this mesic subspecies.

ON THE VALIDITY OF *PRIONOPS TALACOMA* SMITH, 1836

Roberts, *Ann.Transv.Mus.*, vol. x, 2, 1924, p. 86, was the first author to suggest that the southern *poliocephala* group of populations of the helmet-shrike *Prionops plumata* (Shaw) could be arranged in two mensural races: *P.p.poliocephala* (Stanley), 1814: Mozambique, along the eastern coastal lowlands of Africa from Tanzania to Zululand, with a rather longer-winged and -tailed form, *P.p.talacoma* Smith, 1836: "between Latakoo and the Tropic"=western Transvaal at about 25° S., replacing it over the interior plateau. While Sclater, *Syst.Av.Aethiop.*, part ii, 1930 p. 597, disregarded Roberts' findings, this latter author again affirmed the discreteness of *talacoma* in *Ann.Transv.Mus.*, vol. xvi, 1, 1935, p. 151. In proposing *P.p.angolica* from Malanje, Angola, Grote, *Ornith.Monatsber.*, vol. xlvii, 1939, p. 182, arrived at virtually the same conclusion as Roberts, *viz.*, that a valid mensural difference exists between eastern coastal and high level interior and western elements. While the validity of *angolica* has been discussed on several occasions in the literature, and it is currently considered by most workers to be synonymous with *P.p.poliocephala*, Roberts' findings *per se* have not been re-assessed since the publication of his *Birds of South Africa*, 1940.

Examination of the series of 120 specimens of the present *P.p. poliocephala* in the collection of the Durban Museum from southern and eastern Africa in the main confirms the findings of Roberts, these latter based on the series in the Transvaal Museum. Using only fully adult birds, distinguishable from immature examples by showing no development of black over the temporal and occipital surfaces and in the longer wing, eastern littoral skins were found to be significantly shorter winged than those of the high interior from western Swaziland and the Transvaal, north to Rhodesia, eastern and northern Botswana, etc., as follows:

Wings of 10 ♂♂ from Mozambique 103,5 - 108,5 (106,4), SD 1,55, SE 0,49, of 12 ♀♀ 104 - 109 (106,7), SD 1,40, SE 0,40.

Wings of 5 ♂♂ from the interior plateau 108,5 - 114 (110,6), SD 2,04, SE 0,91, of 12 ♀♀ 109 - 115 (110,5), SD 1,79, SE 0,52 mm.

The extensive series of measurements from skins from the same general region of southern and central Africa in the National Museum of Rhodesia's collection given by Irwin and Benson, *Arnoldia* (Rhod.), vol. ii, 32, 1966, pp. 15, 16, unfortunately includes wing-length data from a number of immature birds, as revealed by the large wing-length spectra in most samples. The measurements assembled by Traylor, *Pub.cult.Co.Diam.Ang.*, Lisboa, No. 58, 1962, pp. 105, 106, are also unreliable for this same reason. I find the species to be relatively conservative in its wing-length, the normal size spectrum in adults about 5 or 6 mm. Eastern littoral birds with wings below 103 and plateau birds with wings below 108 are retaining the juvenal rectrices.

Apart from the size criterion, other differences were revealed during the course of study of material on the laboratory table. In series, specimens from the Mozambique littoral and adjacent low country in eastern Swaziland and north-eastern Zululand have the pileum rather darker and more caesious than those from the xeric interior of the South African Sub-Region, with the face more washed with bluish grey, and the crescentic patch over the posterior ear-coverts larger and deeper black. Ventrally, such specimens also show a development of greyish wash to the chin and upper fore-throat. In these features, such eastern low country birds recall a similar development in *P.p.vinaceigularis* Richmond, 1897: plains east of Mt Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, which, however, differs in having the white wing-stripe vestigial or absent and the bristly distal head feathering longer in a trend towards the condition in *P.p.cristata* Rüppell, 1836: coast at Massawa, Eritrea, Ethiopia. I am a little uncertain as to how much taxonomic weighting to accorded dif-

ferences in levels and distribution of the waxy caesious bloom to the head in this helmet-shrike, because as has been shown by Lawson, *Bull.Brit.Orn.Club*, vol. lxxxiv, 7, 1964, pp. 117, 118, it is readily removed by a simple application of soap and water or, as I have ascertained, by solvents such as carbon tetrachloride and trichloroethylene at the skinning table. It is also much affected by insolation, being relatively blue when the bird is in fresh dress, but browning considerably with the passage of time through exposure to the sun's rays. In this connection it is important to recall that the amount and quality of the grey exhibited over the head in this species has occasioned much debate among taxonomists in the past (see Friedmann, *U.S.Nat.Mus.Bull.*, No. 153, 1937, pp. 315 - 320). The fugitive nature of the blue-grey suffusion to the head of *P.plumata* is in some ways analogous to the situation obtaining in the adult Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* (Linnaeus), in which the rust colour is peculiar to certain feather tracts over the head and is likewise solvent in soap and water.

Resulting from the above, I believe there are valid reasons for adopting Roberts' decision of 1924 that the southern African populations of the White Helmet-Shrike should be arranged in two races, and that *P.talacoma* Smith, 1836, be resuscitated for the longer-winged plateau representatives. Both Chapin, *Birds of the Belgian Congo*, part iv, 1954, pp. 94, 95, and Rand, in the continuation of Peters' *Check-List Birds of the World*, vol. ix, 1960, p. 311, recognise *P.p.angolica*, the latter author giving the range of this taxon as extending south to most of Zambia, Angola and South West Africa. As birds every bit as large as those of Angola (topotypes of *P.p.angolica*) occur further to the south-east in northern and eastern Botswana, the plateau of Rhodesia and the Transvaal, *angolica* is, *ipso facto*, antedated by Smith's *talacoma*, described from the far western Transvaal and on the eastern edge of the South West Arid District.

The characters and ranges of the two southern African races of the White Helmet-Shrike will now stand as follows:

Prionops plumata poliocephala (Stanley), 1814: Mozambique.

Bristly frons off-white; pileum deep caesious grey; face light bluish grey, whitening distally; vertically across the posterior auriculars a crescentic patch of deep black. Below white, the chin and upper fore-throat washed with grey. Wings of adult ♂♀ 103,5 - 109 mm.

Range: Natal and Zululand from about the Tugela R., Mozambique, northern Rhodesia to the middle reaches of the Zambesi R. valley, and south-eastern Zambia, Malawi, and central and eastern Tanzania.

Prionops plumata talacoma Smith, 1836: western Transvaal about 25°S.

Synonym: Prionops poliocephala angolica Grote, 1939.

Pileum paler and less bluish grey; face wholly whiter, and blackish posterior auricular patch lighter and greyer. Below, usually without a grey wash to the chin and upper fore-throat. Size ranging much larger: wings of adult ♂♀ 108,5+ - 115 mm. Recorded as having wings to 121 mm. in Angolan populations.

Range: Western Swaziland, Transvaal (lowveld birds intergrades towards last), Rhodesia, eastern and northern Botswana, Caprivi, northern South West Africa, Angola, most of Zambia, southern Zaïre, north-western Tanzania, southern Uganda in Ankole, and south-central Kenya.

Remarks: Evidence from Natal and from study of material indicate that some elements of the southern African populations of *P.p.talacoma* shift east during droughts and some descend annually to the coastal lowlands during the cold dry winter months. Birds with the wing above 110 mm from Mozambique are winterers from the high interior to the west.

Prionops Talacoma A. Smith, *Rep.Exped.Expl.Centr.Afr.*, 1836, p. 45, has its type-locality as "between Latakoo(=Kuruman) and the Tropic." This can be more accurately defined by reference to Smith, *Illustr.Zool.S.Afr.*, Aves, pl. v (and text), 1838, where it is stated that the species was first encountered when the expedition reached (the western Transvaal) about 25° S. I therefore formally propose that the type-locality of *P.p.talacoma* be restricted to
western Transvaal at about 25° S.