

Photospot:

Endemic and special birds of Somaliland

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Spécialités du Somaliland. La Corne de l'Afrique est une région très peu visitée par les ornithologues, principalement pour des raisons de sécurité. Cependant, la partie nord-ouest, le Somaliland, qui a son propre gouvernement élu démocratiquement, est un pays stable et paisible, que l'on peut visiter en toute sécurité, contrairement à la Somalie limitrophe. Nous présentons quelques oiseaux parmi les plus remarquables du pays observés au cours de notre visite en mai 2010.

The constant news stories of violence and chaos emanating from Somalia's capital city, Mogadishu, have made 'the Horn of Africa' one of the continent's least-visited regions. Since little other news leaks beyond the region's borders, it is quite understandable that few people realise that

the north-western section of the Horn is in fact a peaceful and stable country called the Republic of Somaliland, whose borders roughly equate to the former British Somaliland. An autonomous state with its own government, visas, currency and capital (Hargeisa), Somaliland has just successfully



Figure 1. Orange River Francolin *Francolinus levaillantoides* of the subspecies *lorti*, near Daalo Forest, north-east Somaliland, 22 May 2010. This taxon is confined to Somaliland and adjacent north-east Ethiopia (Ash & Atkins 2009). It is, together with *F. l. archeri* of south-west Ethiopia, southern Sudan and northern Uganda, and *F. l. gutturalis* of Eritrea and adjacent northern Ethiopia, often considered to be a separate species, Archer's Francolin *F. archeri*. The vocalisations of Archer's Francolin are similar to those of Orange River Francolin and Shelley's Francolin *S. shelleyi*.

Francolin d'Archer *Francolinus levaillantoides* de la sous-espèce *lorti*, Forêt de Daalo, nord-est du Somaliland, 22 mai 2010. Cette sous-espèce est confinée au Somaliland et au nord-est de l'Éthiopie (Ash & Atkins 2009). Avec *F. l. archeri* de l'Éthiopie du sud-ouest, le Soudan du sud et l'Ouganda du nord, et *F. l. gutturalis* de l'Érythrée et l'Éthiopie du nord, elle est souvent considérée comme une espèce distincte, *F. archeri*.

Figure 2. Archer's Buzzard *Buteo [augur] archeri*, near Daalo Forest, 22 May 2010. This distinctive taxon is confined to the mountains of northern Somaliland and adjacent Somalia, and differs from adult Augur Buzzard *B. augur* in having rich chestnut underparts and underwing-coverts. Our only sighting was of this subadult. If it is as rare as it appeared during our visit, then this species should be considered for inclusion on the list of globally threatened birds.

Buse d'Archer *Buteo [augur] archeri*, Forêt de Daalo, 22 mai 2010. Ce taxon distinctif est confinée aux montagnes au nord du Somaliland et de la Somalie limitrophe et diffère de la Buse augure *B. augur* adulte par ses parties inférieures et ses couvertures sous-alaires châtaines. Nous n'avons pas d'autre observation que celle de cet individu subadulte.



Figure 3. Male Heuglin's Bustard *Neotis heuglinii*, east of Burco, 25 May 2010. This majestic bird, with its bold black face mark outlined with a flash of white, finely vermiculated upperparts, grey neck, chestnut lower breast and white belly, must rate as one of Somaliland's most exciting species. It is confined to Somaliland and Somalia, as well as adjacent areas of Djibouti, eastern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. It appears to occur in greatest numbers in central Somaliland, where we saw several in one day, and where this bird was photographed.

Outarde de Heuglin *Neotis heuglinii*, à l'est de Burco, 25 mai 2010. Ce majestueux mâle est un des oiseaux les plus remarquables du Somaliland. L'espèce est confinée au Somaliland et à la Somalie, ainsi qu'aux zones limitrophes de Djibouti, l'Éthiopie orientale et le Kenya septentrional. Le Somaliland central semble héberger la plus grande population. Nous y avons observé plusieurs individus en un jour, dont celui photographié.

run its second democratic elections, with a new president elected. This news is slowly filtering through to the rest of the world.

From an ornithological perspective, such peace and stability means that a few adventurous groups have now visited this mysterious and remote region over the past year. *Birds of Somalia* by Ash & Miskell (1998) and the excellent new field guide to the *Birds of the Horn of Africa* (Redman *et al.* 2009) have provided significant encouragement. The now difficult to find *The Birds of British Somaliland and the Gulf of Aden* (Archer & Godman 1937, 1961) is a must-read for anyone with a serious interest in the region's birds. It was written principally by Sir



Figure 4. Little Brown Bustard *Eupodotis humilis*, east of Burco, 25 May 2010. This species provides a clear reminder of the ancient, dry-corridor connection between south-west and north-east Africa; it has similar croaking calls to its closest relatives, Karoo Bustard (Korhaan) *E. vigorsii* of western South Africa and southern Namibia, and Rüppell's Bustard (Korhaan) *E. rueppellii* of Namibia and southern Angola. Little Brown Bustard appears to be relatively common and widespread across the plains and bush country of the interior of Somaliland.

Outarde somalienne *Eupodotis humilis*, à l'est de Burco, 25 mai 2010. Cette espèce rappelle l'existence dans le passé d'un corridor aride reliant le sud-ouest de l'Afrique au nord-est ; elle émet des croassements similaires à ceux de ses congénères les plus proches, l'Outarde de Vigors *E. vigorsii* d'Afrique du Sud occidentale et Namibie du sud, et l'Outarde de Rüppell *E. rueppellii* de Namibie et Angola du sud. L'Outarde somalienne semble être relativement commune et répandue à l'intérieur du Somaliland.

Geoffrey Archer, Governor of British Somaliland in 1919–22 (who first went there as a colonial administrator in 1913) and constitutes one of Africa's ornithological classics.

To explore the region and contribute to our outdated knowledge of its birds, Birding Africa (www.birdingafrica.com) organised a two-week expedition to Somaliland during the season of peak rains (May/June), to coincide with the main bird breeding season (Archer & Godman 1961). While a trip during this period has the disadvantage of missing a host of Palearctic migrants that visit the country in September–April, our primary aim was to improve knowledge of the region's resident endemics and near-endemics, particularly of their



Figure 5. Somali Courser *Cursorius (cursor) somalensis*, Bohootleh area, 27 May 2010. This ‘dapper’ courser of arid north-east Africa is common on the plains of Somaliland. It shares its blue-grey nape with the similar Cream-coloured Courser *C. cursor*, which occurs from North Africa to India, and Burchell’s Courser *C. rufus* of arid areas of southern Africa. The underwing pattern—distal half black and proximal half brownish grey with a white trailing edge—is similar to that of Burchell’s Courser and is perhaps the best feature for differentiating it from the very similar and partially sympatric Cream-coloured Courser, which has an entirely black underwing (Pearson & Ash 1996).

Courvite de Somalie *Cursorius (cursor) somalensis*, zone de Bohootleh, 27 mai 2010. Ce courvite de l’Afrique du nord-est aride est commun dans les plaines du Somaliland. Il partage sa nuque gris-bleu avec le Courvite isabelle *C. cursor*, dont l’aire de distribution s’étend d’Afrique du Nord jusqu’en Inde, et le Courvite de Burchell *C. rufus* des zones arides d’Afrique australe. Le pattern sous-alaire—main noire et bord de fuite blanc—est probablement le meilleur caractère pour distinguer le Courvite de Somalie du Courvite isabelle, qui est très semblable et partiellement sympatrique, mais dont le dessous de l’aile est entièrement noir (Pearson & Ash 1996).

Figure 6. Somali Pigeon *Columba oliviae*, near Dubâr, 28 May 2010. This localised pigeon with its distinctive pale rufous nape patch, is confined to the arid hills just inland of the Somaliland and northern Somalia coasts. It was first collected by Sir Geoffrey Francis Archer in 1917 and named, by Colonel Stephenson Clarke, for his wife Lady Archer. During the First World War 10,000 camels were sent from British Somaliland to Egypt, necessitating



the importation of large quantities of grain to feed these camels. This was when Archer observed Somali Pigeon flocking to feed on this abundant food source at Dubâr near Berbera. We saw a handful of birds that appeared to be breeding in caves, also near Dubâr.

Pigeon de Somalie *Columba oliviae*, près de Dubâr, 28 mai 2010. Ce pigeon, avec sa tache nuchale roussâtre distinctive, est confiné aux collines arides à l’arrière de la zone côtière du Somaliland et du nord de la Somalie. Sir Geoffrey Francis Archer fut le premier à collecter des spécimens, en 1917, et l’espèce a été nommée d’après sa femme, Lady Archer, par le Colonel Stephenson Clarke. Nous avons vu quelques individus, qui nichaient apparemment dans des grottes près de Dubâr.



Figure 7. Somali Lark *Mirafra somalica*, Qorladey plains, south of Hargeysa, 28 May 2010. The nominate subspecies of Somali Lark is endemic to Somaliland and Somalia. It is a large, stout, upright lark, with rich rufous upperparts and quite a long, slightly downcurved bill, and runs like a courser across the open plains (Archer & Godman 1961). We found them uncommonly across the open, treeless plains of central Somaliland, where they

sang their sweet songs from atop low bushes. We were surprised to find how similar the birds were to Rufous-naped Lark *M. africana*, especially given there has been a suggestion that it may belong in the genus *Certhilauda*, which to us seems strange as it clearly appears to be a species of *Mirafra*.

Alouette de Somalie *Mirafra somalica*, plaine de Qorladey, au sud d'Hargeysa, 28 mai 2010. La sous-espèce nominale de l'Alouette de Somalie est endémique au Somaliland et à la Somalie. Nous l'avons trouvée peu commune dans les plaines ouvertes du Somaliland central, où les oiseaux chantaient sur des buissons. Cette alouette ressemble beaucoup à l'Alouette à nuque rousse *M. africana*, et la suggestion qu'elle pourrait appartenir au genre *Certhilauda* nous paraît injustifiée.

Figure 8. Lesser Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon hamertoni*, near Garadag, 22 May 2010. One of the highlights of our expedition was watching the localised Lesser Hoopoe Lark performing its parachute-like display flights over the desert plains of Somaliland. This large, plain-coloured lark is yet another endemic to Somaliland and Somalia. Its resemblance to Greater Hoopoe Lark *A. alaudipes* is rather superficial, and genetic data are required to determine if it is indeed a close relative of the latter species, or if it deserves its own genus.

Sirli de Witherby *Alaemon hamertoni*, près de Garadag, 22 May 2010. Un des points forts de notre expédition était l'observation du Sirli de Witherby faisant son vol nuptial ressemblant à un parachute au-dessus des plaines désertiques du Somaliland. Cette grande alouette terne est endémique au Somaliland et à la Somalie.



Figure 9. Mangrove Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus [baeticatus] avicenniae*, near Saylac, 17 May 2010. This taxon was initially described in 1989 as a subspecies of African Reed Warbler *A. baeticatus* (Ash *et al.* 1989). Based on the findings of Leisler *et al.* (1997), who used genetic, phenotypic and vocal evidence to study relationships between members of the genus *Acrocephalus*, Gill & Donsker (2008) elevated it to full species status, although most authorities still retain the taxon as a subspecies of African Reed Warbler. As its name suggests, the taxon breeds in mangrove swamps along the North African and Arabian peninsular littorals. It appears to be common near Saylac.

Rousserolle des mangroves *Acrocephalus [baeticatus] avicenniae*, près de Saylac, 17 mai 2010. Ce taxon niche dans les mangroves du littoral de l'Afrique du Nord et de la péninsule arabe. Il semble être commun près de Saylac.



Figure 10. Philippa's Crombec *Sylvietta philippae*, near Buraao, 21 May 2010. This crombec, with its short tail, short, straight bill, yellowish underparts and dark face, is a little-known species of low, dense *Commiphora* and *Acacia* scrub of the Horn of Africa. Prior to 1982 it was known from just 27 records (Ash 1982), although more recently it has been seen occasionally in south-east Ethiopia. Given the paucity of previous records, our five sightings in two days in central and southern Somaliland suggest the species is under-recorded.

Crombec de Somalie *Sylvietta philippae*, près de Buraao, 21 mai 2010. Cette petite espèce habite la brousse dense de *Commiphora* et *Acacia* de la Corne de l'Afrique. Avant 1982, il n'y avait que 27 données pour ce crombec (Ash 1982). Nos cinq observations en deux jours au Somaliland central et méridional suggèrent que cette espèce est plus commune qu'on ne le pensait.

Figure 11. Somali Thrush *Turdus ludoviciae*, Daalo Forest, 23 May 2010. This thrush is a member of the Olive Thrush *T. olivaceus* complex, which has recently been the subject of much splitting (Bowie *et al.* 2005). This distinctive species, the only member of the group with no rufous coloration on the underparts, is confined to high-altitude *Juniperus* forests and other scrubby vegetation in the highlands of northern Somaliland.

Merle de Somalie *Turdus ludoviciae*, Forêt de Daalo, 23 mai 2010. Ce merle est un membre du complexe du Merle olivâtre *T. olivaceus*. Cette espèce distinctive, le seul membre du groupe sans roux sur les parties inférieures, est confinée aux forêts de *Juniperus* d'altitude et autres végétations broussailleuses des hautes terres du Somaliland septentrional.



Figure 12. Somali Sparrow *Passer castanopterus*, Saylac, 18 May 2010. This breeding-plumaged male of the nominate subspecies is much less yellow below than *P. c. fulgens* of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. The entirely rufous head distinguishes it from the very similar House Sparrow *P. domesticus*, with which it is known to hybridise in Somaliland (Ash & Colston 1981, Ash & Miskell 1998). Both species regularly occur around towns and villages; this individual was photographed at Saylac on the Somaliland coast, and as we observed hybrid individuals further to the west, it is possible that introgression of some characters has occurred near areas where House Sparrow occurs.

Moineau de Somalie *Passer castanopterus*, Saylac, 18 mai 2010. Ce mâle de la sous-espèce nominale en plumage nuptial est moins jaune en dessous que *P. c. fulgens* d'Éthiopie et du Kenya septentrional. La tête entièrement rousse le distingue du Moineau domestique *P. domesticus*, avec lequel il s'hybride au Somaliland (Ash & Miskell 1998). Les deux espèces sont régulièrement rencontrées autour des villes et villages ; cet individu a été photographié à Saylac, sur la côte du Somaliland.



Figure 13. Warsangli Linnet *Carduelis johannis*, Daalo Forest, 23 May 2010. There are greatly varying reports concerning the scarcity of the localised Warsangli Linnet, which appears to be abundant at times and rare at others (Ash & Miskell 1981). This lovely finch, with its chestnut rump and flank patch, and distinctive white wing patches, was numerous during our visit to Daalo Forest, occurring from *Juniperus* forests above 2,000 m to *Acacia* bushveld at 1,270 m.

Linotte de Warsangli *Carduelis johannis*, Forêt de Daalo, 23 mai 2010. Cette jolie espèce semble être parfois abondante, parfois rare (Ash & Miskell 1981). Elle était nombreuse pendant notre visite à la forêt de Daalo, des forêts de *Juniperus* au-dessus de 2.000 m à la zone d'*Acacia* à 1.270 m.

Figure 14. Somali Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus louisae*, near Daalo Forest, 24 May 2010. This grosbeak forms a superspecies with the similar Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak *R. socotranus* of Socotra and Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak *R. percivali* of the Arabian Peninsula. Somaliland birds are best distinguished from their closest relatives by lacking any white on the cheeks (Kirwan & Grieve 2007).

Grand-verdier à ailes d'or de Somalie *Rhynchostruthus louisae*, près de la forêt de Daalo, 24 mai 2010. Ce grand-verdier constitue une super-espèce avec le Grand-verdier à ailes d'or de Socotra *R. socotranus* et le Grand-verdier à ailes d'or d'Arabie *R. percivali*. Les oiseaux du Somaliland se distinguent par l'absence de blanc sur les joues (Kirwan & Grieve 2007).

vocalisations. Although we encountered more rain than we expected in this desert region, and lost several hours getting stuck in sand and mud as a result, most birds were in full song or breeding, including the region's rich array of larks.

Here we showcase some of Somaliland's most sought-after and charismatic birds, and encourage other birdwatchers with a sense of adventure to visit the country and augment our knowledge of its birds and mammals. Several species depicted here are very poorly known, and for some these are the first published photographs. Our visit, that of Hugh Buck, and a subsequent visit by Nik Borrow, have produced many other interesting findings and questions, which will be published in more detail elsewhere. We would also like to encourage travelling birders to recognise Somaliland for what it is: a friendly country where an impressive number of endemic and little-known birds can be found.

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