

Little-known African bird: Gabela Akalat, Angola's long-neglected *Gabelatrix*

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Un oiseau africain peu connu: le Rougegorge de Gabela, le *Gabelatrix* longtemps négligé de l'Angola. Le Rougegorge de Gabela *Sheppardia gabela*, découvert en 1954 dans une forêt de l'escarpement angolais près de Gabela, a connu une histoire taxonomique mouvementée et après avoir été inclus successivement dans les genres *Muscicapa* et *Erithacus*, il a même été proposé qu'il méritait son propre sous-genre *Gabelatrix*. Sa biologie demeure peu connue et ses vocalisations ne sont pas connues du tout. Les deux dernières années, cette espèce menacée a été observée à plusieurs reprises et son aire de distribution connue a été étendue vers le sud jusqu'à 10 km à l'est de Seles. Deux individus ont également été vus à 8 km au sud de Conda, à 990 m et 810 m d'altitude, tandis que tous les sites où des spécimens ont été prélevés dans le passé se trouvent à environ 1100 m ou au-delà. Il semble probable que la superficie de l'habitat du Rougegorge de Gabela ait augmenté pendant la guerre, mais une reprise des plantations commerciales sur l'escarpement pourrait de nouveau menacer l'espèce, ainsi que les autres espèces d'oiseaux endémiques.

Over the past three decades, western Angola's scarp forests have attained mythical status amongst birders, ornithologists and conservationists, with a debilitating civil war keeping almost all at bay (see p. 152). The escarpment proper supports 11 restricted-range species (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998), amongst them a small, unobtrusive and poorly known forest robin currently regarded as Endangered (BirdLife International 2000).

The Gabela Akalat *Sheppardia gabela* has enjoyed an eventful taxonomic history since its discovery near the escarpment town of Gabela by Gerd Heinrich in 1954 (Rand 1957). It was initially described as a flycatcher in the genus *Muscicapa* because of its olivaceous-brown plumage, broad-based bill, numerous, pronounced rictal bristles, and weak legs and feet (Rand 1957, Hall 1961). Following a brief stint as a congener of the European Robin, in *Erithacus*, closer examination revealed long tarsi and traces of orange pigment on some underparts feathers, leading it to be reclassified as a *Sheppardia* akalat, a genus of understory robins that exhibits some convergent features with flycatchers, such as rictal bristles (Irwin & Clancey 1974, Clancey 1977). Still perplexed by the bird's uniqueness, Clancey (1977) went so far as to suggest that it deserved its own subgenus, *Gabelatrix*! A recently published molecular

phylogenetic study by Pamela Beresford (Beresford 2003), using genetic material taken from museum specimens, certainly supports its status as an akalat (albeit a polyphyletic grouping, she also reveals). Interestingly, however, this study reveals that it is mostly closely related to the Central African 'orange-bellied' Lowland *S. cyornithopsis* and Equatorial Akalats *S. aequatorialis*, not to the two 'brown' akalats of Tanzania, as one might be tempted superficially to assume, given its dull plumage. The behaviour and shape are certainly typical of other akalats: it is a small, squat bird with a large head, and feeds unobtrusively in dense forest understorey, gleaning insects from foliage and branches.

Since its discovery, little of its natural history has been revealed. Four additional specimens have been collected, all from the surroundings of Gabela, suggesting that it has a range of less than 1,000 km² (Hall & Moreau 1962), whilst a sighting was made near Conda in the 1970s (Collar & Stuart 1985), and during an all-too-brief-ceasefire in the early 1990s, the bird was observed three times in two days in coffee/forest edge by a team from the former International Council for Bird Preservation (Hawkins 1993, Collar *et al.* 1994). Nothing is known concerning the species' breeding, although Pinto collected it in breeding condi-



Gabela Akalat *Sheppardia gabela*, Kumbira Forest, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)
 Rougegorge de Gabela *Sheppardia gabela*, Forêt de Kumbira, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

tion in September (Dean 2000). Its voice remains unknown.

Several sightings have been made of this species in the more peaceful last two years. For example, during *c.*20 hours of observations in the scarp forests of Cuanza Sul province in October 2003 we recorded three Gabela Akalats, supporting the suggestion that they are not uncommon in suitable habitat (Oatley & Arnott 1998). Our first sighting was *c.*10 km east of Seles, along the road to Sumbe (11°22'S 14°13'E; 900 m). Surprisingly, the bird was moving through low dense second growth, without any canopy, close to a road verge. This constitutes a southern extension of the reported range, the previous southernmost record being from Assango (11°04'S 14°32'E). We also recorded two individuals near the village of Kumbira One, 8 km south of Conda. One was observed at 990 m in stunted primary forest with a dense and rocky understorey near the

forest edge, just below the treeline, and the other, illustrated here, was mist-netted in regenerating coffee forest at 11°08'S 14°17'E, at 810 m. Although few altitude records exist for the species, all collection sites (see Dean 2000) were roughly at or above 1,100 m, suggesting that our lowest record constitutes an extension of Gabela Akalat's known altitudinal range.

An estimated 95% of Angola's escarpment forests has been cleared for coffee since the 1930s (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998), but it seems likely that over the past 30 years the amount of suitable habitat available to the Gabela Akalat has increased, as civil war forced out commercial farmers and permitted the understorey of untended shaded coffee plantations to run wild. Still, subsistence agriculture must pose an increasingly severe threat (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998). With the return of peace there are suggestions that commercial activities will also resume on the Angolan escarpment and, as dis-

cussed on p. 159 of this issue, a further threat to Angola's endemics may thus be revived. A conservation strategy for the area requires urgent implementation, before other developments take hold.

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