



Finding southern Ethiopia's endemic birds

Claire N. Spottiswoode

Trouver les oiseaux endémiques au sud de l'Éthiopie. Le sud de l'Éthiopie possède un endémisme avien remarquable et est reconnu comme une Zone d'Endémisme pour les Oiseaux. Cet article fournit des informations concernant cinq espèces endémiques et explique comment les trouver sur le terrain. Il s'agit du Touraco de Ruspoli *Tauraco ruspolii*, de l'Engoulement de Nechisar *Caprimulgus solala*, de l'Alouette d'Erard *Heteromirafra sidamoensis*, de l'Hirondelle à queue blanche *Hirundo megaensis* et du Corbin de Stresemann *Zavattariornis stresemanni*. Ces espèces sont menacées par la dégradation ou la destruction de leur habitat par les activités d'une population humaine toujours en augmentation.

Scattered along the southernmost escarpment of Ethiopia's highlands are the tiny distributions of five endemic bird species. This nucleus of remarkable and unexplained endemism in grassland, savanna and juniper forest is recognised as a global Endemic Bird Area (EBA; Stattersfield *et al.* 1998). All five endemics are globally threatened, one critically so, and conservation projects in the region will be beneficiaries of funds raised by the 2010 British Birdwatching Fair. This support is urgently needed to avert at least one imminent extinction: without immediate conservation intervention, southern Ethiopia's Liben Lark (previously known as Sidamo Lark: see Collar 2009) seems destined to become mainland Africa's first recorded bird extinction (Spottiswoode *et al.* 2009).

Endemics aside, birdwatching in this region is tremendously diverse, enjoyable and for the most part straightforward, owing to its open habitats and dry climate. The focus of this article is, however, the endemic species, briefly sketching their ecology and how and where each can most reliably be seen during a short birding trip. Much of the information is adapted from a forthcoming bird-finding guide to Ethiopia (Spottiswoode *et al.* in press), which also describes in detail other sites along the journey 'linking' the endemic species, from Negele to Yabelo via the village of Arero.

Until recently, the pantheon of southern Ethiopia's endemics would also have included the far-flung Degodi Lark *Mirafra degodiensis*, but Collar *et al.* (2008) have shown this species to be

poorly defined with respect to morphology, voice and genetics, and best regarded as a subspecies of Gillett's Lark *Mirafra gilletti*, itself a relatively localised endemic to the Horn of Africa.



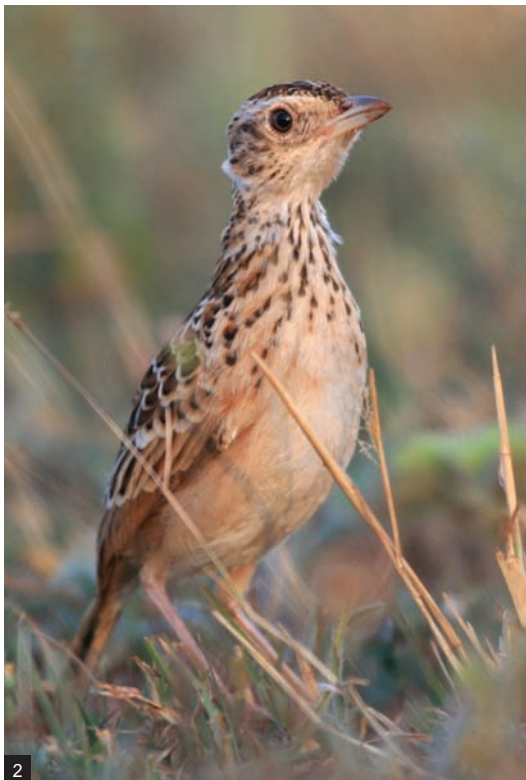
Above: general map of southern Ethiopia showing the main areas discussed herein. All of the maps reproduced here are by Claire Spottiswoode, and taken from *Finding Birds in Ethiopia*, reproduced with permission of the publishers.

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Figures 1–2. Liben (formerly Sidamo) Lark / Alouette d'Erard *Heteromirafra sidamoensis*, Liben Plain, Ethiopia, 2 August 2007 (Greg Davies)

Figure 3. Prince Ruspoli's Turaco / Touraco de Ruspoli *Tauraco ruspolii*, Arero Forest, Ethiopia, 31 August 2005 (Claire Spottiswoode)





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Prince Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii*

When Prince Ruspoli was trampled to death by an elephant in south-west Ethiopia in 1893, his collecting bag—happily intact—contained the type specimen of this turaco. The specimen was presumed to originate from Arero Forest (described below), but it is now clear that the bird occurs patchily over a wider area of southern Ethiopia, and is not confined to forest. Despite its tolerance of tall *Acacia* and secondary growth, it remains heavily threatened by wood extraction and agriculture (Borghesio *et al.* 2004). There is little confidence that its distributional limits have been properly defined, and any records outside its established range (between Arero and the Genale River) are of great interest and should be reported to the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS; BirdLife in Ethiopia). The three sites below represent those where it can most reliably be seen, but keep an eye out for the species in any denser roadside vegetation throughout the wooded highland foothills (particularly from Negele to Kebre Mengist and Shakisso). This species and the more widespread White-cheeked Turaco *T. leucotis* occur alongside one another at Arero Forest and in the Kebre Mengist region; hybrids are worryingly widespread at the latter (Lernould & Seitre 2002, Borghesio *et al.* 2004).

Finding it. Although habitat degradation in the heavily populated Negele region has already taken a heavy toll on Prince Ruspoli's Turaco (Borghesio *et al.* 2004), one site in this area is perhaps still the simplest place to see it. Halfway between Negele town and the Liben Plain (see Liben Lark below), a drainage line with sparse thicket crosses the road (1 on Negele map; 05°18.44'N 39°38.04'E). Scan for turacos perched in the open on exposed branches in the early morning and evening, often calling hoarsely, or stroll through the habitat to search for them; when flushed they typically fly only a short distance to the next clump of thicket.

Travelling between Negele and the Bale Mountains, many birders have sought this species (with some success) at the point where the road crosses the Genale River. Stop at the sandy drift (2 on Negele map; 05°41.10'N 39°31.85'E) 2.8 km south of the main Genale bridge, and search the many impressive fig trees here, particularly in the dry season. A local turaco guide, Adem Dube, may well appear and help, and guide you up a beautiful

wooded valley to the east. Turacos also occur in mixed *Acacia–Terminalia–Combretum* woodland further from the Genale River.

Arero Forest, a mixed juniper and *Podocarpus* evergreen forest west of Negele, is the presumed type locality of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco. This area is prone to ethnic disputes so it is worth checking on the security situation before visiting. Entering Arero village, turn left at the large 'roundabout' centred on a big tree, and you will shortly enter juniper forest (1 on Arero map). Turn right 6.2 km from the roundabout (04°47.42'N 38°49.47'E), and keep an eye out from this point for turacos at the roadside, although they are more commonly seen further on. Continue through this forest, beyond a cleared area, until you reach a second, better-developed forest patch. Soon after this point there is an area of exposed rock on the right-hand side of the road (2 on map), which provides a fine place to stand, ideally with a scope, and scan the juniper canopy for turacos. Also walk slowly along the road either side of this site, and keep alert for 'crashing' sounds in the canopy, nasal, squirrel-like trilling or explosive alarm calls, or red wings gliding amongst the junipers. Beware, though, that all of these can also indicate White-cheeked Turaco. The forest beyond the exposed rock, extending along another 2.6 km of road, is also an excellent area for the turaco. Arero Forest itself can feel rather birdless, but other species include Hemprich's Hornbill *Tockus hemprichii*, Northern Brownbul *Phyllastrephus strepitans* and White-breasted Cuckooshrike *Coracina pectoralis*.

Nechisar Nightjar *Caprimulgus solala*

So far as is known the Nechisar Nightjar is endemic to the isolated grasslands of the Nechisar Plain, at the western extremity of this EBA. To date it is known with certainty only from the type specimen, a single and distinctive wing famously rescued from a decomposing roadkill in 1990 (Safford *et al.* 1995), and an excellent guide to its potential field identification has already been published in *Bull. ABC* (Butchart 2007). There has recently (2009) been a tantalising first claim of a live bird (I. Sinclair pers. comm.), although full details remain forthcoming. It is probable that an individual will need to be captured to confirm this species' continued existence.

Finding it. The Nechisar Plains lie within the spectacularly beautiful Nechisar National Park,





near the town of Arba Minch in the Great Rift Valley. At the time of writing the agonisingly poor road from Shashemene to Arba Minch was being remade, which will hopefully simplify future searches. The black cotton soils of the plains are crisscrossed by several tracks, a jolting 30 km (occasionally impassable after rain) beyond the park entrance, and this is also the best place in the world to see the oddly localised White-tailed Lark *Mirafra albicauda*. The area is very good for nightjars in general, with nine species occurring in all, and a night search is likely to turn up one or several of the following: Slender-tailed *C. clarus*, Star-spotted *C. stellata*, Donaldson-Smith's *C. donaldsoni*, Montane *C. poliocephalus* and perhaps even Standard-winged *Macrodipteryx longipennis*.

Liben (formerly Sidamo) Lark *Heteromirafra sidamoensis*

The Liben Lark is a perilously threatened bird confined to the arid grassland of the Liben Plain near Negele, and recent surveys indicate that fewer—probably far fewer—than 250 individuals survive within its tiny range, which continues to be rapidly squeezed by habitat loss through crop planting, overgrazing and scrub encroachment (Collar *et al.* 2008, Spottiswoode *et al.* 2009). By 2009 it was confined to less than 3,000 ha of heavily degraded habitat (Donald *et al.* in press). It belongs to a uniformly imperilled genus of highland grassland larks that also comprises the Vulnerable Rudd's Lark *H. ruddi* of South Africa and the Critically Endangered Archer's Lark *H. archeri* of Somaliland, which has not been seen with certainty since its discovery in 1922.

Finding it. For a species so close to extinction, the Liben Lark could still, at the time of writing, relatively easily be seen. It remains most numerous at the western end of the Liben Plain (3 on Negele map; around 05°16.37'N 39°41.08'E), just south (1–2 km) of a dilapidated but still active military camp, which it is essential to avoid. The lark is found in relatively short grass with very sparse or absent shrubs. Early mornings are best (especially 06.30–09.30 hrs), seemingly year-round, when males are most likely to be heard giving their short skylark *Alauda*-like aerial song that is audible at several hundred metres. Males hover as they sing only c.10 m above the ground, resembling a fly on the horizon before they parachute down after about 20 seconds. At closer range, their incredibly

elongated hindclaws can be seen dangling conspicuously. This short and largely stationary song-flight contrasts with the long, high, circular and somewhat chirruping song-flights of Somali Short-toed Lark *Calandrella somalica*, which is very common here. When flushed, Somali Short-toed Lark is easily distinguished by its rather nasal flight call (if anything, a flushed Liben Lark gives a rather melodious *tseep-eeep-eeep-eeep*, reminiscent of a Pectoral-patch Cisticola *Cisticola brunnescens*), and on the ground by its relatively heavy pinkish bill, conspicuous whitish eye-ring, heavily streaked (rather than scalloped) mantle, and generally pot-bellied and horizontal posture. The alternative (if you are unable to visit in the morning) is to walk until you flush a Liben Lark; they tend not to fly, but run quickly and rodent-like through the grass, occasionally standing upright to scan their surroundings, showing their pale, triangular-looking head, markedly scalloped back and pale central crown-stripe.

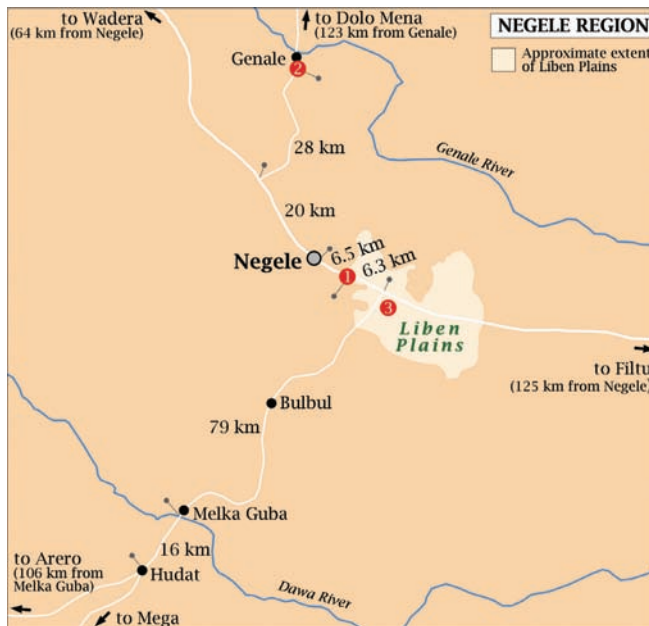
Birds are thin on the ground on the Liben Plain, but other interesting species to be seen here are Hartlaub's Bustard *Eupodotis hartlaubi*, remarkably high concentrations of Kori Bustard *Ardeotis kori*, Somali Courser *Cursor somalensis*, Black-winged Lapwing *Vanellus melanopterus*, White-crowned Starling *Spreo albicapillus*, whilst Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and Salvadori's Seedeater *Serinus xantholaemus* occur nearby. Quail Plover *Ortyxelos meiffrenii* has been seen here, and occasionally small groups of unusually easterly White-tailed Swallows *Hirundo megaensis* (Gabremichael *et al.* 2009).

White-tailed Swallow *Hirundo megaensis*

The range of this species overlaps almost perfectly with that of the Ethiopian Bush Crow; this coincidence is not at all understood, since the birds have quite different ecologies. White-tailed Swallows have an extremely agile, bat-like flight, and are typically seen speeding gracefully over open savannah and scrubland. They especially favour places with sparser cover, such as open valleys, but sometimes occur over woodland. The species was first collected by Con Benson and his Mozambican collector, Jali Makawa, while they were stationed at Mega during the Second World War and did much pioneering work (Benson 1946). Benson suspected that they bred in hollows in termite mounds, and this has been confirmed







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Figure 4. White-tailed Swallow / Hironnelle à queue blanche *Hirundo megaensis*, Liben Plain, Ethiopia, 29 June 2006 (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 5. Ethiopian (Stresemann's) Bush Crow / Corbin de Stresemann *Zavattariornis stresemanni*, between Yabello and Arero, Ethiopia, 29 May 2009 (Paul Donald)

Left: map of the Negele region of southern Ethiopia

Below: map of the Yabelo region of southern Ethiopia, with (inset) details of the Arero Forest.



to occur (M. N. Gabremichael pers. comm.), but circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that they may also nest against the interior beams of Borana houses, as does the sympatric Ethiopian Swallow *H. aethiopica*. Any breeding records are of interest and should be submitted to EWNHS.

Finding it. White-tailed Swallows can be seen anywhere in the Yabelo–Arero–Mega triangle, and are likely simply to be bumped into during a couple of days birding in the area. If time is short and luck is low, though, there are some specific areas that are well worth focusing on. Perhaps best of all is the open, heavily grazed vicinity of the village of Dubuluk (2 on the Yabelo map). Scanning the open country immediately north and south of the village is likely to turn up a swallow. The arid, rocky country along the gravel road from the main Yabelo–Mega road to Soda (turn-off at 04°09.56'N 38°16.83'E; 3 on map) is also good for swallows, as well as species typical of arid stony country such as Somali Courser, Short-tailed Lark *Pseudalaemon fremantlii* and Somali Fiscal *Lanius somalicus*. (Note that a smaller short-cut track—4 on the map—leaving the tar road a little further north,





at 04°12.52'N 38°16.87'E, and rejoining the main Soda dirt road at 04°11.51'N 38°20.59'E is also very good for birding; you might choose to return this way.) A third place to search is the open, largely cultivated area just south of Mega town, on the road to Moyale. Stop along the road 6–14 km south of the town (5 on the map; 04°01.05'N 38°22.02'E) scanning especially in open areas along river valleys. Beware that Ethiopian Swallows also occur in all of these areas, but are readily distinguishable by their dark tails, breast markings, and noticeably less agile flight.

Ethiopian (Stresemann's) Bush Crow

Zavattariornis stresemanni

Ethiopia's star endemic is also an evolutionary and ecological enigma: its closest relatives are the ground-jays *Podoces* of central Asia (Ericson *et al.* 2005), and it is bafflingly confined to a small scrap of arid savannah in the triangle formed by Yabelo, Arero and Moyale in Ethiopia's far south. Happily it is patchily common in this area, and very easily seen. The first sign of its presence is often its nest, a large gourd of spiny sticks with an upward-facing entrance tunnel, sitting on the flat top of an *Acacia*. It is highly social, confiding, wonderfully characterful, and especially common and tame in the vicinity of villages and livestock enclosures, where it turns over pieces of livestock dung in search of grubs, and even perches on cattle. Flocks are noisy and mobile, frequently giving metallic, Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*-like calls, from which comes its Borana name, *kaka*. Although bush crows are still relatively numerous, there is much concern that they are currently declining owing to the whittling away of their habitat of mature *Acacia* savannah by commercial cultivation, charcoal production, and bush encroachment probably caused by overgrazing and fire suppression (Borghesio & Giannetti 2005, Gedeon 2006, Mellanby *et al.* 2008).

Finding it. Seeing an Ethiopian Bush Crow is still unlikely to pose any problems. Any area with some tall acacias and ideally a village or animal enclosure nearby is likely to reveal a party of bush crows. If time is very short, an excellent area to focus on is the tall woodland just north of Yabelo, on the main road to Addis Ababa (map) and in the vicinity of a small settlement called Harobake (1 on the Yabelo map; 04°59.56'N 38°12.59'E), where a livestock market is held on Sundays. The

combination of tall acacias, little ground cover, and the presence of cattle and camel enclosures is prime habitat for bush crows, but take care when photographing them that no livestock are in the background, as this can offend their owners. Another area with a particularly good concentration of bush crows is the first 10–40 km of the dirt road from Yabelo to Arero, where bush crows are almost invariably present in the vicinity of small Borana settlements.

General birding in the Yabelo–Mega area is tremendously diverse and exciting, long after the first bush crows and swallows have been sighted. Species likely to be seen during a 2–3-day visit include Somali Courser, Vulturine Guineafowl *Acryllium vulturinum*, Short-tailed Lark, Somali Short-toed Lark, Foxy Lark *Mirafra alopex*, Scaly Chatterer *Turdoides aylmeri*, Somali Crombec *Sylvietta isabellina*, Pygmy Batis *Batis perkeo*, Pringle's Puffback *Dryoscopus pringlii*, Somali Fiscal, Red-naped Bushshrike *Laniarius ruficeps*, White-crowned Starling and Northern Grosbeak Canary *Serinus donaldsoni*.

The future

All of southern Ethiopia's endemics are threatened. The turaco faces habitat destruction from wood cutting and agriculture, and the lark, swallow and bush crow from bush encroachment, agricultural expansion and rangeland degradation. There are hints that new species to science might still await discovery in the region, but if so they will doubtless find themselves listed as threatened as soon as they are described. In the face of relentless population pressure and large-scale vegetation shifts hastened by climate change, the long-term challenges to the birds of southern Ethiopia are truly daunting. Yet there is reason for optimism, not least that human and conservation interests often coincide in this region: bush encroachment and rangeland degradation favour neither birds nor pastoralists (Spottiswoode *et al.* 2009, Donald *et al.* in press). The 2010 Birdfair will be the first to focus on the Afrotropics for many years and will bring significant support to the invaluable work of the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society. Most urgently of all, their efforts at grassland restoration on the Liben Plain should give the Liben Lark a fighting chance of seeing out the new decade.





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