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MISCELLANEOUS TAXONOMIC NOTES ON AFRICAN BIRDS

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by

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THE GREAT REED WARBLER *ACROCEPHALUS* *ARUNDINACEUS* (LINNAEUS) IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SUB-REGION

Acrocephalus arundinaceus (Linnaeus), 1758: Gdańsk (Danzig), northern Poland, winters abundantly in southern Africa, where it is present from about the end of November to the first half of April. Of the four races of *arundinaceus* admitted by Vaurie, *Birds Palearctic Fauna*, vol. i (Passeriformes), 1959, pp. 245–247, nominate *arundinaceus* and the central Asian *A.a.zarudnyi* Hartert, 1907: Djarkent=Panfilov, Kazakhstan, U.S.S.R., are recorded for the South African Sub-Region, though the relative abundance of either has never been accurately determined. In the case of the other two subspecies of *A.arundinaceus* recognised by Vaurie, *A.a.griseldis* (Hartlaub), 1891: Nguru Mts, Kilosa district, eastern Tanzania, is currently known to winter in eastern Africa as far south as the southern end of Lake Malawi (Fort Johnston), in Malawi, while the closely allied *A.orientalis* Temminck and Schlegel, 1847: Japan, aestivates in the Indo-Chinese countries and the Philippines, south to Sulawesi (Celebes), Timor and other islands to the north-west of New Guinea. This latter form is now no longer treated as conspecific with *arundinaceus*, following the demonstration of a different moult pattern by Stresemann & Stresemann, *Die Mauser der Vögel*, 1966, pp. 429–431, and on the basis of its different wing-formula.

Variation in the present reed warbler affects general size, the mass of the bill, and the colouration of the dorsum and to a lesser degree that of the underside. As in all species inhabiting the abrasive realm of a rank grass and reed environment, the colour of the plumage is subject to rapid modification. Wear and insolation result in a dulling of the brown surfaces, while the venter becomes whiter and the grey streaking over the lower fore-throat more marked.

Recent careful study of a series of 107 skins of *A.arundinaceus* preserved in the collections of the Durban and Transvaal Museums and the National Museum of Rhodesia, Bulawayo, has enabled me to draw certain conclusions as to the relative abundance of *A.a.arundinaceus* and *A.a.zarudnyi* on their southern African wintering grounds, and has revealed that *A.a.griseldis* ranges certainly as far south as the lower reaches of the Zambesi R. For assistance in organising the loan of specimens to augment the material in the Durban Museum I am indebted to both Dr. A. C. Kemp and Mr. M. P. Stuart Irwin.

Analysis of a hundred specimens in more or less immaculate pre-nuptial dress collected in southern Africa (Africa from south-western Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi and northern Moçambique, south to the Cape) suggests that nominate *arundinaceus* is almost twice as numerous as *zarudnyi* (63 per cent.), with 34 per cent. of specimens being attributable to *zarudnyi* and 3 per cent. to *griseldis*. The distinctions between *arundinaceus* and *zarudnyi* are not very sharply drawn in newly moulted material in many instances, the latter taxon somewhat colder and more olivaceous, less rusty or ochraceous, above, and with a lighter rump and paler upper tail-coverts. The subspecies concerned is not consistently whiter below, and the characters laid down for it by Vaurie, *loc.cit.*, suggest the use of insulated material from the relatively xeric breeding grounds of the form.

The pre-nuptial moult is relatively rapid, with some birds almost completely through it arriving on the austral wintering grounds by the end of the first half of December, while others, probably from different populations, are still in more or less complete faded and worn breeding or juvenal plumage in mid-January, the moult only in its incipient stages (see also Nisbet & Medway, *Ibis*, vol. cxiv, 4, 1972, p. 482).

The differentiating characters and other details of the three races of the Great Reed Warbler known to occur in southern Africa are as follows:

- (a) **Acrocephalus arundinaceus arundinaceus** (Linnaeus), 1758:
Gdańsk (Danzig), northern Poland.

Dorsum Dresden Brown (Ridgway, *Color Standards and Color Nomenclature*, 1912, pl. xv), merging into Tawny-Olive (pl. xxix) over the rump and upper tail-coverts. Below creamy white, the lower fore-throat faintly streaked with grey, and the breast, sides and flanks variably washed with ochraceous-buff.

Wings of 10 ♂♂ 96,5–102 (98,8), SD 2,10, of 10 ♀♀ 91,5–96,5 (93,6), SD 2,01mm.

Dates: First and last dates of specimens examined from various territories are as follows:

Cape and Orange Free State: 28 December–14 March

Natal: 2 February–11 March

Transvaal: 17 December–3 April

Rhodesia: 5 December–22 March

Botswana and South West Africa: 8 December–5 March

Malawi: 1 January–26 March

Zambia: 23 November–1 April

Tanzania (L.Rukwa): 13 December–25 February

Material examined: 68. *Cape and O.F.S.:* Uitenhage, Renoster R., Philipstown, Flagstaff, Umtamvuna R.; *Natal:* Durban, Pietermaritzburg; *Transvaal:* Wakkerstroom, Lydenburg, Pretoria, Aapies R., Henley-on-Klip, Hamanskraal, Moordrift; *Rhodesia:* Bulawayo, Gwaai Reserve, Selukwe, Salisbury, Rusape, Gadzema R., Murumbini (Sabi/Lundi confl.), Maranke Reserve (Sabi), 21° 08' S., 31° 22' E.; *Botswana:* L. Ngami, Shorobe, Chanokhe Drift, Lake Dow, Makarikari Salt Lake, Nata, Kasane; *South West Africa:* Okahandja; *Malawi:* Karonga, Nkhotka-Kota, Blantyre, Nsanje (Port Herald), Tangadzi; *Zambia:* Kabompo Boma, Solwezi, Chilanga, Gwembe, Ngoma (Kafue), Lusaka, Luwingu, Mporokoso, Hot Springs (Kalomo), Chiengi, Mbala, Petuake, Chipata; *S.W. Tanzania:* L. Rukwa. A skin from Sokoto, Nigeria, is dated 21 April, a Kananga (Luluabourg), Zaïre, one 21 February, while two from Kilifi, coastal Kenya, are dated 16 and 20 April.

(b) ***Acrocephalus arundinaceus zarudnyi*** Hartert, 1907: Panfilov (Djarkent), Kazakhstan, U.S.S.R.

Colder, more olivaceous, above than nominate *arundinaceus*, the dorsal surface Light Brownish Olive (pl. xxx) or paler, grading into dilute Isabella Color (same pl.) over the rump and upper tail-coverts. Edging to outer vanes of wing-coverts and tertials less rusty than in *arundinaceus*. Averaging but not consistently whiter below. Similar in size.

Wings of 10 ♂♂ 96–101,5 (98,3), SD 1,78, of 10 ♀♀ 90–97 (93,3), SD 2,38mm.

Dates: First and last dates of specimens examined from various territories are as follows:

Cape and Natal: 2 February–30 March

Rhodesia: 5 December–9 April

Botswana: 9 December–13 March

Malawi: 14 January–7 February

Zambia: 27 November–4 April

Material examined: 36. *Cape and Natal:* Umtamvuna R., Durban; *Rhodesia:* Nyamandhlovu, Bulawayo, Fort Victoria, Chipisi T.T.L., Salisbury, Rusape, Maranke Reserve (Sabi), Murumbini (Sabi/Lundi); *Botswana:* Shorobe, Kasane, Nata; *Malawi:* Chinteche, Nsanje (Port Herald district); *Moçambique:* Mopeia; *Zambia:* Gwembe, Chisomo (Serenje), Mporokoso, Kasama, Mbala, Chiengi, Lundazi, Kalichero; *S.W. Tanzania:* Lake Rukwa.

Remarks: A ♀ dated 31 January, 1956, from Salisbury, Rhodesia, in the collection of the National Museum of Rhodesia, Bulawayo, N.M. Reg. No. 33 547, differs from all other *zarudnyi* and nominate *arundinaceus* specimens examined in having the upper-parts paler and rather redder (about Tawny-Olive, brighter and paler over the rump and upper tail-coverts), the remiges and rectrices being warm brown rather than blackish. It may represent an undescribed race. On the basis of wing-formula it is clearly not an example of *A. orientalis*, nor is it attributable to any of the *A. stentoreus* Hemprich and Ehrenberg subspecies, and its affinities are clearly with the *zarudnyi* and *arundinaceus* assemblage of populations. The wing of the specimen concerned measured 94, and in the wing $P2=3/4$.

(c) ***Acrocephalus arundinaceus griseldis*** (Hartlaub), 1891: Nguru Mts, Kilosa, Tanzania.

Synonym: *Acrocephalus babylonicus* Ticehurst, 1920.

Dorsally somewhat similar to *A.a.zarudnyi* but averaging greyer and somewhat greener, and rump and upper tail-coverts less pallid and contrasted against the mantle. Below whiter, the lower fore-throat unstreaked and breast and sides without a buffy overlay. Bill more slender, less high basally, and strongly laterally compressed. Size smaller.

Wings of 1 ♂ 83, 2 ♀♀ 80, 82,5mm.

Dates: *Southern Malawi:* 23 March

Moçambique: 10 December–8 January

Material examined: 3. *Malawi:* Fort Johnston; *Moçambique:* Mopeia.

Remarks: The two specimens from Mopeia (Mopêia Velha), at 17° 59' S., 35° 44' E., in Moçambique, extend the known wintering range further south than heretofore, and are also the first records of the taxon for Moçambique. It seems certain that the form will ultimately be found to winter still further south in the lowlands of Moçambique, and may be added provisionally to the South African list.

A. a. griseldis breeds in the marshes along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers from north of Baghdad to Basra and Al Faw (Fao), Iraq, according to Vaurie, *loc.cit.* Its winter range will now stand as East Africa from Kenya, south to the lower Zambesi R., in Moçambique.

The much smaller general proportions, whiter underside with the lower fore-throat unstreaked, and the finer, narrower bill suggest to me that *griseldis* may well be specifically discrete from *A. arundinaceus*.

VARIATION IN *ACROCEPHALUS PALUSTRIS* (BECHSTEIN)

The Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* (Bechstein), 1798: Germany, is a western Palaearctic species which breeds from southern England and western continental Europe from southern Sweden and Finland, south to France and northern Italy, thence east to Transcaspia in the U.S.S.R., and winters in eastern and southern Africa. It was considered to show no geographical variation until Portenko, *Trudy Zool.Inst.Akad.Nauk, S.S.S.R.*, vol. xviii, 1955, p. 504, described the eastern populations as *A. p. laricus*, the type-locality of which is Davamand, in the Elburz Mts of northern Iran. Vaurie, *Birds of the Palearctic Fauna*, vol. i (Passeriformes), 1959, p. 243, dealt with *laricus*, placing it in the synonymy of *A. p. palustris* and stating "The populations of Iran ("*laricus*") are very slightly paler, the difference being a little more distinct in juvenal plumage" than in European tootypes of *palustris*.

As all populations of this reed warbler winter in East Africa, south to Damaraland, South West Africa, in the west and Natal and the eastern Cape in the east, any variation of subspecific import could be expected to be discernible in a panel of freshly moulted material from this general region of Africa. Careful study of a series of eighty African-taken skins, including many in more or less immaculate, newly assumed nuptial dress, recently carried out in the Durban Museum suggests that *laricus* is in all probability well founded and more distinct than one would gauge from Vaurie's succinct comments. Of the series of eighty specimens before me some twenty-five