

Records of ‘Indian’ Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus philippinus* (Linnaeus, 1766) and Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* (Temminck, 1825) from Afghanistan (Aves: Passeriformes)

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Abstract. Here we present the first record of Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus* for the country of Afghanistan. A specimen was collected on May 29, 1967 in the vicinity of Bari Kowt (تړوك ږب) in the province of Kunar (كړنوك). In addition, a Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* was collected on January 17, 1968 in the vicinity of Farah (فارف) in south-western Afghanistan. Hitherto the status of the species in Afghanistan is unclear. We describe both specimens and shortly discuss the records.

Keywords. Ploceidae, Muscicapidae, range extension

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is situated in a zoogeographic transition zone where Palearctic faunal elements meet those typical for the Oriental region. For a landlocked country, Afghanistan is extraordinary species-rich with about 490 bird species recorded so far (Habibi 2007; according to Lepage 2012: 491 species following taxonomy of IOC World Bird Names 2012). After decades of political instability, which hindered ornithological research, the birds of Afghanistan have received more attention only very recently. In particular the seminal work by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) gives a comprehensive overview of the avifauna of the country. Otherwise, mainly single observations were published in the last years (e.g. Balmer & Murdoch 2010a, b, Harrison & Grieve 2012a, b, Kowatsch & Probst 2006, Mostafawi & Ostrowski 2010, Ostrowski et al. 2008a, b). However, in north-eastern Afghanistan a likely breeding population of one of the least known bird species on the globe, the Large-billed Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus*, was discovered only recently (Svensson 2008, Timmins et al. 2009, 2010), and breeding was confirmed right across the border in Tajikistan (Ayé et al. 2010).

The Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig (ZFMK) harbours a significant collection of birds from Afghanistan. Most of the specimens were collected during zoological and botanical expeditions as well as long-time stays from the mid-1960s until the beginning of the 1970s. The main collectors were G. and J. Niethammer, A. and H. Brade, C. M. Naumann as well as E. J. Kullmann. In addition, at least parts of the collection of the

former Zoological Museum of Kabul are now held at the ZFMK. Some important results of the ornithological research at that time were contemporarily published (e.g. Niethammer 1967, Niethammer & Niethammer 1967, Niethammer 1973). However, the collection has never been completely inventoried, and this was only carried out within the last months. Herein, we present the first results of this task, namely the discovery of two species new for Afghanistan or at least with hitherto unproven status for the country.

RESULTS

Specimen of *Ploceus philippinus philippinus*

The specimen (ZFMK 2012.937) was collected on May 29, 1967 in east Afghanistan in the province Kunar (كړنوك) in the vicinity of Bari Kowt (تړوك ږب) (coordinates: 35.2992° N, 71.5397° E) within two kilometres from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (original label: E-Afghanistan, Prov. Kunar-ha, vic. Barikot, 1300 m, Zoologisch. Museum Kabul/Afghanistan Nr. 942). There is no collector given, but according to the handwriting the bird was labelled by C. M. Naumann. However, (re)labelling could have happened belatedly as the species name was added subsequently. Thus, the collector remains unknown. The bird is a male of unknown age. It is perhaps not in complete breeding plumage, as the dark area of the head and throat is light brownish and yellow feather mar-



Fig. 1. Ventral (a) and dorsal (b) view of the specimen of Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus* (ZFMK 2012.937) collected near Bari Kowt, Afghanistan, on May 29, 1967.



Fig. 2. Ventral (a) and dorsal (b) view of the specimen of Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* (ZFMK 2012.942) collected in the vicinity of Farah, Afghanistan, on January 17, 1968.

Table 1. Measurements of the specimen of *Ploceus philippinus philippinus*. Methodology follows Eck et al. (2011).

| Body part | Size [mm] |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Wing (flattened) | 71 |
| Tail | 49 |
| Bill length (tip to distal nostril) | 11.7 |
| Bill height (proximal nostril) | 9.5 |

gins on the back are not outstanding prominent (Fig. 1). The head cap is yellow, partially with some fine darker shaft streaks. Mantle feathers are centrally brown with obvious yellow margins. Tail and wings are dark brown with lighter margins. On the tertials, margins of the outer vanes are buffy to rusty while they are yellow-olive on the secondaries forming an unobtrusive wing panel. The throat is light brown, the breast yellow and the belly is light yellowish to whitish while the flanks are rather buffy. In addition, tarsi and toes are horn-coloured. The bill of the specimen is largely black with small lighter areas at the basis of the upper and lower mandible. Note that some colour fading cannot be excluded for darker feathers and bare parts. Nevertheless, identification as *Ploceus philippinus* is straightforward given the limited number of possible confounding species in southern Asia. In contrast to *P. benghalensis* and *P. manyar*, the yellow breast is striking, and this also allows identification as belonging to the nominate subspecies. The occurrence of the rather similar subspecies *P. p. travancoreensis* would be highly unlikely, as this taxon is limited to south-western India. The three outer primaries on both wings are heavily abraded and faded while the inner primaries are fresh. Nevertheless, measurements are within the known range of the species (Table 1, see Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). For unknown reasons, wing measurement given on the original label exceeds our measurement by 9 mm.

Specimen of *Oenanthe monacha*

The specimen (ZFMK 2012.942) was collected on January 17, 1968 in south-western Afghanistan in the vicinity of the city of Farah (coordinates: 32.3744° N, 62.1164° E) in the province of the same name (original label: SW-Afghanistan, Prov. Farah, vic. Farah, Zoologisch. Museum Kabul/Afghanistan Nr. 1075). The specimen was also once held in the collection of the former museum of Kabul. As for the weaver, no collector is given on the label. However, specimens collected between Delaram and Farah on January 16, 1968 and on January 22, 1968 be-

Table 2. Measurements of the specimen of *Oenanthe monacha*. Methodology follows Eck et al. (2011).

| Body part | Size [mm] |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Wing (flattened) | 109 |
| Tail | 75 |
| Bill length (tip to distal nostril) | 11.9 |
| Bill height (proximal nostril) | 4.5 |

tween Djuwein and Farah were collected by Heinrich Klockenhoff. Thus, he is almost certainly the collector of the *Oenanthe monacha* specimen as well as of four additional specimens from the same day and location (species: *Lanius excubitor pallidirostris*, *Cettia cetti*, *Phoenicurus erythronotus*, *Phoenicurus ochruros*).

Species identification is easy. The pure size (Table 2) excludes the smaller *Oenanthe* species, and the bird is readily identifiable as a male. In contrast to *Oenanthe albonigra*, the whitish head cap is striking (Fig. 2). Mantle and wings are black, upper tail coverts, rump and lower back are white. The black of chin and throat extends to the upper breast. The belly and under tail coverts are white with a buffy tinge. Also note that the specimen does not show a complete terminal dark tail bar as would be the case in *Oenanthe picata capistrata*. Whitish tips to breast and throat feathers as well as on the mantle and on the remiges indicate a relatively fresh plumage. As there is no obvious moult limit in the greater coverts detectable, it is most likely an adult (van Duivendijk 2010). Bare parts are black. *Oenanthe monacha* is monotypic (Dickinson 2003).

DISCUSSION

We presented two ornithological records for Afghanistan. Concerning the specimen of *Ploceus philippinus*, one can only speculate if the incongruence on the label is due to transcription errors or even some kind of mislabelling, as field labels do not exist. Unfortunately, there is no hint for distinct collection activities at the finding locality, since no other specimen from the same location or from the same time can be found within our collection. Thus, the collection history of the specimen cannot be retraced. Due to its bright plumage and its ability to perform tricks, *Ploceus philippinus* is frequently caught and sold as cage bird in Pakistan (Roberts 1992). Furthermore, the bird market of Kabul still reflects the Afghan tradition of keeping pet birds, as captured wild birds from throughout Afghanistan as well as from Pakistan and India are sold here (Ostrows-

ki 2007). A record of *Ploceus philippinus* on the bird market could not be provided, though (Ostrowski 2007). The abraded primaries could also be a hint to a captive origin although, alternatively, they might have been heavily worn out naturally. Therefore, it is impossible to completely rule out the possibility that the record represents an escaped bird. On the other hand, date and location of the presented record make perfectly sense. *Ploceus philippinus* is the most widespread species of Ploceidae in southern Asia. It inhabits a wide range of habitats including grasslands and cultivated areas mostly close to water, although it is less bound to swamps than other weavers in the region (Craig 2010). In Pakistan, the species can be “locally abundant” in the Indus basin (Grimmett et al. 2008). Bari Kowt is also located within the Indus basin, as the town is situated at the shore of the Kuna River, a tributary of the Kabul River, which eventually feeds the Indus. Collected at an altitude of 1300 m a.s.l., the bird occurred near the upper limit of its altitudinal distribution which reaches 1400 m a.s.l. at the Himalayan foothills (Craig 2010). According to the map in Grimmett et al. (2008, p. 224), the next known natural occurrence in Pakistan might be about 100 km away. Thus, habitat as well as the location of the discovery fit well in the general ecology and the biogeographical pattern of the distribution of the species. *Ploceus philippinus* is generally assumed to be sedentary (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), but at least in Pakistan it widely disperses in non-breeding seasons (Grimmett et al. 2008). We do not know whether the record presented here only indicates a vagrant or whether the specimen even represents a breeding population. At least the collection date fits perfectly within the regional breeding season of the species (Roberts 1992). We recommend adding *Ploceus philippinus* at least tentatively to the Afghan avifauna. To our knowledge there is no other record of the species from the country. It is not mentioned by Paludan (1959) or Ayé et al. (2012), and the map in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) does not indicate any occurrences.

Oenanthe monacha is patchily distributed from Egypt throughout the Middle East to southern Pakistan (Collar 2010). In most places, it seems to be only a sparse breeding resident in remote habitats like desert ravines and wadis up to 1300 m a.s.l. although it might also occur in the vicinity of buildings in the desert (Collar 2010, Porter & Aspinall 2010). Habitats are often too barren and arid for other *Oenanthe* species (Collar 2010). In addition, the species is described as shy and unobtrusive (Svensson 2009). Nearest depicted occurrence is eastern Iran where the Lut desert (Dasht-e-Lut) reaches close to the Afghan border (see map in Porter & Aspinall 2010, p. 314). However, there is at least one unproven sight report from Pul-i Chakri which even suggests breeding (Kullberg 2002) and this observation was cited by Habibi (2007). Nevertheless, neither Paludan (1959) nor Ayé et al. (2012) mention *Oenanthe monacha*, and the map in Rasmussen & An-

derton (2012) does not denote any findings from Afghanistan. Thus, the status of the species in the country was hitherto categorised as unconfirmed (UNEP 2008).

In conclusion, our findings add to the still fragmentary knowledge of the Afghan avifauna. The presented records of a Palaearctic and an Oriental faunal element further highlight the transitional character of the fauna of Afghanistan.

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