

Little-known African Bird: Chaplin's Barbet *Lybius chaplini*, Zambia's fig-loving endemic



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Un oiseau africain peu connu: le Barbican de Chaplin *Lybius chaplini*, l'endémique zambien amateur de figes. Le Barbican de Chaplin *Lybius chaplini* est la seule espèce d'oiseau endémique de la Zambie. Si certains aspects de sa biologie ont été assez bien étudiés, on ne connaît pas encore suffisamment l'écologie de l'espèce, son aire de distribution et son statut de conservation. Le barbican, actuellement considéré Quasi-Menacé, occupe principalement un type de savane boisée ouverte avec une abondance de figuiers *Ficus sycomorus*. L'espèce vit en couples ou en groupes comprenant jusqu'à six individus et a une vie sociale bien développée, avec de remarquables cérémonies de salutations. Malgré sa répartition restreinte, le Barbican de Chaplin peut être observé de façon assez prévisible à plusieurs endroits, dont les détails sont mentionnés dans l'article.



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Captions are on page 51

So often endemic birds are small, brown and skulking. It is therefore unsurprising that Zambian ornithologists have long been proud of their country's only true endemic species, the striking black-and-white Chaplin's Barbet *Lybius chaplini*. It appeared on Zambia's ten-shilling note in the 1960s and subsequently on the 25 Ngwee stamp.

Some aspects of the species' life history are fairly well known and its breeding biology, in particular, has been relatively well studied. However, knowledge of its distribution, ecology and threat status remains inadequate. It is currently classified as Low Risk / Near Threatened on the basis of its fragmented, easily transformed habitat, which may be decreasing (BirdLife International 2003, 2004).

Chaplin's Barbets are almost always found in open savanna grassland with scattered trees, usually where Sycamore Fig *Ficus sycomorus* trees are plentiful (Fig. 4). Although the bird has often been regarded as inextricably linked to this tree, firm evidence is presently lacking and the species' dependence on the tree requires verification (Leonard 2001). This is important since fig tree savanna is threatened, to an unknown degree, by commercial and subsistence agriculture (Leonard 2001, BirdLife International 2003). Certainly, it is

known to feed on fruits other than figs and also arthropods (Short & Horne 2001).

Chaplin's Barbet occurs within an area of c.90,000 km², from 14° to 18°S and from 26° to 29°E. However, its actual range is likely to be as small as a few hundred square kilometres, given that suitable habitat is patchy (BirdLife International 2003). Currently, it is known to occur in five of the 42 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) identified in Zambia. It is uncommon around the periphery of the Kafue Flats IBA, within which it is also known from Blue Lagoon National Park (Fig. 2), rare and localised in Kafue National Park IBA and Lukanga Swamps IBA, but relatively common at two sites on private land, Chisamba IBA (c.40 km north of Lusaka) and Nkanga River Conservation Area IBA (20 km north of Choma) (Leonard 2001, Leonard in prep.).

Despite Mackworth-Praed & Grant's (1962) somewhat damning assertion that 'its habits are precisely those of any other barbet of the same size', Chaplin's Barbet appears to have an unusual and well-developed social system, which probably deserves further study. Pairs or groups of up to six vigorously defend large territories (estimated at c.40 ha: Short & Horne 1988), attacking conspecifics as well as Black-collared Barbets *Lybius torquatus* and occasionally even Red-faced Mousebirds *Urocolius indicus* that intrude fruiting trees. Social interactions within the group are frequent, especially in the vicinity of a nesting tree, and shortly before or after roosting. Most conspicuous are its greeting ceremonies, involving two or more birds bouncing among adjacent branches while simultaneously giving a long, harsh cackling sequence of up to 35 seconds, curiously reminiscent of the territorial 'rallies' of Green Woodhoopoes *Phoeniculus purpureus*, and similarly accompanied by bowing and swinging motions. Individuals may also hop from side to side (even jumping over one another) and wave their wings individually (a display described in detail by Short & Horne 2001).

As for many other *Lybius* barbets, there is some evidence that the species is a cooperative breeder and a host of the Lesser Honeyguide *Indicator minor* (Colebrook-Robjent & Stjernstedt 1976). Of 17 nests checked, eight contained eggs of Lesser Honeyguide (J. Colebrook-Robjent pers. comm.), the latter species being frequently

Captions to plate on page 50

Figure 1. Chaplin's Barbet / Barbican de Chaplin *Lybius chaplini*, Nkanga River Conservation Area, Zambia (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 2. Chaplin's Barbet / Barbican de Chaplin *Lybius chaplini*, Blue Lagoon National Park, Zambia (Mike Harrison)

Figure 3. Pair of Chaplin's Barbet *Lybius chaplini*, Nkanga River Conservation Area, Zambia (Claire Spottiswoode)

Couple de Barbicans de Chaplin *Lybius chaplini*, Nkanga River Conservation Area, Zambia (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 4. Typical habitat of Chaplin's Barbet *Lybius chaplini*—grassland savanna with scattered trees, the most prominent of which is a Sycamore Fig *Ficus sycomorus*, Nkanga River Conservation Area, Zambia (Pete Leonard)

Habitat typique du Barbican de Chaplin *Lybius chaplini*: savane boisée avec arbres espacés, le plus important étant le figuier *Ficus sycomorus*. Nkanga River Conservation Area, Zambie (Pete Leonard)

encountered in the nesting trees of Chaplin's Barbets during the breeding season.

Despite Chaplin's Barbet's small world range, poorly known status and esoteric habitat preferences, those wanting to see it can be consoled that it is reliably found at several sites. The privately owned IBAs mentioned previously are both easy to visit. Nkanga River Conservation Area, near Choma, in Southern Province is owned by the Bruce-Miller family (e-mail: nansai@zamnet.zm), and the turn-off to the farm is signed 2 km east of Choma on the main Lusaka road. The farmhouse is a further 20 km along a signed series of gravel roads. Camping facilities and accommodation are available, and directions to the barbet habitat can be obtained from the Bruce-Millers. At Chisamba IBA, turn east from the main Lusaka–Kabwe road c.40 km north of Lusaka, onto the road to Chisamba town. The birds can often be seen beside this road, from c.7 km along it. A number of accommodation options are available in the area. Chaplin's Barbets are most easily seen shortly after sunrise and shortly before sunset, when pairs or groups sun themselves conspicuously on the exposed branches of fig trees, giving occasional bursts of calling (Figs. 1, 3). At other times they are most easily located by listening for calls or by waiting near a fruiting tree. In the heat of the day they can be very difficult to locate as they often retreat into dense foliage.

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