

Spike-heeled Lark *Chersomanes albofasciata* rediscovered in Katanga, DR Congo

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L'Alouette éperonnée *Chersomanes albofasciata* redécouverte au Katanga, RD Congo. En 2016 plusieurs Alouettes éperonnées *Chersomanes albofasciata* ont été photographiées sur le plateau du Kundelungu. En RDC, l'espèce n'était connue que d'un unique spécimen, collecté sur ce même site en décembre 1966. Il s'agit probablement de la race *obscurata*, également présente en Angola.

In December 1966 Louis Poelman collected a specimen of Spike-heeled Lark *Chersomanes albofasciata* on the Kundelungu plateau, Katanga (Schouteden 1969, 1971; Fig. 1); this remarkable record, far from the species' known range, represented an addition to the DR Congo list. The record was considered to probably involve a vagrant by Lippens & Wille (1976) and it was listed as such by Dowsett *et al.* (2016), but omitted from Keith *et al.* (1992), whereas Dowsett *et al.* (2008) treated it, without justification, as 'undocumented and perhaps mislabelled'.

MH visited the inadequately explored Kundelungu plateau in August and October 2016, and observed several groups of Spike-heeled Larks while driving on the following roads and by stopping frequently, but the total number of birds seen is uncertain, as accurate counts were not attempted, although the species probably numbered some tens during each visit:

- 6 August: Lofoi road, 15 km in both directions (burnt grassland savannah, first 5 km still on fire);
- 7 August: from Masanza (miombo woodland) to the entry of the Lofoi road and the first 10 km on the latter in both directions;
- 13 August: from Masanza to the camp site on the Lofoi road (40 km in grassland savannah and 20 km in miombo woodland);
- 14 August: from the camp site on the Lofoi road towards Katwe (60 km);
- 7 October: Lofoi road, as on 6 August.

Only birds within *c.*30 m of the car were identified. On 6–7 August two groups were seen, one of which comprised six individuals (at 10°30'33.1"S 27°45'36.8"E; 1,685 m); one was carrying vegetable matter in its bill (Fig. 2). On 13–14 August, four groups were observed,

among them one comprising three individuals (at 10°28'33.3"S 27°44'20.0"E; 1,670 m). The birds were not particularly shy, running among burnt grass stems, at times moving somewhat like small mammals, and occasionally perching atop grass mounds (Fig. 4). Although it is impossible to be certain, we presume that the individuals photographed on different dates on the same stretches of road were different birds.

In burnt grassland, Spike-heeled Lark is perhaps the commonest bird species in the area. Red-capped Lark *Calandrella cinerea* (adult with young in August), Rufous-naped Lark *Mirafra africana* and Angola Lark *M. angolensis* occurred in the same habitat, but were less common. Other species included Capped Wheatear *Oenanthe pileata* (adults in August, young in October), *Anthus* sp. (probably Buffy Pipit *A. vaalensis*), *Cisticola* sp. (probably Wing-snapping *Cisticola C. ayresii*) and, in wetter areas, Rosy-breasted Longclaw *Macronyx ameliae*. Flappet Lark *Mirafra rufocinnamomea* was encountered in miombo.

Discussion

The specimen from the Kundelungu plateau (RMCA 118564; Fig. 1), currently unassigned to subspecies (Schouteden 1969, Lippens & Wille 1976), was re-examined by ML & A. Reygel. The measurements—wing: 87 mm, tail: 40.5 mm, tarsus: 31 mm, culmen: 20.5 mm—are within the overall range of the species (Donald & Collar (2011) and the key features that identify the specimen as Spike-heeled Lark—the long, slightly decurved bill, scaly upperparts, rufous underparts and short tail—are visible in Fig. 1.

The birds observed in 2016 exhibited considerable variation in plumage tones to the underparts—a feature found throughout the species' range (Donald & Collar 2011): in some the underparts were deep russet, but were



1a



1b

Figure 1. Spike-heeled Lark *Chersomanes albofasciata* collected on the Kundelungu plateau, Katanga, DR Congo, December 1966 (RMCA 118564) (Alain Reygel, © Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium)
 Alouette éperonnée *Chersomanes albofasciata* collectée sur le plateau du Kundelungu, Katanga, RD Congo, décembre 1966 (RMCA 118564) (Alain Reygel, © Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgique)



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Figure 2. A Spike-heeled Lark *Chersomanes albofasciata* crushes a small bulb in its bill, Lofoi road, Kundelungu National Park, DRC, 13 August 2016 (Michel Hasson)
 Une Alouette éperonnée *Chersomanes albofasciata* triture un petit bulbe séché avec son bec, Piste Lofoi, Parc National de Kundelungu, RDC, 13 août 2016 (Michel Hasson)

distinctly paler in others; some breast streaking was usually visible (Figs. 3–7).

The Spike-heeled Lark population in Katanga is geographically situated between the range of the subspecies *C. a. obscurata*, known only from north-east, central and south-west Angola, and

that of the very rare and declining *C. beesleyi* in northern Tanzania (Keith *et al.* 1992, Dean 2000, Ryan 2004; Fig. 8). The latter was previously considered to be a race of *C. albofasciata*, but molecular analyses by Alström *et al.* (2013), based on specimens from Tanzania, Namibia and an



Figure 3. Spike-heeled Lark *Chersomanes albofasciata*, Loföi road, Kundelungu National Park, DRC, 13 August 2016 (Michel Hasson)

Alouette éperonnée *Chersomanes albofasciata*, Piste Loföi, Parc National de Kundelungu, RDC, 13 août 2016 (Michel Hasson)



Figure 4. Spike-heeled Lark *Chersomanes albofasciata*; a bird with a paler breast, Loföi road, Kundelungu National Park, DRC, 13 August 2016 (Michel Hasson)

Alouette éperonnée *Chersomanes albofasciata*; un oiseau à la poitrine pâle, Piste Loföi, Parc National de Kundelungu, RDC, 7 October 2016 (Michel Hasson)

unknown locality, suggested *beesleyi* is a separate species, although Donald & Collar (2011) found that colour and breast streaking matched that of some Spike-heeled Lark taxa, and size was within the overall range of that species. The variation in plumage tones over the entire range, mainly linked to soil colour and vegetation density, appears to be broadly clinal and further study might reduce the number of currently recognised subspecies (Hockey *et al.* 2005). The populations from Angola, Katanga and Tanzania appear to be quite similar and are presumably conspecific.

Remarkably, Spike-heeled Lark has not been collected in the neighbouring, well-explored Upemba National Park (Verheyen 1953), so the species is presumably absent there, although habitats appear similar in certain areas. It may be worthy of note that Verheyen (1953) collected only two species of *Mirafra* in Upemba, Flappet

and Angola Lark (specimens re-examined), but not Rufous-naped Lark.

It is as yet unproven that the Spike-heeled Larks in Katanga constitute a local breeding population, but all subspecies are considered resident (Keith *et al.* 1992). The habitat at Kundelungu appears suitable and the fact that the birds were in groups with differently coloured individuals (possibly including immatures; Fig. 7) suggests local breeding. On several occasions, song was heard. The breeding season for *obscurata* in Angola is unknown, but birds in breeding condition have been collected in July and December (Dean 2000). Laying dates for *beesleyi* in Tanzania are March–April and November (Keith *et al.* 1992).

Acknowledgements

We thank Alain Reygel for examining *Chersomanes* and *Mirafra* specimens in the Royal Museum for Central



Figure 5. Spike-heeled Larks *Chersomanes albofasciata*, Lofoi road, Kundelungu National Park, DRC, 7 August 2016 (Michel Hasson). The bird on the right has decidedly more reddish underparts.

Alouettes éperonnées *Chersomanes albofasciata*, piste Lofoi, Parc National de Kundelungu, RDC, 7 août 2016 (Michel Hasson). L'oiseau à droite arbore une poitrine nettement plus rousse que l'autre.

Figure 6. Spike-heeled Lark *Chersomanes albofasciata* showing well the pale russet belly and the streaking on the upper breast, Lofoi road, Kundelungu National Park, DRC, 6 August 2016 (Michel Hasson)

Alouette éperonnée *Chersomanes albofasciata* qui montre bien la couleur roux pâle de la poitrine et les stries, Piste Lofoi, Parc National de Kundelungu, RDC, 6 août 2016 (Michel Hasson)



Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, with ML, photographing the specimen and producing the map, and Tom Geerinckx for expediting a loan of *Mirafra* specimens held at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels.

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Figure 7. Spike-heeled Larks *Chersomanes albofasciata* showing some variation in plumage, Lofoi road, Kundelungu National Park, DRC, 7 August 2016 (Michel Hasson)

Alouettes éperonnées *Chersomanes albofasciata* présentant quelques variations dans la couleur du plumage, Piste Lofoi, Parc National de Kundelungu, RDC, 7 August 2016 (Michel Hasson)



Figure 8. Distribution of Spike-heeled Lark *Chersomanes albofasciata*. The Kundelungu population is indicated by the red dot.

Distribution de l'Alouette éperonnée *Chersomanes albofasciata*. La population du plateau du Kundelungu est indiquée par le point rouge.

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Received 12 October 2016; revision accepted 15 December 2016.

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