

Short Note

Long-billed Tailorbirds (*Orthotomus moreaui*) rediscovered at Serra Jeci, northern Mozambique

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The Long-billed Tailorbird, *Orthotomus (Artisornis/Apalis) moreaui*, is listed as Critically Endangered on the basis of its very small and fragmented population (criterion C2a; BirdLife International 2000). It is known from only two localities some 950km apart: the East Usambara Mountains of north-east Tanzania and the Serra Jeci (Njesi Plateau) of Niassa Province, northern Mozambique. The nominate race is scarce at the East Usambaras (Cordeiro *et al.* 2001), but nothing is known about the current status of subspecies *sousae* from Mozambique (BirdLife International 2000). The only information on Long-billed Tailorbirds in Mozambique dates from 1945, when Jali Makawa spent 16 days in the Unango district, collecting birds on the Njesi Plateau (labelled Serra Jeci on modern maps) at the behest of Con Benson (Benson 1945, 1946). Among the 29 bird species collected by Makawa were seven specimens of Long-billed Tailorbird, which Benson described as a new subspecies (Benson 1945).

One of the conservation targets identified by BirdLife International (2000) was an assessment of the status of Long-billed Tailorbirds at Serra Jeci, reiterating the call made by Collar and Stuart (1985). We made a brief visit to Serra Jeci during July 2001 and are pleased to report that the area remains virtually undisturbed by humans, and that Long-billed Tailorbirds still occur at this site.

Methods

We visited Serra Jeci, northern Mozambique, from 3–5 July 2001. The Serra Jeci massif lies midway between the two main roads running north from Lichinga, the capital of Niassa Province (Figure 1). The road to Unango and Macaloge lies to the east, and the road to Metangula on Lake Malawi lies to the west. We learned from local people that the only vehicle access was via a farm track which leaves the main road 25km north of Unango. We followed this track through 18km of intact miombo (*Brachystegia*) woodland to a small compound and several cleared fields some 4km from the base of Serra Jeci.

Mist nets were set up in the riparian woodland at the farm for three hours on the afternoon of 3 July. Early on 4 July, with the assistance of two local guides, we hiked from the farm to the nearest forest patch on the mountain (12°38.6'S, 35°16.1'E). The most accessible montane forest was a small

patch (ca. 10ha) at 1 500m a.s.l., at the interface between miombo woodland on the steep slope and tall grassland on the 1 600m summit. Much of the forest lacked a closed canopy and contained birds not typical of montane forest, such as Black Cuckooshrike, *Campephaga flava*, and Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike, *Telophorus sulphureopectus*. However, the forest was taller than that reported by Makawa (Benson 1946), with the tallest trees in excess of 20m high. There were several other small forest patches farther north, on the slope of the main peak (Monte Chitagal), and a large forest block on the scarp farther north (Monte Chilungo). Immediately to the south, the hills were lower and covered with miombo woodland, but farther south there were two large, grassy plateaux with scattered forest patches.

Owing to the lack of water and other logistical constraints, we spent only one night in the forest on the mountain. We listed all bird species observed and set three mist nets within the forest for approximately five hours on the afternoon of 4 July and three hours on the morning of 5 July. PGR also walked 2km north from the forest patch to the base of Monte Chitagal. Through Fred Berrington, we were able to ask the farm workers about human activities in the area, as well as wildlife occurring in the area and the distribution of forest habitat.

Results

A total of 81 bird species was observed during our brief visit to Serra Jeci, of which 57 were observed in the montane forest or adjacent grassland (Table 1). Combined with the species collected by Makawa in 1945, 94 species have been recorded from the area, 64 from montane forest and grassland (Table 1). One pair of Long-billed Tailorbirds was observed moving quietly through the canopy of a tall forest tree (ca. 15m high). We heard some apalis-like calls that did not resemble the calls of Black-headed, *Apalis melanocephala*, or Yellow-breasted, *A. flavidata*, apalises, but could not be ascribed definitely to Long-billed Tailorbirds. African Tailorbirds, *O. metopias*, were fairly common in the forest understorey, and three were caught in mist nets (Table 2).

Apart from two metal cans found on the slope of the mountain (possibly dating to the civil war that raged in Mozambique from the 1970's to 1990's), there was no evi-

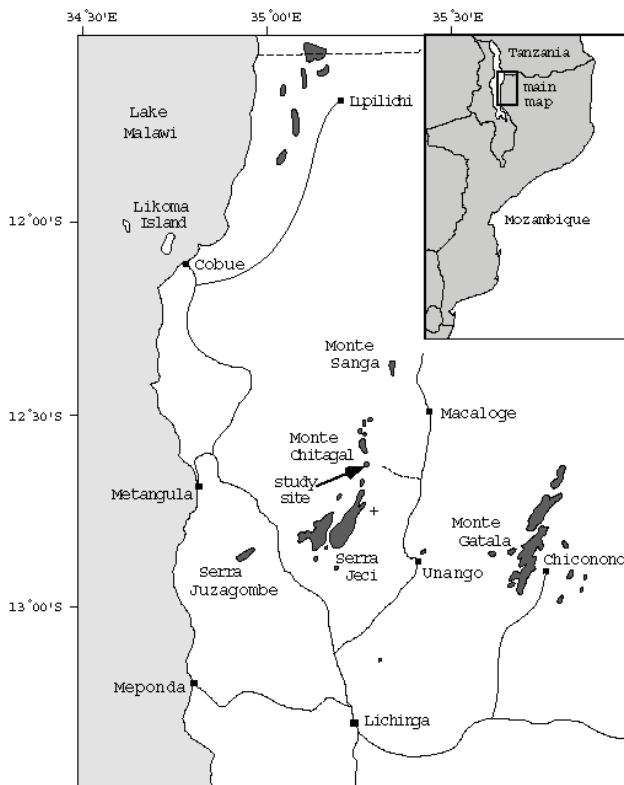


Figure 1: The Serra Jeci and surrounding peaks above 1500 m (shaded) in north-western Niassa Province, northern Mozambique. The location of the forest visited in 2001 is arrowed; the location cited by Benson (1946) is shown as +

dence of human activities away from the immediate vicinity of the small farm. The farm workers reported collecting honey from the foothills of the mountains, but seldom if ever visited the mountain peaks. There was no evidence of any other extractive activities beyond the immediate area of the farm. Trails leading from the farm only ran approximately one-third of the way to the foot of the mountain; thereafter only game tracks were encountered. Judging from spoor and droppings, African elephants, *Loxodonta africana*, are regular visitors to the forest and montane grassland, and the local people report numbers of other large mammals in the area, including lion, *Panthera leo*; leopard, *P. pardus*; eland, *Taurotragus oryx*; sable antelope, *Hippotragus niger* and zebra, *Equus crawshayi*. The local Yao people were very reluctant to visit especially the high Njeci Peak, as well as a number of other peaks in the region, believing them to be occupied by ancestral spirits. Reference was also made to landmines on some parts of the massif.

Discussion

Given the apparently poor conservation status of Long-billed Tailorbirds in the East Usambaras, the species' sole other known locality (BirdLife International 2000, but see Cordeiro *et al.* 2001), the Serra Jeci is of global conservation importance for this species. Although we observed only a single

pair of Long-billed Tailorbirds, it is likely that the species remains fairly common in the montane forest patches on Serra Jeci, given the virtual absence of human disturbance. Other species of conservation concern occur in the area: the Olive-headed Weaver, *Ploceus olivaceiceps*, is near-threatened (BirdLife International 2000), and Bertram's Weaver, *Ploceus bertrandi*, as a forest-edge species, is being severely affected by habitat loss in Tanzania (Neil Baker in litt.). Serra Jeci also is the only known locality for African Tailorbirds outside Tanzania, adding to the area's conservation importance. Although there appears to be little immediate threat to Serra Jeci from human activities, steps should be taken to formally protect the area.

One of the peculiarities of Makawa's report of Long-billed Tailorbirds at Serra Jeci was that they occurred in the forest canopy (Benson 1946), whereas the species primarily occurs in forest edge and undergrowth at the East Usambaras (Irwin 1997, Cordeiro *et al.* 2001). Benson subsequently questioned the accuracy of Makawa's habitat observations (Hall and Moreau 1970, Collar and Stuart 1985), but our limited observations confirm that Long-billed Tailorbirds occur in the canopy at Serra Jeci. One possible explanation for this apparent difference in habitat use between the disjunct montane areas may be competition with African Tailorbirds and Green-backed Camaropteras, *Camaroptera brachyura*, in the understorey at Serra Jeci. Stuart (1981) argued that the disjunct distribution of the Long-billed Tailorbird might result from competition with these species, but this has been questioned by Cordeiro *et al.* (2001). An alternative hypothesis for the disjunct distributions of Long-billed Apalis and Dapple-throat, *Modulatrix orostruthus*, in the Eastern Arc montane forests is that they are relictual species, approaching the end of the controversial 'taxon cycle' (see Ricklefs and Bermingham 1999 for a discussion of this hypothesis).

It is not entirely clear from Benson's (1946) account where exactly Jali Makawa collected birds at Serra Jeci. The co-ordinates given (12°45'S, 35°20'E) are south of the area we visited, but lie east of the mountains (Figure 1). Makawa's description of the habitat suggests that he collected on the large plateaux 10–15 km south of the forest we visited. These plateaux are the closest high-elevation areas to Unango, and are the most likely target for a collector walking in from Unango. Our records thus probably represent a small range extension of both tailorbirds in Mozambique.

Currently, there are too few observations to estimate the population of Long-billed Tailorbirds at Serra Jeci. Hall and Moreau (1962) suggested that there was not more than 10 square miles of suitable habitat at Serra Jeci, and this estimate (25 km²) was repeated by Collar and Stuart (1985). We estimated 10–20% of the southern Serra Jeci was forested, and a small-scale topographical map of the region suggests that there is some 125 km² above 1500 m, giving a forest area of 12–25 km². Many of the forest patches were rather small, but even if each forest patch only supports a few pairs of Long-billed Tailorbirds (given the presence of Long-billed Tailorbirds in the small patch visited), the population is likely to be >50 birds. Consequently, it is likely that the species' conservation status could be reassigned from Critical to

Table 1: Birds observed in montane forest on Serra Jeci (ca. 1 500m), adjacent montane scrub (grassland, protea scrub and dwarf miombo above 1 500m) and in miombo and riparian woodland on the mountain slopes and adjacent areas. * denotes species observed in 2001 and collected in 1945 (Benson 1946); § species collected in 1945 but not observed during the current visit. Taxonomy and order follows Sibley and Monroe (1990)

	Species	Forest	Scrub	Woodland
§ Green-backed Honeybird	<i>Prodotiscus zambesiae</i>			+
Green-backed Woodpecker	<i>Campethera cailliautii</i>	+	+	
Cardinal Woodpecker	<i>Dendropicos fuscescens</i>			+
* Stierling's Woodpecker	<i>Dendropicos stierlingi</i>			+
Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird	<i>Pogoniulus chrysoconus</i>			+
Crowned Hornbill	<i>Tockus alboterminatus</i>	+		
Striped Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon chelicuti</i>			+
Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops pusillus</i>			+
Swallow-tailed Bee-eater	<i>Merops hirundineus</i>		+	
* Livingstone's Turaco	<i>Tauraco livingstonii</i>	+	+	
African Wood-Owl	<i>Strix woodfordii</i>	+		
Freckled Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus tristigma</i>		+	
§ African Olive-Pigeon	<i>Columba arquatrix</i>	+		
Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>		+	+
African Goshawk	<i>Accipiter tachiro</i>	+		+
White-breasted Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina pectoralis</i>			+
Black Cuckooshrike	<i>Campephaga flava</i>	+		
Square-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus ludwigii</i>	+		+
Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>			+
* White-tailed Crested Flycatcher	<i>Elminia albonotata</i>	+		+
Black-backed Puffback	<i>Dryoscopus cubla</i>	+		+
Black-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegala</i>			+
Tropical Boubou	<i>Laniarius aethiopicus</i>	+		+
Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike	<i>Telophorus sulfureopectus</i>	+		+
White-crested Helmet-Shrike	<i>Prionops plumatus</i>			+
Retz's Helmet-Shrike	<i>Prionops retzii</i>	+		+
Pale Batis	<i>Batis soror</i>		+	+
Black-throated Wattle-eye	<i>Platysteira peltata</i>	+		+
§ Miombo Rock-Thrush	<i>Monticola angolensis</i>			+
Orange Ground-Thrush	<i>Zoothera gurneyi</i>	+		
Kurrichane Thrush	<i>Turdus libonyanus</i>			+
African Dusky Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa adusta</i>	+		
* White-starred Robin	<i>Pogonocichla stellata</i>	+		
* Cape Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha caffra</i>		+	
White-browed Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha heuglini</i>			+
Red-capped Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha natalensis</i>	+		
* African Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		+	
Familiar Chat	<i>Cercomela familiaris</i>			+
Arnott's Chat	<i>Myrmecocichla arnotti</i>			+
§ Mocking Cliff-Chat	<i>Thamnota cinnamomeiventris</i>			+
* Spotted Creeper	<i>Salpormis spilonotus</i>		+	+
Cinnamon-breasted Tit	<i>Parus pallidiventris</i>		+	+
Eastern Saw-wing	<i>Psalidoprocne orientalis</i>		+	
Dark-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus tricolor</i>	+		+
§ Stripe-cheeked Greenbul	<i>Andropadus milanjensis</i>	+		
Little Greenbul	<i>Andropadus virens</i>	+		+
Terrestrial Brownbul	<i>Phyllastrephus terrestris</i>	+		
§ Placid Greenbul	<i>Phyllastrephus placidus</i>	+		
Red-faced Cisticola	<i>Cisticola erythrops</i>			+
Singing Cisticola	<i>Cisticola cantans</i>		+	
* Lazy Cisticola	<i>Cisticola aberrans</i>		+	
Tawny-flanked Prinia	<i>Prinia subflava</i>		+	+
Yellow-breasted Apalis	<i>Apalis flavida</i>	+		+
* Black-headed Apalis	<i>Apalis melanocephala</i>	+		
* Long-billed Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus moreaui</i>	+		
* African Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus metopias</i>	+		
Green-backed Camaroptera	<i>Camaroptera brachyura</i>	+		+
Stierling's Wren-Warbler	<i>Calamonastes stierlingi</i>			+
African Yellow White-eye	<i>Zosterops senegalensis</i>	+		+
* Evergreen Forest-Warbler	<i>Bradypterus lopezi</i>	+		

Table 1 cont.

§ Dark-capped Yellow Warbler	<i>Chloropeta natalensis</i>			+
Yellow-bellied Eremomela	<i>Eremomela icteropygialis</i>		+	+
* Green-capped Eremomela	<i>Eremomela scotops</i>			+
Red-faced Crombec	<i>Sylvietta whytii</i>			+
§ Yellow-bellied Hyliota	<i>Hyliota flavigaster</i>			+
Southern Hyliota	<i>Hyliota australis</i>			+
§ African Hill-Babbler	<i>Pseudoalcippe abyssinica</i>	+		
Arrow-marked Babbler	<i>Turdoides jardineii</i>		+	
§ Rufous-naped Lark	<i>Mirafra africana</i>			+
§ Red-capped Lark	<i>Calandrella cinerea</i>		+	
Western Violet-backed Sunbird	<i>Anthreptes longuemarei</i>		+	
Eastern Olive Sunbird	<i>Cyanomitra olivacea</i>	+	+	+
Amethyst Sunbird	<i>Chalcomitra amethystina</i>	+	+	+
Scarlet-chested Sunbird	<i>Chalcomitra senegalensis</i>		+	
Collared Sunbird	<i>Hedydipna collaris</i>	+		+
Miombo Double-collared Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris manoensis</i>		+	+
* Eastern Double-collared Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris mediocris</i>	+		
Variable Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris venusta</i>		+	
Yellow-throated Petronia	<i>Petronia superciliaris</i>		+	+
Striped Pipit	<i>Anthus lineiventris</i>			+
§ African Pipit	<i>Anthus cinnamomeus</i>		+	
Spectacled Weaver	<i>Ploceus ocularis</i>		+	
Bertram's Weaver	<i>Ploceus bertrandi</i>		+	
Dark-backed Weaver	<i>Ploceus bicolor</i>	+		+
* Olive-headed Weaver	<i>Ploceus olivaceiceps</i>			+
Yellow Bishop	<i>Euplectes capensis</i>			+
Red-collared Widowbird	<i>Euplectes ardens</i>		+	
§ Red-faced Crimsonwing	<i>Cryptospiza reichenovii</i>	+		
Red-throated Twinspot	<i>Hypargos niveoguttatus</i>			+
Jameson's Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta rhodopareia</i>		+	+
Yellow-bellied Waxbill	<i>Estrilda quartinia</i>		+	
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>		+	
* Stripe-breasted Seedeater	<i>Serinus reichardi</i>			+
Cabanis's Bunting	<i>Emberiza cabanisi</i>			+
Total number of species		37	31	56

Table 2: Birds caught in mist nets set in montane forest on Serra Jeci (1 500m) and in riparian woodland at the farm below the mountain (1 200m). See methods for data on netting effort

Species	Montane forest	Riparian forest
African Tailorbird	3	0
Eastern Double-collared Sunbird	3	0
Little Greenbul	2	2
Eastern Olive Sunbird	2	1
White-starred Robin	1	0
Black-headed Apalis	1	0
White-tailed Crested Flycatcher	0	2
Dark-backed Weaver	0	2
Red-throated Twinspot	0	2
Green-backed Camaroptera	0	1
Tropical Boubou	0	1
Total	12	11

Endangered. (*cf.* extinction risk criteria in BirdLife International 2000) once a proper evaluation of its population in Mozambique is conducted.

The fact that both tailorbirds occurred in a small forest

patch on the slopes of Njeki Peak, which is isolated from the southern plateau by more than 5km of miombo woodland, suggests that they may also occur in forest patches on other peaks in the area. Near the village of Macaloge some 30km farther north, the local people report that Monte Sanga has three forested peaks which apparently have not been visited by ornithologists. To the east of Unango, there is another extensive area above 1 500m (some 140km²), between Monte Gatala and Chiconono (Figure 1), which may support further montane forests. These areas require exploration, as do the highlands close to the Tanzania border around Lupilichi (60km² above 1 500m), the Serra Juzagombe west of Serra Jeci (8km²), and a few small, forested peaks south of Lichinga. We are planning a more extensive survey of as many montane forests in the area as possible.

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