

FEATURE ARTICLES

MIGRANTS AT NCHALO, MALAWI?

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Nchalo, (16° 16'S, 34° 55'E) lies on the flat, alluvial plains by the Shire River in southern Malawi, at an altitude of 59,4 m. The valley, part of the Great African Rift, is bounded by escarpments. To the south-west the hills are low, some 350 m. but to the north-east the escarpment rises over 1,500 m. Both sides are wooded with Brachystegia - Uapaca - Isoberlina; Colophospermum mopane; Terminalia sericea and Pterocarpus angolensis with the other tree and herb species usually associated with these types. In the valley there are remnant woods of Sterculia - Adansonia - Hyphaene; Acacia alba - Cordyla africana and Combretum spp. - plus the other tree and herb species usually associated with these types. The nearest reasonably undisturbed woodlands to Nchalo, are at least 10 km away.

I live in a wooded "island" of approximately 300 ha. surrounded on south-west to north by 11,00 ha. of sugar cane; on north to south-east by many thousands of square kilometres of marsh and reedbeds and on south-east by a large area of open grassland with scattered patches of low scrub and the occasional Baobab. The "island" vegetation consists mainly of exotics - Flamboyant, Cassia, Bauhinia, Thevetia, Caesalpinia etc. and many fruit trees - Mango, Pawpaw, Guava, Citrus, Mulberry etc. Among the exotics there still remain patches of indigenous vegetation of the three valley types mentioned above.

During four years of netting, certain interesting apparent migration movements have been noticed among several avian species.

Campephaga phoenicea (Black Cuckoo-Shrike) has not been seen at Nchalo during summer months. Eight caught between April and August, one in November and thirty-five sightings between April and October. Most birds seen and caught were apparently adult which suggests that this is not a juvenile dispersion. One bird ringed in April 1974 was recaptured in July 1976. There have been no other recaptures except within a few months of ringing. The species is not common in Malawi but is found all year in the woodlands where they breed between October and January.

Dicrurus adsimilis (Fork-tailed Drongo) is not present in summer, appearing in large numbers (30-40) in April, departing in August. Eight caught with four immatures but a high proportion of those seen have been adult. One immature ringed in June 1976 was recaptured in June 1977. In woodlands this species is common all year, breeding from September to November.

Oriolus larvatus (Black-headed Oriole) appears in May and goes in August. Not present in large numbers (10-15) and only seven caught. Most birds are immature. There have been no retraps in following years and only one in the same season. This may be juvenile dispersion. The species is fairly common all year in the woodlands, breeding mainly in *Brachystegia* from September to November or even April.

Cossypha natalensis (Natal Robin) arrives in May, departing in September. Eight caught (inc. four immature) and very few more seen. No recaptures in following years. This species is believed (Britton 1971) to be in many areas, a winter migrant, moving to lower country in the cold season. In Malawi they are found in rain forest and dense scrub up to 1,500 m. where they breed from November on. I do not know whether any remain in the escarpment woods during the cold months.

Pegonochila stellata (Starred Robin) breeds on the north-eastern escarpment in thick woodland. It is believed (Benson pers. comm.) that there is an altitudinal migration after breeding (September to January). I have caught three immatures between January and April and seen two others in May, all ranging from "spangled" to

"olive" in plumage. This is almost certainly juvenile dispersion but whether the adults descend as low as the valley in winter, is not possible of determination without either sightings or captures.

Nectarinia cuprea (Coppery Sunbird) arrives in small numbers in May, increasing to a large population by July and disappearing again in December (one caught in January). Seventy-five caught with only a few recaptures within the same "season". They arrive in old plumage and moult; males departing in full or almost full breeding plumage. Breeding is known in February and March and the species is usually found in Acacia. My sightings in Acacia woodlands have not been frequent enough to say whether the species is present all year there - they may be absent from the breeding areas during moult.

Nectarinia bifasciata (Purple-banded Sunbird) is fairly common here (twenty-six caught) between November and May. They arrive in old plumage and males depart in full to almost full breeding plumage. One immature ringed in April 1976 was retrapped in January 1977 but otherwise there have been no retraps except within the same "season". The species occurs in riparian forest or dense scrub, breeding being known from May and August. (Males in full plumage between May and October). It is fairly certain that they do not breed at Nchalo. My sightings in other parts of the valley have not been frequent enough to say whether the species is absent from other woodlands during the moult.

Terpsiphone viridis (Paradise Fly-catcher) is apparently resident at Nchalo; 75 caught, some in every month. However, between September and March I have had several retraps of breeding birds but between April and August there have been no retraps except within a few days of ringing. It is believed (Benson 1953) that this species migrates from highlands to the Zambezi valley in winter, but I have not determined whether my winter birds are from a high-land breeding population or not. Nor do I know whether birds which breed here, remain for the winter but retrap figures do not suggest this. It would be helpful were some of my rings returned from elsewhere but so far this has not occurred.

Ispidina picta (Natal Kingfisher) is a known migrant which appears here to breed in October. They are common (123 caught). Most birds depart in May but my catch figures for the winter months are interesting: June = 9, July = 7, August = 3, September = 1. All these birds are immature. Many of the winter catches are ringed birds, i.e. the twenty caught include only eleven individuals. Almost certainly most of these birds did not migrate.

Discussion

Apart from the Natal Kingfisher and Paradise Fly-catcher (in that they breed at Nchalo), all the species mentioned are resident in the woodlands of the valley and escarpment edges but are not resident in Nchalo. They all appear to disperse during the non-breeding seasons into other areas which are either not large enough to support a breeding population or which may have an unsuitable vegetation for breeding requirements. It is possible that some individuals of these species return annually to the same non-breeding areas.

Acknowledgements

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References

Normal habitat and breeding dates for all species was taken from:

- Benson, C.W. 1953. "A checklist of the birds of Nyasaland". Nyasaland Society and Publications Bureau, Blantyre and Lusaka.
- Britton, P.L. 1971. "On the apparent movements of Cossypha natalensis". Bull. Brit. Orn. Club. 91(5) 137-144.
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