

A record of an immature Ovambo Sparrowhawk *Accipiter ovampensis* from Ivory Coast

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La capture d'un Épervier de l'Ovambo *Accipiter ovampensis* immature au Parc National de la Comoé, Côte d'Ivoire, en Septembre 1997, est analysée à la lumière des observations relativement peu nombreuses de cette espèce dans l'Ouest africain. Des données biométriques de cet individu sont présentées. L'auteur estime que l'espèce pourrait être plus fréquente en Afrique de l'Ouest que ne l'indique la littérature.



Immature Ovambo Sparrowhawk *Accipiter ovampensis*, at Comoé National Park, Ivory Coast, 26 September 1997 (Volker Salewski)



Ovambo Sparrowhawk *Accipiter ovampensis* is widespread in southern Africa, where it is known to breed in Angola, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa⁷, although it is nowhere abundant⁵. The only breeding records from East Africa are from north of the equator in Kenya⁵ in May and September⁹. The species is believed to be an intra-African, partially transequatorial, migrant as it is largely absent from its South African range during the austral summer (December–February)¹¹ although there is evidence that some birds are resident there (R Davies pers. comm.). It occurs throughout the year in northern Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Transvaal, where breeding is reported from September–January². In West Africa, the species is considered rare without firm evidence of breeding^{3,5,7,11} and it has been postulated that it might only be a migrant there⁴. Dowsett & Forbes-Watson⁷ list the species for Senegal (two recent records from the south of the country¹), Sierra Leone (confirmation required), Ivory Coast, Ghana (rare migrant⁸), Bénin (resident, without firm

breeding records) and Nigeria (a migrant, without firm breeding records). Since 1991 when the first record was made, there have been an increasing number of occurrences in The Gambia, including two of juveniles, and all in June–December⁴. For Ivory Coast, Thiollay¹³ gives ten records between 15 June–5 October in savanna habitat, some of them from Comoé National Park in the north-east of the country. At least one of these records (near Lamto) was an immature bird (J-M Thiollay pers. comm.). Demey & Fishpool⁶ add three further records, one a subadult.

New record

On 26 September 1997, whilst mist-netting in the south-west of Comoé National Park at c08°45'N 03°49'W, an immature Ovambo Sparrowhawk was caught. It was identified according to the following features: small head, heavy pointed dark bill, large feet, dark ear patches, pale supercilium, barred tail and cere turning red (R Davies pers. comm.). One adult feather had appeared on the breast indicating that the bird was c12 months-old (R Davies pers. comm.). Measurements of the bird were: wing 237 mm; tarsus 49.8 mm; weight, more than 200 g (the upper limit of my balance). The wing measurement falls between those given in Brown *et al*⁵ for males (210–225 mm) and females 245–253 mm), whilst weights of males are given as 105–190 g (mean 140 g) and for females as 180–305 g (mean 260 g)⁵, perhaps suggesting that the bird I captured was a female. A blood sample was taken which is retained by A Helbig (Vogelwarte Hiddensee, Germany). The bird was caught on the edge of riparian forest fringing the Comoé river and close to savannah (the favoured habitat of the species in southern Africa⁹). Due to this preference for open habitats, the species has an unusual wingshape for an *Accipiter* with an almost falcon-like long outerwing⁷.

Discussion

It is possible that the species is more abundant in West Africa than previously thought but has been overlooked for the following reasons: the density of birders in West Africa is much lower than in East or South Africa, the species is nowhere abundant⁸ except in Transvaal, South Africa² and difficult to identify in the field¹ being, for example, very similar to the sympatric Gabar Goshawk *Melierax gabar*¹².

A concentrated effort by observers in areas with sufficient and suitable habitat may reveal the species to be more common than previously suspected. It is not impossible that the species breeds in West Africa but has been overlooked. It appears surprising that many authorities^{2,3,9,10} have suggested that the species is a transequatorial migrant although there is no confirmatory evidence for this supposition (eg ringing recoveries) which suggests that much additional research is required.

Acknowledgements

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