IN BRIEF

A SUBSTITUTE NAME FOR THE BIOKO RACE OF PYCNONOTUS VIRENS


The name recognizes the contribution of Dr Dean Amadon to our knowledge of the birds of the Gulf of Guinea.

American Museum of Natural History, ROBERT W. DICKERMAN
Central Park West at 79th Street, New York, NY 10024, U.S.A.

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THE THREAT STATUS OF THE SIDAMO LARK

Good as it was to read Iain Robertson’s account of his observations of the Sidamo Lark Heteromirafra sidamoensis in November 1994 (evidently not 1974, as first indicated in his article) (Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl. 115: 241–243), he is mistaken in regarding the “Indeterminate” status assigned to this species in Threatened Birds of Africa (1985) as inconsistent. He bases this view on the fact that two other endemics of southern Ethiopia were classified as “Rare” despite their larger ranges and greater proportion of available habitat. I suspect the confusion arises because the word “indeterminate” suggests less urgency than the word “rare”.

The categories used in Threatened Birds of Africa, which were those then formally adopted by IUCN for all threatened species classification, are explained in the Introduction (pp. xxv–xxvi). I quote: “‘Indeterminate’ applies to ‘taxa known to be Endangered, Vulnerable or Rare but where there is not enough information to say which of the three categories is appropriate’ (... it should be noted that, since an Indeterminate species can be at best Rare, Indeterminate is a category of threat higher than Rare).”

The assignment of Indeterminate to the Sidamo Lark in 1985 was made in the knowledge of John Ash’s 1974 observation, since he had kindly furnished an early draft of the paper he published in Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl. (105: 141–143) in 1985, but also in the light of his in litt.
In brief, which I reproduced, that there was then "plenty of apparently suitable habitat" in the area. Following his discovery in 1989 that both sites at which the species had previously been recorded were being affected by man (Scopus 13: 90–97), and with the reformulation of the IUCN categories, the Sidamo Lark was classified as Endangered two years ago (Collar et al. 1994, Birds to Watch 2, which see also for the new categories).

It is encouraging to know that some of these human influences appear now to have ceased, but I cannot think that such news will make a difference to the 1994 classification of the species. This is, however, a notable instance of the difficulty of appropriate categorisation in the absence of data. If it is accepted that highly cryptic birds in relatively poorly known regions stand a reasonable chance of being found over much wider ranges than those reported, then the Sidamo Lark might better have been classified "Data Deficient", which stands outside the new threatened categories. However, given the propensity for birds in Ethiopia and Somalia to be confined to often inexplicably small ranges, the precautionary principle requires us to entertain the possibility that the entire range of the species may well not extend beyond the small area south of Negele in which it has so far been found. It therefore appears that Iain Robertson and I have been and remain in closer agreement over the threat status of the Sidamo Lark than he previously imagined.

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BirdLife International,
Wellbrook Court,
Girton Road,
Cambridge CB3 0NA,
U.K.

N. J. COLLAR

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RANGE EXPANSION AND SUMMERING OF PALM WARBLER DENDROICA PALMARUM IN VENEZUELA

On 29 June 1995, the first author observed a Palm Warbler Dendroica palmarum during an ornithological survey around the Mucubaji Lake, Mérida State in Venezuela (08°48'N, 70°48'W), at an elevation of 3500 m. The bird was also seen by several bird watchers and a photographic record was taken. Only one individual was seen for a few minutes, feeding on the ground and continually wagging its tail. The area is open with very few trees, the dominant plant being Espeletia (Espeletia spp.).

The solid rufous cap and the combination of yellow undertail coverts, pale yellow throat and whitish, vaguely streaked underparts differentiates this species from any other migrant parulid. No resident species are similar in colour. This coloration is typical of breeding adult plumage and distinctive of the nominate subspecies D. p. palmarum. The Palm Warbler breeds in North America and winters on the Gulf and southern Atlantic U.S. coasts, in eastern Yucatan, and in the West