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Authors: Dove, Carla J., Whatton, James F., Milensky, Christopher M., Boss, Will, Rayaleh, Houssein, et al.

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Notable records and observations of four passerines in Djibouti, 2020

by Carla J. Dove, James F. Whatton, Christopher M. Milensky, Will Boss, Houssein Rayaleh & Djama G. Awaleh

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Summary.—Four passerines, Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Sombre Rock Chat *Oenanthe dubia*, Green-winged Pytilia *Pytilia melba* and Yellow-rumped Seedeater *Crithagra xanthopygia*, are reported here as occurring or breeding in Djibouti. A male Gambaga Flycatcher is the only modern specimen record of this species from Djibouti. Specimens of Sombre Rock Chat, including one with aberrant plumage, confirm breeding in Djibouti, and the species' juvenile plumage is described for the first time. A single specimen of Green-winged Pytilia confirms morphological variation of this species in the region. Yellow-rumped Seedeaters from Dittilou, Goda Mountains (Tadjoura) confirm the species' common occurrence and breeding status in Djibouti. Further surveys are necessary for the comprehensive exploration and documentation of Djibouti's avifauna.

In March 2020, an expedition to Djibouti was conducted to complement earlier surveys in and around Camp Lemonnier (Dove *et al*. 2017, 2020). Our purpose was to commence avifaunal exploration of areas away from urban settlements, around Dittilou in the Goda Mountains, Tadjoura Region (11º46'50"N, 42º41'37"E; 675 m elevation) and in the mangroves of Godoria, Obock Region (12º09'11"N, 43º24'41"E; 7 m). However, field work was truncated because of the impending covid-19 global pandemic and the survey only lasted 14–21 March 2020. Abnormally heavy rainfall was reported in Djibouti in 2019 creating a lush landscape with dense ground cover and undergrowth in the areas visited. On this short trip, specimens of 25 bird species were obtained and are now in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History (USNM), Washington, DC. DNA barcoding (Hebert *et al*. 2003) was conducted on representative specimens and the resulting mtCO1 (cytochrome-*c* oxidase 1) or NADH-dehydrogenase subunit 2 (ND2) sequences (following protocols in Hackett 1996) processed via Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST) programs (National Center for Biotechnology Information http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) to confirm species identifications. These sequences were deposited to BoLD (Barcode of Life Database) Systems (GenBank accession numbers BankIt2793695:PP339593-PP339650). Here we report noteworthy records obtained during the survey.

GAMBAGA FLYCATCHER *Muscicapa gambagae*

Described as an uncommon migrant (Redman *et al*. 2016) or vagrant to Djibouti (Taylor 2020), but regular sightings and photographs in various habitats throughout the country are available locally (HR pers. obs.). Only one previous specimen (a female) of this species is known from Djibouti, held at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle (MNHN, Paris) collected on 30 April 1893 at Obock (http://vertnet.org; accessed April 2023). Our specimen (USNM 664504) was mist-netted on 18 March 2020 at Dittilou and was prepared in fluid (molecular gender identification, male); iris brown, tarsi dark grey, body mass 12.0 g. We

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differentiated the species from Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, which is common in Djibouti in winter, by its smaller size and less distinct streaking on the crown and underparts, shorter bill, pale mandible and overall browner coloration (Taylor 2020). In Djibouti, Gambaga Flycatcher occurs throughout the country in rocky dry areas and wadis, and in the few remaining forested areas such as Forêt du Day and Mabla Mountains, as well as gardens in the town of Arta (HR pers. obs.). More than a dozen sightings and photographs are available from Djibouti on eBird (www.ebird.org; accessed 19 April 2023), in June and September at elevations above 1,100 m near Forêt du Day, and at sites near the Ethiopian border in April and October below 700 m. Additional sightings near and south of Djibouti City (Decan Refuge) and in coastal areas have been reported in September and October. Given the frequency and dates of these observations, the species is probably a common passage migrant or possibly a breeding migrant in Djibouti. Gambaga Flycatcher may have been overlooked in the past due to similarity with Spotted Flycatcher.

SOMBRE ROCK CHAT *Oenanthe dubia*

Generally recognised as an Ethiopian endemic, but one historical specimen, together with sight records in 2010 and 2012, near Mt. Wagar, north-west Somalia (Clement & Rose 2015), suggest that it may be more widespread and thus only near-endemic. A first sight record from Djibouti in September 2010 (Borrow & Jama 2010) was reported as a possible vagrant by Clement & Rose (2015). Sombre Rock Chat is commonly seen in Dittilou by local people (HR pers. obs.) and was frequently seen by us there, with several mist-netted on 17–19 March 2020, including juveniles, and males and females in breeding condition (per gonad measurements). Dittilou (*c.*700 m) is one of the wettest areas in Djibouti with annual rainfall exceeding 400 mm. The main vegetation in higher areas consists of Terminalia (*Terminalia brownii*), boxwood (*Buxus hildebrandtii*), acacias (*Acacia etbaica*, *A. millifera*) and scattered large Sycamore Figs (*Ficus sycomorus*). In lower basaltic cliff areas, Camphor Bush (*Tarchonanthus camphoratus*) and Red Acacia (*Vachellia seyal*) replace boxwoods. Multiple family groups of Sombre Rock Chats were observed in rocky wadis lined with trees (canopy height 10–15 m), often perched on large boulders and unwary of humans. Adults were observed feeding begging young and one family group included two juveniles. Elsewhere, Sombre Rock Chat inhabits arid rocky areas with scattered bushes and lava fields at 740–1,800 m (Redman *et al*. 2016, Collar & Sharpe 2020). The species regularly occurs above 900 m in Djibouti (HR pers. obs.). We separated adults from Brown-tailed Chat *Cercomela scotocerca*, which could occur in the same area, based on the much darker undertail-coverts (brown not white; Clement & Rose 2015). Two juveniles (one skin, USNM 664495, and one fluid-preserved, USNM 664532) were obtained, and were found to differ morphologically from the plumage described in Clement & Rose (2015) based on a photograph of an immature in northern Somalia. Our specimens were associating with adults and match well three photographs labelled juvenile submitted to eBird (C. Burne, http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist/S61732820; accessed 19 April 2023) on the northern shore of Lake Basaka, Oromia, Ethiopia. We describe the juvenile plumage from these two specimens as follows (Fig. 1; photographs may appear to differ slightly from the following description due to lighting effects). Head brown, slightly browner ear-coverts with buffy-spotted tips, narrow pale incomplete eye-ring, upperparts spotted buffy, sometimes with dark brown tips. Greater primary-coverts and alula quills edged pale whitish grey. Greater secondary-coverts tipped dark buff brown. Median secondary-coverts brown with light buffy tips. Tail dark brown with buffy tips. Throat pale grey, breast scalloped pale buff with brown tips, belly pale with some scalloped dark tips. Undertail-coverts rusty brown with darker rachises. Bare parts: iris, dark brown; bill,

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Figure 1 (A–B). Juvenile-plumaged Sombre Rock Chat *Oenanthe dubia*, specimen USNM 664495, alongside adult-plumaged (C) specimen USNM 664496 (James Whatton)

dark brown; tarsi and feet, dark brown with silvery sheen.

Specimen USNM 664495 was mist-netted on 17 March 2020 and determined to be a juvenile based on the plumage characteristics described above and gonad measurements (testes, L = 1.0 × 0.5 mm, white; R = 1.0 × 0.5 mm, black), with bursa (9 × 4 mm). Specimen USNM 664532 had identical plumage, but gonad measurements were unavailable due to specimen preparation type. These are the only known juvenile-plumaged birds in collections. In addition, four adult males (enlarged testes and seminal vesicles, collected 17–19 March 2020) and one adult female (ovary in laying condition, largest ovum 10 × 10 mm, collected 18 March 2020) were in breeding condition. Stomach analysis found them to contain insects or to be empty. Most specimens were in body and/or tail moult. One aberrant-plumaged male specimen in breeding condition, USNM 664494, had numerous white feathers on the head, back, breast and wing-coverts (Fig. 2).

Juveniles have also been observed in gardens in Arta, and this species is frequently seen in Assamo, Dikhil, Galafi and at Ghoubet windfarm (HR pers. obs.).

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Figure 2. Male Sombre Rock Chat *Oenanthe dubia*, specimen USNM 664494, showing aberrant plumage (ventral and dorsal views) (Katie Sayers)

These observations, together with the specimen data, prove definitively that the species breeds in Djibouti and is locally common.

GREEN-WINGED PYTILIA *Pytilia melba*

The Green-winged Pytilia known from the Dittilou and Goula (11°57′N, 43°00′E; 565 m) areas of Djibouti was described as a new subspecies, *P. m. flavicaudata* by Welch & Welch (1988), based on observations and four photographs of three different males, and one female (not photographed) near Goula, but this designation was challenged by Payne (1989). Although this plumage is well known to local people (HR pers. obs.), until now no voucher specimens have been available. One female was mist-netted on 19 March 2020 at Dittilou. This specimen, USNM 664520, is similar to the female illustrated in Payne (2010), presumably based on the description in Welch & Welch (1988: 70). The male plumage was also illustrated in Welch & Welch (1998) and Redman *et al*. (2016). Photographs of male *P. melba* submitted to eBird from the Rahhle Valley Ecotourism Campsite near

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Assamo, Djibouti, involve *P. m. jessei*, based on the grey lores, red rump, and orange-red chin and throat (Payne 2020). A thorough taxonomic evaluation of this species is now being conducted by us and will include molecular analysis to determine the status of our specimen.

YELLOW-RUMPED SEEDEATER *Crithagra xanthopygia*

Locally common in the highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia in dry, open scrub at 900–2,500 m (Redman *et al*. 2016). Mills & Cohen (2015) observed a *Crithagra* sp. in Forêt du Day and suggested that *C. xanthopygia* might occur in Djibouti. Our observations in 2016 at Campement Touristique de la Forêt du Day (Dove *et al*. 2020) were inconclusive and no specimens of this seedeater were obtained. During the 2020 expedition we obtained specimens at Forêt du Day near Campement Touristique Dittilou (11º46′50″N, 42º01′37″E, 675 m), which is *c*.5 km east of our 2016 site; all 12 were identified as Yellow-rumped Seedeater. Our specimens were compared with Reichenow's Seedeater *C. reichenowi* at USNM because the latter is similar and was the only *Crithagra* sp. previously known to occur in Djibouti (Mills & Cohen 2015). The current specimens differed from Reichenow's Seedeater in the lack of whitish superciliary stripes, greyer underparts and by having a white throat (Fig. 3). Sightings on eBird describe in detail both Yellow-throated Seedeater *C. flavigula* and *C. xanthopygia* in the same area of Ethiopia near Dire Dawa (R. Clark, https://ebird.org/checklist/S21407416; accessed 19 April 2023). None of our specimens is similar to descriptions or photographs of Yellow-throated Seedeater submitted to eBird, but they are similar to those of Yellow-rumped Seedeater. As suggested by Mills & Cohen

Figure 3 (A–B). Adult-plumaged Reichenow's Seedeater *Crithagra reichenowi* specimen USNM 246631 (left) compared to Yellow-rumped Seedeater *C. xanthopygia* specimen USNM 664564 (right) showing the lack of whitish supercilium, and greyer underparts and white throat in the Yellow-rumped Seedeater specimen (right) (Carla Dove)

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(2015), more study is needed on *Crithagra* seedeaters in Djibouti to determine whether any other species might occur in the country and to determine the validity and taxonomic rank of the taxa within this genus. We deposited all of our DNA sequences identified as *C. xanthopygia* to GenBank. We found *C. xanthopygia* to be common in the Dittilou area, in the rocky wadi, where we saw and heard their vocalisations daily and throughout the day. The birds appeared to be engaged in a second brood because very young and immature birds were mist-netted, but the adults were still in breeding condition. They fed on small seeds. The species occurs mostly in the Goda Mountains and nearby Mabla Mountains in the remaining small forests in Djibouti.

Our work in Djibouti (2014, 2016 and 2020) has continued to refine and document knowledge of the country's avifauna. Our observations and those recently reported by Buechley *et al*. (2019) indicate that its birdlife is understudied and in need of additional surveys over longer periods to document thoroughly avian diversity in country. Given rapid urban development in this part of the Horn of Africa, such work is a priority to inform conservation efforts.

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Addresses: Carla J. Dove, James F. Whatton and Christopher M. Milensky, Smithsonian Institution, Division of Birds, NHB E-600, MRC 116, P.O. Box 37012, Washington, DC 20013, USA, e-mails: dovec@si.edu, whattonj@si.edu, milenskyc@si.edu. Will Boss, US Air Force Safety Center, 9700 G Avenue SE, Albuquerque, NM 87116, USA, e-mail: Patrick.Boss@ucf.edu. Houssein Rayaleh, Association Djibouti Nature, P.O. Box 3088, Djibouti, e-mail: naturedjibouti@gmail.com. Djama Goumaneh Awaleh, Gazi University, Turkey; and Ministère de l'environnement te de dèveloppement durable de Djibouti, Djibouti.

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