

The birds of Tchimpounga Nature Reserve, Congo-Brazzaville I: Highlights from three visits in 2012 and 2013

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Summary. A series of short bird surveys carried out at Tchimpounga Nature Reserve, Congo-Brazzaville, in 2012 and 2013. The reserve is in the lower Kouilou basin, an Important Bird Area but one that is rarely visited by ornithologists. A total of 247 species was recorded, including the Endangered Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus* and breeding colonies of Rosy Bee-eater *Merops malimbicus* and African River Martin *Pseudochelidon eurystomina*.

The Congo Basin is renowned for its staggering biodiversity, yet the birds of Congo-Brazzaville (The Republic of the Congo) are surprisingly poorly known. Around 60% of the country is covered by lowland tropical forest (Dowsett-Lemaire 2001), including large tracts of relatively undisturbed wilderness, and more than 650 species have been recorded there (Rainey *et al.* 2009) of which eight are Globally Threatened (BirdLife International 2020). However, this impressive avifauna has received little attention since the work of R. J. Dowsett and F. Dowsett-Lemaire in the 1990s (e.g. Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire 1991, Dowsett 1993, Dowsett-Lemaire *et al.* 1993, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1998, Rainey *et al.* 2009).

The lower Kouilou basin is recognised as one of Congo-Brazzaville's Important Bird Areas but is in need of further study (Dowsett-Lemaire 2001, Gonzalez-Dunia *et al.* 2014). Sitting in the heart of this region, approximately 40 km north of Pointe-Noire, is Tchimpounga Nature Reserve (TNR), a 523 km² area of forest-savanna mosaic managed by the Jane Goodall Institute which has rarely been visited by experienced ornithologists. Here, we report the highlights from a series of visits made to TNR in 2012 and 2013, during which opportunistic surveys and mist netting were carried out prior to a more comprehensive survey in 2014 (Sharp & Wilson *in review*). A total of 247 species were recorded during three visits (23 September-8 October 2012, 10-25 October 2013 and 17-25 November 2013). For the complete reserve species list, see Sharp & Wilson *in review*.

Chestnut-flanked Sparrowhawk *Accipiter castanilius*

An adult of this poorly known raptor was mist netted and ringed in an area of dry forest on 14 October 2013. Dowsett and Dowsett-Lemaire (1991) suggested that this species must be

under-recorded in the region having observed just a single individual during several months of surveys.

Ayres's Hawk-Eagle *Hieraaetus ayresii*

A single bird was seen flying over the Lac Foni area of the reserve on 30 September 2012. This is thought to be a new regional record, with the only previous Congolese records coming from the north of the country.

Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus*

Pre-roost gatherings of this Endangered species were recorded at Tchindzoulou Island on several dates, with a peak count of 75 birds on 29 September 2012 and similar numbers on 16 October 2013. Singles or pairs were also recorded elsewhere in the reserve on other visits.

Black-headed Bee-eater *Merops breweri*

A single bird was mist netted and ringed near to Lac Foni on 30 September 2012 and singles or pairs were recorded occasionally on subsequent visits. This large species is one of the least known African bee-eaters but the breeding density in the lower Kouilou basin is thought to be locally high (Dowsett-Lemaire 2001).

Rosy Bee-eater *Merops malimbicus*

This intra-African migrant appears to be common in the reserve during the dry season (September to November), after which it is thought to disperse but can still be found in small numbers (Sharp & Wilson *in review*). Birds were recorded in or flying over all habitats on most days. In October 2013, several individuals were observed carrying food, suggesting local breeding. On 23 October 2013, a large flock of individuals was found feeding on recently emerged ant alates; 13 birds were mist netted and ringed, of which several were gravid. A more concerted effort was therefore made to find a breeding site and, on 18 November, an active colony was found in a large patch of grassland on white sand, approximately 200m from the forest edge. It was difficult to estimate the number of breeding birds, but several hundred individuals were present and a total of 53 individuals were ringed; many were gravid or had brood patches. Several food items were found around the burrow entrances, most of which were Odonata species. TNR is one of only nine recorded breeding sites for this species in the world, and the most southerly known to date (Nwaogu *et al.* 2017). The timing of breeding is different to that recorded for Nigeria (Nwaogu *et al.* 2017) or indeed to that reported for any other colonies (Fry *et al.* 1992).

African River Martin *Pseudochelidon eurystomina*

This Data Deficient species was recorded regularly on all visits in a wide range of habitats, including over the sea, and appears to be locally common. It is known to breed in two main areas; along the Congo River from December to April and in coastal Gabon and Congo-Brazzaville in October (Turner & Rose 1989, Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire 1991, Maisels &

Cruickshank 2000). It is thought that birds migrate between these regions (Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire 1991) but it is not yet known whether they are two separate breeding populations. A colony discovered in 1996 at Conkouati-Douli National Park, only c.80 km from TNR, is one of very few ever found (Maisels & Cruickshank 2000), but anecdotal evidence suggests that breeding is regular at TNR. On 11 October 2013, an active colony was found at a site where breeding had been suspected in previous years. The colony was in very similar habitat to the Rosy Bee-eater colony described above and to that of other African River Martin colonies described elsewhere (Maisels & Cruickshank 2000). Approximately 400 birds were present, and a sample of 10 individuals were mist netted and ringed; all had pronounced brood patches and three were gravid, indicating that egg-laying and incubation were in progress. Furthermore, approximately every 40 minutes there was an apparent changeover in nest attendance. A single flock of several hundred birds would repeatedly circle the colony and 'waves' of individuals would land with each pass, running across the sand and entering their burrow; another bird, presumably the partner, would leave. This lasted for several minutes, with the outgoing birds disappearing over the forest to feed. The colony was visited again on 18 and 21 November when around 200 individuals were present, many carrying food. A further 14 individuals were ringed, and prey items dropped in the mist nets included several hawk-moths (*Agrius* spp. and *Hippotion* spp.).

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