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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.

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

(31 per cent.) are distinguishable from the rest in having the upper-parts colder, somewhat more greenish, and less warm buffy olivaceous, and the venter distinctly whiter, with a reduced buff overlay to the breast and lateral surfaces. These correspond to the taxon *laricus* as proposed by Portenko, the warmer backed and buffier birds being attributable to the occidental populations (nominate *A. palustris*). On the basis of these winter-quarters taken birds, the differences between nominate *palustris* and *A. p. laricus* are adjudged to be on a par with those separating the Great Reed Warbler races *A. a. arundinaceus* and *A. a. zarudnyi* and the two races of the Garden Warbler *S. b. borin* and *S. b. woodwardi*. As in all denizens of dense herbage and rank grass and reeds, the plumage of *A. palustris* wears and fades relatively rapidly, and separation of *palustris* and *laricus* may on occasion be difficult in the event of worn breeding material being used.

In newly assumed nuptial dress two subspecies of *A. palustris* are recognisable, following Portenko, as follows:

(a) ***Acrocephalus palustris palustris*** (Bechstein), 1798: Germany.

Dorsum about clear Isabella Color (pl. xxx), lightening over the rump and upper tail-coverts. Below creamy white, washed with Cream Buff (pl. xxx) over the breast, sides and flanks, the last nearer Chamois (same pl.).

Remarks: Present on its central and southern African wintering grounds from the first week of December–mid-April. First and last dates of collected specimens examined from various territories are as follows:

Capr: 25 March

Natal: 29 December–29 March

Transvaal: 12 January–24 March

Rhodesia: 9 January–3 April

Moçambique: 7 December–12 January

Malawi: 5 December–14 April

Zambia: 6 December–13 April

Northward movement commences almost immediately following the completion of the prenuptial moult.

(b) ***Acrocephalus palustris laricus*** Portenko, 1955: Davāmand, Elburz Mts, northern Iran.

Compared with *A. p. palustris*, the present taxon in fresh plumage is colder, somewhat darker, rather greener, and less ochraceous-

olive, over the upper-parts, which are about Light Brownish Olive or Buffy Olive (pl. xxx). Below whiter, with paler, less ochraceous, buff on the breast and lateral surfaces, the flanks much lighter.

Range: Vaurie, *loc.cit.*, considered *laricus* attributable only to the Iranian population, but probably all eastern populations, namely those breeding in regions immediately to the south, west and north of the Caspian from northern Iran and eastern Turkey, north to Transcaucasia and Transcaspia (in the north-east to the valleys of the Ural and Ilek Rivers), in the U.S.S.R., will be found to be referable to *laricus* as defined above. The precise breeding range will require to be determined by workers in the northern hemisphere.

Specimens from the central and southern African wintering grounds referred to *laricus* are as follows:

Natal:

- ♀ Reunion Rocks, Durban, 24 December, 1931 (TM)
- ♂ Reunion Rocks, Durban, 20 January, 1960 (DM)

Swaziland:

- ♂ S.W. boundary, 4 January, 1973 (DM)

Transvaal:

- ♂ Moordrift, 18 December, 1924 (TM)
- ♂ Blouberg, 17 January, 1955 (TM)

Rhodesia:

- ♂ Turgwe R., 1 January, 1937 (TM)
- ♀ Pungwe R., Holdenby, 25 December, 1957 (NM)
- ♀ Bulawayo, 12 January, 1961 (NM)
- ♂ Banket, - December, 1962 (NM)
- ♂ Hot Springs, Sabi, 27 December, 1964 (NM)
- ♀ Haroni/Lusitu confl., 14 January, 1966 (NM)
- ♀ Lusitu R., 15 January, 1966 (NM)
- ♂ Sabi/Lundi confl., 11 January, 1968 (NM)
- ♂ Sabi/Lundi confl., 16 January, 1968 (NM)
- ♀ Mazoe, 9 January, 1971 (NM)
- ♂ Fort Victoria, 30 January, 1971 (NM)
- ♀ Humani Ranch, Sabi, 14 February, 1972 (NM)
- ♂ Marandellas, 27 January, 1973 (NM)

Moçambique:

- ♂ Mopeia, 7 January, 1973 (TM)

Malawi:

- ♂ Nsanje (Port Herald), 24 February, 1953 (NM)

Zambia:

♀ Chipata, 2 January, 1953 (NM)

♂ Hot Springs, Kalomo, 7 January, 1958 (NM)

South West Africa:

0 40 km E. of Windhoek, 20 March, 1975 (SWA)

0 40 km E. of Windhoek, 20 March, 1975 (SWA)

Kenya:

♂ Kakamega Forest, 1969 (date given on label incorrect)

Key: Collection: DM Durban Museum, TM Transvaal Museum, NM National Museum of Rhodesia, SWA South West African Administration.

The winter range of *A.p.laricus* appears to completely subsume that of nominate *A.palustris*, but which is twice as numerous as *laricus* (69 per cent.). The subspecies was first shown to reach South Africa in Clancey, *Natal Wildlife*, vol. xiv, 2, 1973, p. 6.

The African hibernal range of *A.palustris* as shown by Moreau, *Palaeartic-African Bird Migration Systems*, 1972, p. 302 (map 4), requires to be adjusted to include more of Moçambique and central South West Africa, in which latter territory the species has recently been taken by staff members of the nature conservation section of the South West African Administration.

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