

The nest and eggs of Margaret's Batis *Batis margaritae*

by Michael S. L. Mills & Alexandre Vaz

Received 9 March 2011

Margaret's Batis *Batis margaritae* was first collected, by R. & L. Boulton, on 24 February 1931, at Mount Moco, Angola (Boulton 1934). Subsequently, the species was also found at one locality in the southern Democratic Republic of Congo (Schouteden 1971) and the species is fairly widespread in north-west Zambia where it can be common in *Cryptosepalum* forest (Dowsett *et al.* 2008). However, little is known of its behaviour, and the nest and eggs have never been described (Urban *et al.* 1997, Dowsett *et al.* 2008).

At around midday on 17 July 2010 we were in the largest forest patch on Mount Moco, known as Luanda (Mills *et al.* 2011), when we spotted a small, cup-shaped nest in the fork of a sapling within an area of relatively dense undergrowth at 2,390 m (12°42'557"S, 15°17'711"E). The nest contained two eggs. We retreated c.10 m and waited motionless in the undergrowth. After a couple of minutes a pair of Margaret's Batis (Fig. 1) approached the nest. They remained within 20 m for 5–10 minutes, after which one bird briefly perched on the nest, confirming its ownership. To minimise disturbance, we briefly photographed the nest and eggs after the birds had moved away, and then departed.

Twenty-one days later, on 7 August, we revisited the nest but found it empty. There were no obvious signs of predation or disturbance, making us uncertain as to whether or not the attempt had been successful. With a typical fledging period of 15–17 days for *Batis* spp. (Tarboton 2001), it is possible that the eggs hatched shortly after our observation and that the young had fledged shortly before our second visit. Because the nest was no longer in use, we collected it together with the branch on which it was placed, and have deposited it in The Natural History Museum, Tring, UK (NHM N/2011.2.1).



Figure 1 (left). Adult female Margaret's Batis *Batis margaritae* near its nest, Luanda forest, Mount Moco, Angola, July 2010 (A. Vaz)

Figure 2 (below, left). Nest of Margaret's Batis *Batis margaritae*, Luanda forest, Mount Moco, Angola, July 2010 (A. Vaz)

Figure 3 (below, right). Nest and eggs of Margaret's Batis *Batis margaritae*, Luanda forest, Mount Moco, Angola, July 2010 (A. Vaz)



Description of the nest and eggs

Following the nomenclature of Simon & Pacheco (2005), the nest can be described as a 'high cup/fork', since nest height is greater than diameter, and it was placed in the fork of a sapling (Fig. 2).

Location.—The nest was placed c.90 cm above the ground, in the fork of a sapling c.1 m tall. The sapling was 7–8 mm in diameter at the fork. The location was in dense forest undergrowth below closed-canopy Afromontane forest, c.20 m from the forest edge.

Clutch size.—Two eggs; although we are uncertain if this was a complete clutch, the usual clutch size in most *Batis* spp. is two eggs (Tarboton 2001).

Eggs.—Not handled, so not measured. Description taken from photographs (Fig. 3). Background colour creamy white, with dark and pale brown blotching scattered over the entire surface, albeit concentrated at the larger end. Markings similar to those of other *Batis* spp. (Tarboton 2001).

Nest materials.—The inside of the cup was lined with very fine grass, whereas the outer surface comprised fine grass and mosses bound with spider's web, and covered with small pieces of lichen attached with spider's web. The construction seems typical for members of the genus *Batis* (Tarboton 2001).

Dimensions.—Height 9.0 cm, depth 3.0 cm, outer diameter / width 8.0 cm, outer diameter / breadth 7.0 cm, inner diameter / width 5.0 cm, and inner diameter / breadth 4.5 cm. These dimensions are very similar to those of other *Batis* (Tarboton 2001).

Acknowledgements

Douglas Russell of The Natural History Museum, Tring, commented on an earlier draft of the manuscript and supplied some relevant references. Richard Dean and Michel Louette kindly refereed the article. Funding for the field trip was provided by Tasso Leventis of the A. P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute, the Rufford Small Grants Foundation and DST/NRF Centre of Excellence at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology. Juliet Mills and Tim Seccombe joined us on our second visit and helped collect the nest.

References:

- Boulton, R. 1934. New birds from Angola. *Proc. Biol. Soc. Wash.* 47: 45–48.
- Dowsett, R. J., Aspinwall, D. R. & Dowsett-Lemaire, R. D. 2008. *The birds of Zambia*. Tauraco Press & Aves, Liège.
- Mills, M. S. L., Olmos, F., Melo, M. & Dean, W. R. J. 2011. Mount Moco: its importance to the conservation of Swierstra's Francolin *Pternistis swierstrai* and the Afromontane avifauna of Angola. *Bird Conserv. Intern.* doi: 10.1017/S0959270910000493.
- Schouteden, H. 1971. La faune ornithologique de la Province du Katanga. *Mus. Roy. Afr. Centr., Doc. Zool.* 17: 1–248.
- Simon, J. E. & Pacheco, S. 2005. On the standardization of nest descriptions of neotropical birds. *Rev. Bras. Orn.* 13: 143–154.
- Tarboton, W. 2001. *A guide to the nests & eggs of Southern African birds*. Struik, Cape Town.
- Urban, E. K., Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) 1997. *The birds of Africa*, vol. 5. Academic Press, London.

Addresses: Michael S. L. Mills, A. P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute, University of Jos, P.O. Box 13404, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria; DST/NRF Centre of Excellence at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa, e-mail: michael@birdingafrica.com. Alexandre Vaz, Av. Almirante Reis 197, 4° Esq., 1000-048 Lisbon, Portugal.

© British Ornithologists' Club 2011