

# Green-breasted Bush-shrike

## *Malaconotus gladiator* and its relationship with Monteiro's Bush-shrike *M. monteiri*

Eddie Williams

Le Gladiateur à poitrine verte *Malaconotus gladiator* et le Gladiateur de Monteiro *M. monteiri* sont deux espèces en danger et difficiles à observer, connues de quelques forêts ouest africaines seulement. Les observations récentes de l'auteur au sud-ouest du Cameroun laissent supposer que le répertoire vocal de *M. gladiator* est plus varié qu'indiqué dans la littérature, ce qui pourrait amener l'observateur à confondre cette espèce avec *M. monteiri*. Tenter de distinguer les deux espèces uniquement sur la base des vocalisations semble être hasardeux et il est possible qu'elles ne représentent que deux formes d'une même espèce. Tandis que la position systématique des deux taxons vis-à-vis d'autres gladiateurs, en particulier le Gladiateur ensanglanté *M. cruentus*, a déjà fait l'objet de recherches dans le passé, la possibilité qu'il s'agisse d'une seule espèce ne semble pas encore avoir été envisagée. Il semble que les deux taxons aient connu une évolution parallèle et en isolement géographique et écologique par rapport au Gladiateur de Blanchot *M. blanchoti*. Des recherches supplémentaires sont souhaitables, étant donné la rareté de ces deux gladiateurs.

### Introduction

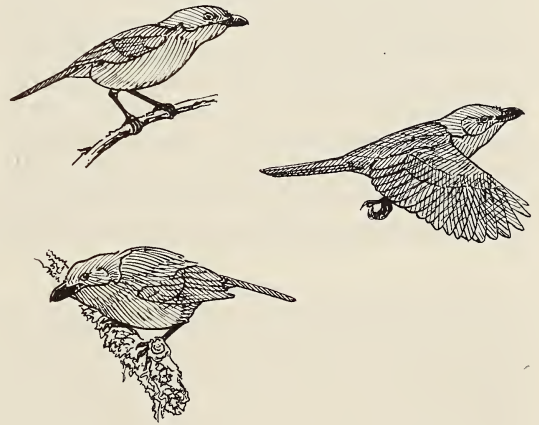
**G**reen-breasted Bush-shrike is an elusive, canopy-dwelling species which occurs at very low density in montane forest in western Cameroon and eastern Nigeria. It is currently considered 'Vulnerable' by Birdlife International<sup>3</sup> and consequently figures high on the menu of the increasing number of birders now visiting western Cameroon in search of the region's many endemics.

Monteiro's Bush-Shrike is an even more elusive species, with only a handful of records from montane forest in Angola and western Cameroon, and is currently classed as 'Endangered'<sup>3</sup>. Although considered by some authorities to be a race of Grey-headed Bush-shrike *M. blanchoti*<sup>6</sup>, the rationale for this treatment appears tenuous. The latter is primarily a lowland bush and woodland inhabitant with no zones of intergradation with *monteiri*. There are, however, similarities in the plumage and vocalisations of the two taxa.

### Vocalisations

Both Green-breasted and Monteiro's Bush-shrikes are best located by call. That of the former is described as a series of three mournful whistles each with an upward-terminating inflection<sup>1</sup>. While this appears to be the most frequent call, it has also been described as making a series of up to six mournful whistles, some lacking the upward-terminating inflection<sup>2</sup>.

The call of Monteiro's Bush-shrike is described as similar to, but distinct from, that of Green-breasted,



Green-breasted Bush-shrike *Malaconotus gladiator*  
by Mark Andrews

namely a series of five whistles, each shorter than those of the latter species, and lacking the upward-terminating inflection<sup>1</sup>. The calls are described as being identical to those of Grey-headed Bush-shrike<sup>2</sup>.

However, recent observations I have made of Green-breasted Bush-shrike in south-west Cameroon suggest that its repertoire is more varied and may be confusable with the calls of Monteiro's.

### Recent observations

On 20 June 1997 at Lake Edib, in the Bakossi mountains, I heard a calling *Malaconotus* sp. at 1,250 m in montane forest. The bird was using a long series of

whistles each without any upward-terminating inflection. I whistled back, causing it to draw nearer where it remained in the canopy above me, calling persistently. When it eventually came into view, it proved not to be the expected Monteiro's but a Green-breasted Bush-shrike. The calls consisted of a series of 5–10 whistles, each slightly shorter than the bird's 'usual' calls and without any upward inflection at their end. I made tape-recordings of this bird and was able to clearly observe it calling, eliminating the possibility of there being two birds present. The calls sounded similar to some sequences given by Grey-headed Bush-Shrike and tape comparisons bear this out.

The following day I encountered what may have been the same calling bird in the same area, which I again 'whistled in'. The calls were identical to those of the previous day with the exception of two series of four whistles in which the two end notes in each series undulated up-and-down.

In addition, F Dowsett-Lemaire (FDL) reports (pers. comm. to G Kirwan 1998) that, of six different *M. gladiator* heard in the Kodmin area and several around Edib (both localities in the Bakossi mountains) in April 1998 none exhibited any upward-terminating inflection in their whistles. Two of these birds were observed. The same also holds true for two *M. gladiator* watched singing on Mt. Kupe, Cameroon in 1997 by the same observer. FDL has noticed two other call types in the repertoire of *M. gladiator* (which are shared by Grey-headed Bush-shrike), both of which

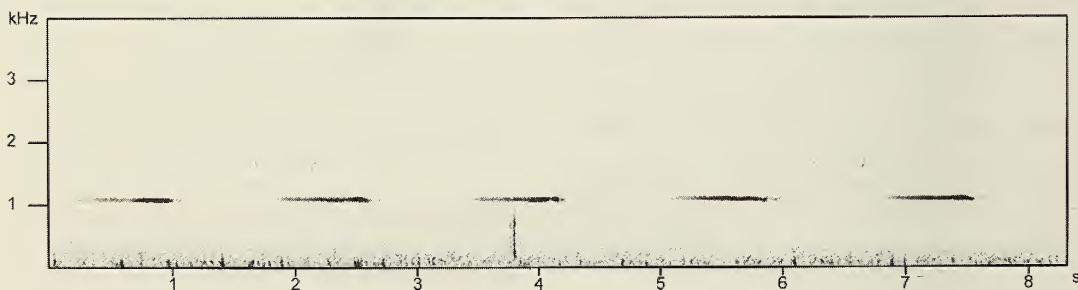
she has heard frequently. "Tearing" calls are given in series' of up to five; "broken whistles" exhibit a distinct break in the middle of the 'song' with the second part being higher-pitched, and are interspersed with monotonous whistles. This call-type may correspond to those I heard on 21 June 1997, in which the song appeared to undulate. One bird observed by FDL at 1,200 m near Lake Edib in April 1998 gave all three call types.

## Discussion

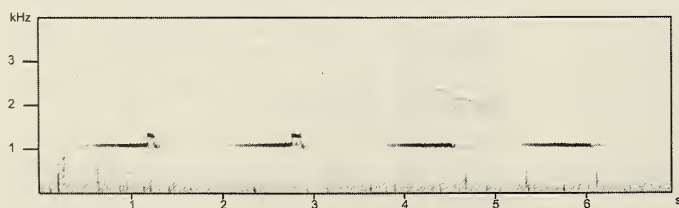
In view of these observations, I believe it is unsafe to distinguish between Green-breasted and Monteiro's Bush-shrikes on the basis of call alone. Furthermore, I believe it is consequently worth considering that they might be colour morphs of the same species, with Monteiro's possibly replacing Green-breasted further south in Angola, where the latter remains unknown. Further evidence to support this possibility is provided by Andrews<sup>1</sup>, who observed Monteiro's responding to imitations of Green-breasted and consequently interacting with one by a duet.

Also relevant is the fact that both Monteiro's and Green-breasted appear to be the only two species of larger *Malaconotus* which are sympatric at the same altitude and in the same habitat. All other large *Malaconotus* usually appear to be mutually exclusive. For example, on Mt. Kupe (Cameroon), Fiery-breasted Bush-shrike *M. cruentus* occurs in lower altitude farmbrush and secondary growth (pers. obs.), Mount

*Malaconotus gladiator* 20/06/97 Bakossi Mtns, Cameroon (E Williams)



*Malaconotus gladiator* 21/06/97 Bakossi Mtns, Cameroon (E Williams)



Kupe Bush-shrike *M. kupeensis* is in primary forest from 950–1,450 m, with Green-breasted and apparently Monteiro's Bush-shrikes occurring above 1,400 m<sup>2</sup>. (The 50 m range of apparent overlap is probably due to variability in altitudinal calculations by observers.) While individuals do wander between altitudes, the vast majority of records conform to this rule. However, in the Bakossi mountains *M. kupeensis* has been recorded twice in the Edib area (by I Faucher; FDL and R J Dowsett) at 1,150 m and 1,150–1,200 m, and thus overlapping with *gladiator*. Indeed one bird was observed within 500 m of a Green-breasted Bush-shrike, although the two species occupy different niches, with *kupeensis* favouring the middle strata and *gladiator* the canopy (FDL pers. comm. to G Kirwan 1998). On mountains where Mount Kupe Bush-shrike is absent, it is noticeable that Green-breasted Bush-shrike occurs regularly at much lower altitudes, down to 950 m on Mt. Cameroon for instance; although, at this locality montane species typically occur at lower altitudes due to the very high rainfall and lower temperatures experienced there<sup>9</sup>.

There remains an anomaly regarding the size of Monteiro's Bush-shrike. In the field it is described as appearing larger than Green-breasted and heavier looking than Grey-headed Bush-shrike. Conversely an examination of skins revealed that Monteiro's appeared smaller than Green-breasted<sup>1</sup>. *Malaconotus* species, however, are known to be variable in size within species<sup>3</sup>, although there is room for further study of this issue.

The taxonomic position of Monteiro's Bush-shrike is addressed at length by Hall *et al*<sup>1</sup>. These authors provide a convincing argument for the separation of Monteiro's from Grey-headed which I believe also has a bearing on its relationship with Green-breasted. They maintain that it is highly unlikely that the Monteiro's Bush-shrike collected on Mt. Cameroon in 1894<sup>7</sup> could be independently derived from Grey-headed Bush-shrike, in forest habitat 300 km from the nearest savannah-dwelling population of the latter, by changes in facial and iris coloration exactly paralleling those in the Angolan population. The recent discovery of the Mt. Kupe population—also isolated from any population of Grey-headed Bush-shrike—reinforces this argument. Green-breasted Bush-shrike appears to have evolved in a similar manner to Monteiro's, in geographically and ecologically isolated areas from those of Grey-headed.

Although Hall *et al*<sup>1</sup> considered Green-breasted Bush-shrike a monomorphic species they do mention its grey iris, identical in colour to that of Monteiro's, another relevant factor when considering its relation-

ship. Grey-headed Bush-shrike has a yellow iris. Hall *et al*<sup>1</sup> also considered that Monteiro's could be a colour morph or race of Fiery-breasted Bush-shrike on account of its identical iris colour and similar facial pattern. They do not consider, however, differences in habitat (discussed above) and vocal differences: the most regular calls of Fiery-breasted being a series of 5–6 short barbet-like hoots (pers. obs.), totally unlike the long mournful whistles of Monteiro's and Green-breasted.

The differences between the plumages of Green-breasted and Monteiro's Bush-shrikes are less relevant than they would otherwise seem when we consider the fact that the African bush-shrikes taken as a whole contain some of the most extreme and varied examples of polymorphism known among birds. Intra-genus polymorphism is also discussed in detail by Hall *et al*<sup>1</sup> and is, in any case, beyond the scope of this article. One example worthy of mention, however, is the occurrence in south-west Cameroon of a yellow-breasted variant of Fiery-breasted Bush-shrike. Individuals have been collected at Kumba<sup>8</sup> and I observed one on Mt. Kupe in June 1997. Given a good view, it can be separated from Monteiro's by the lack of yellow crescent-shaped tips to the wing-coverts and smaller yellow tips to the tertials. The existence of these individuals should be borne in mind by observers presented with a possible Monteiro's, especially one seen only from below (a highly probable scenario), in which case habitat and calls would be the only clues to the birds identity.

To summarise, I believe there is some evidence to suggest that Green-breasted and Monteiro's Bush-shrikes are conspecific. Further study, including that based upon DNA testing, is clearly required, although this will be no easy task given the rarity of the subjects and their elusive habits. Perhaps the greatest problem facing future researchers is the continuing depletion of montane forest in the region, and that these enigmatic birds will consequently disappear before these issues can be resolved.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Richard Ranft, of the National Sound Archive, for producing the sonograms using Avisoft-Sonograph Pro, Guy Kirwan for reading an early draft of this article and providing information used to improve it, and Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire for her extensive comments on the manuscript and allowing me to include her unpublished data. I would also like to thank Mark Andrews for listening to the tape-recordings and providing useful comments. 🐦

---

## References

1. Andrews, S.M. 1994. The re-discovery of Monteiro's Bush-shrike *Malaconotus monteiri* in Cameroon. *Bull. ABC* 1: 26–27.
  2. Bowden, C.G.R. and Andrews, S.M. 1994. Mount Kupe and its birds. *Bull. ABC* 1: 13–16.
  3. Collar, N.J., Crosby, M.J. and Stattersfield, A.J. 1994. *Birds to watch 2: the world list of threatened birds*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International.
  4. Hall, B.P., Moreau, R.E. and Galbraith, I.C.J. 1966. Polymorphism and parallelism in the African bush-shrikes of the genus *Malaconotus* (including *Chlorophoneus*). *Ibis* 108: 162–182.
  5. Keen, S. Cameroon 16 September–3 December 1992. Unpublished trip report.
  6. Mackworth-Praed, C.W. and Grant, C.H.B. 1973. *Birds of West Central and Western Africa*. London, UK: Longmans, Green & Co.
  7. Reichenow, A. 1894. Zur Vogelfauna von Kamerun. Zweiter Nachtrag. *J. Orn.* 42: 29–43.
  8. Serle, W. 1952b. Colour variations in *Malaconotus cruentus* (Lesson) *Bull. Brit. Ornithol. Cl.* 1 72: 27–28.
  9. Stuart, S.N. (ed) 1986. *Conservation of Cameroon Montane Forests*. Cambridge, UK: International Council for Bird Preservation.
- 6 Newbold Grove, Croxteth Park, Liverpool L12 0NS, UK.