

Should the Brown-headed Apalis *Apalis alticola* be on the Kenya list?

In early 1990 Stefan Rozwadowski suggested that Brown-headed Apalis *Apalis alticola* was present in the South Loita area near Entesekera (D. Turner, pers. comm.). (NB: In the literature, this area is often referred to as the South Ngurumans, but our understanding is that it is correct to refer to the range as the Loita Forest and that the word Nguruman refers strictly to the escarpment zone.) D. Turner followed this up by visiting the area in December 1990. He saw several birds with an all dark chocolate brown head clearly distinct from the normal plumage of Grey Apalis *Apalis cinerea* located elsewhere in Kenya. D. Turner wrote a short note (Turner 1992), which together with submissions to the East Africa Rarities Committee from S. Rozwadowski, effectively placed Brown-headed Apalis on the Kenyan list.

Between 20 and 24 October 2010, a group of 13 people, including BF and NH, visited the Entesekera area with an objective of locating and documenting Brown-headed Apalis. We were armed with a recording of Brown-headed Apalis from Ngorongoro where the bird is common and highly responsive to playback. It is also important to note that we believed there were three distinctive features in regard to *alticola* compared to *cinerea*. In addition to the much browner head colour, *alticola* has a dark under tail with white tips to the tail feathers giving a terminal and midway white band effect, compared to the all-white under tail, with obvious white outer tail feathers of *cinerea*. Thirdly *alticola* consistently has a yellow eye compared to the red-brown eye of *cinerea*.

We traversed the four major habitats at and around Entesekera including the locations where the records of Brown-headed Apalis originated: the highest forest above Entesekera (both inside and outside), the gallery forest along the rivers that bisect the road at lower altitudes, dense scrub patches around seasonal swamps in otherwise *Acacia xanthophloea* woodland down to 1800 m right alongside the Tanzanian border, and forest on the south-eastern part of the escarpment overlooking Lake Magadi. In all these areas, we played this recording not only to birds that were already calling, but also to stir up any Apalises that might be in the area that were not vocalising. Out of some 25 Brown-headed Apalis play-backs, we had response on all but three instances when distant canopy birds would not come into view.

On every occasion we were visited by noisy Grey Apalises. The amount of brown on the head varied, but every individual showed all white undertails, and flashy white outertail feathers. We were faced with Grey Apalis response to pure Brown-headed Apalis tape. Indeed they would arrive giving the calls absolutely identical to the Brown-headed Apalis recording. Apart from numerous photographs of equally numerous individuals from all over the area in all forest and thick scrub habitats, we also have video of birds at Entesekera Village, (the place of the original claims that put the bird on the Kenyan list) where birds in the scrub were calling identically to the Brown-

headed *Apalis* recording. Just in case the proximity of the Ngorongoro birds' song was too similar to *cinerea*, we tried Brown-headed *Apalis* recording from Malawi and still Grey *Apalis* responded enthusiastically.

We noticed a great variety in head-plumage between individuals which was not tied to altitude; besides, associating pairs were not identical. Albeit some birds showed very brown heads, they invariably had the white undertail and white outertails that marks them as *cinerea* not *alticola*. Given that the brown head feature appears to be the criteria used for placing *alticola* on the Kenyan list, without reference to the tail differences and the vocalisation experience, we believe it is no longer safe to list the Brown-headed *Apalis* as a Kenyan species. In consulting Itai Shanni and Jeffrey James about their separate visits to this area, they agree with our conclusion (pers. comm.), as does Don Turner (pers. comm.).

But it may well be that this population of Grey *Apalis* should be treated as a new distinct race. During his time in the Masai Mara, BF never observed the plumage variation apparent in this Loita population. Having read Edwin Selempo's report from Loliondo (Selempo 1992), which is an extension of the Loita-type habitat into Tanzania, we think the same conclusion applies, namely that only Grey *Apalis* occur there.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that there is a growing body of opinion that *alticola* is in fact a form of Grey *Apalis*. For example, in their *Birds of Malawi* (2006), Bob and Françoise Dowsett refer to the *Apalis* as Grey *Apalis* *A. cinerea* and include the following taxonomic note: "*A.c. alticola* sometimes considered a distinct species but ecology and voice almost identical." Furthermore in Nguembock *et al.* (2008), the Bayesian analysis (pp. 761, 763) clearly indicates that the DNA evidence shows *alticola* as close to *cinerea* as several subspecies are within *A. thoracica* and *Artisornis metopias*, and as such *alticola* should warrant sub-specific recognition only.

References

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