

# Notes on birds in the Lubango Bird Skin Collection, Angola

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by Michael Mills

During January 2013 I had the privilege of visiting the Lubango Bird Skin Collection in Angola for three days, to study some of the 40000 bird skins in the collection. This was the first step at studying various taxonomic questions related to Angolan birds, and clarifying various identification questions. Some notes based on this visit follow:

1. I spent a while looking at all the swift specimens, hoping to find something unusual among the Common Swift *Apus apus* specimens. There is only one African Black Swift *Apus barbatus* specimen, not even from Angola, and none of the Common Swifts look untoward, all collected in the period Oct-Jan. The darker mantle of African Black Swift was the most noticeable feature differentiating these two species.
2. Bradfield's Swift *Apus bradfieldi* and Mottled Swift *Tachymarptis aequatorialis* appeared to be very similar in plumage pattern and colouration, with basically equal amount of scalloping, so the only difference would be size. Mottled Swift was the same ground colour throughout, quite brownish, and was collected mostly from the mouth of the Dande River, so are may be the large brown swifts I see over the Kwanza, Keve and Longa Rivers.
3. In agreement with Brooke (1971), I could find no difference in morphology between Horus Swift *Apus horus* and so-called Loanda Swift *Apus [horus] toulsoni*, which has subspecies *toulsoni* and *fuscobrunneus* (south-west Angola only). Birds collected from the same area in Cabinda displayed white rumps (*horus*) in some and brown rumps (*toulsoni*) in others. They all appeared to be adults. Currently the southern birds *fuscobrunneus* are treated as a different subspecies based on ground colour being much paler and lacking any of the darker gloss, but I could not see any gloss in the Cabinda birds (*toulsoni*) either. The so called *toulsoni* bird from Zimbabwe (not sure if is the one collected by Peter Steyn and referred to by Brooke 1971) had a small but definitely white rump, so not sure why it was classified as such.





4. I measured all the *bailunduensis* Rock-loving Cisticola *Cisticola emini* specimens in the collection and compared this with Lyne (1930). These birds appear to be significantly smaller than any of the other subspecies of Rock-loving Cisticola. They must surely be a different species!
5. I took some time comparing Bubbling Cisticola *Cisticola bulliens* with Chattering Cisticola *Cisticola anonymus* collected in Angola. There were only about 6-7 Chattering Cisticola skins from Cabinda and Uige, all but one female. There are hundreds of Bubbling Cisticola skins, so I selected six males and six females from three different areas (far south, either Namibe or Benguela), central (south of the Kwanza River, and I think all from Kwanza Sul) and north (north of the Kwanza River from Uige and Kwanza Norte) for comparison. Some Bubbling Cisticolas and Chattering Cisticolas came from the same area of Uige. I could find absolutely no size difference between the two species, and the only feature that the labelled Chattering Cisticolas displayed was a richer rufous top of head, although this was quite variable in Bubbling Cisticola and the richest rufous birds approached Chattering Cisticola's colouration. I will need to cross check this with birds at Tring, but unless all the Chattering Cisticolas in Lubango are in fact Bubbling Cisticolas then I'm convinced that they are the same species and impossible to separate in the field. Lynes (1930) mentions that Bubbling Cisticola has a more pronounced beak than Chattering (not sure if he makes the direct comparison), but there is no difference I can see or measure in the beaks. And Lynes (1930) emphasises massive size difference between the sexes of Bubbling (20%) compared with moderate differences between the sexes of Chattering (13%), but I found the sexes differences within these species to be identical.
6. I looked at Violet Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus damarensis* skins from Angola. Based on mantle colour they appear to be correctly identified, but all specimens are from the far south of the country (Cunene, Cuando Cubango and southern Huila), so I have no idea where the claim that they occur all the way up the coast to the Kwanza River comes from.
7. I looked at a few specimens the *quanzae* subspecies of Fan-tailed Widowbird *Euplectes axillaris* and could see no major difference with other subspecies. I have no doubt that it does not deserve specific status, as has been suggested by some authors.

8. I looked at Yellow-throated Longclaw *Macronyx croceus* specimens, of which there are only 8. Localities are Funda (Vale do Bengo, Luanda), Chiela (Landana, Cabinda) and Quifangondo (also Vale do Bengo). This is compared with 135 specimens of Fülleborn's Longclaw *Macronyx fuelleborni*. Dean (2000) gives the distribution as quite widespread across the plateau, but I suspect it occurs only along the coastal plain, Cabinda and perhaps the far south, with all the plateau birds being Fülleborn's Longclaw.
9. I looked at the two *viridiceps* specimens of White-throated Greenbul *Phyllastrephus albicularis* and compared them with the three specimens of Icterine Greenbul *Phyllastrephus icterinus* from Cabinda. The one Icterine Greenbul (29962) had a very yellow throat, as would be expected, but the other two (30126 and 30120) had rather white throats, and I suspect they may be the same taxon as the *viridiceps* birds. Unfortunately the two *viridiceps* are males and the two *icterinus* are a juvenile female and unsexed, so this could easily explain the minor differences in plumage characters. I took some photos (4800-4802) with all five specimens together, the two "*icterinus*" on the left, then the two *viridiceps* and on the right the true *icterinus*.



10. I compared the three subspecies of Yellow-crowned Bishop *Euplectes afer* (*afer*, *taha* and *strictus*) and marvelled at the size differences and the colouration of the under-parts. See photos 4803-4806.



11. I looked at three of the four species of *Andropadus* greenbuls, namely Little Greenbul *A. virens*, Little Grey Greenbul *A. gracilis* and Plain/Cameroon Sombre Greenbul *A. curvirostris*. These are challenging birds to identify in the field. In size, *curvirostris* and *virens* are similar, and *gracilis* is smaller, probably smaller enough to be a useful field character. In underpart colouration they are very similar, although *virens* has a small amount of grey on the chin, which spills to the upper breast in *curvirostris* and all the way to the mid-breast in *gracilis*. Colour of legs and feet is useful – orangey in *virens* and blackish in *gracilis* and *curvirostris*. The upperparts are incredibly similar; they are basically the same (including the tail colour) except that *virens* has an olive crown and the other two have grey-olive crowns, but this may be hard/impossible to see in the field. First photos with nine birds had males and females, latter photos with six bird only males. Left is *gracilis*, middle *curvirostris*, right *virens*. In side profile photos, *curvirostris* is top and *gracilis* bottom.





12. I looked at brown seedeaters – Streaky-headed Seedeater *Crithagra gularis* and Black-eared Seedeater *Crithagra mennelli*. I'm not sure which features supposedly distinguish them, as the ear colour seems to be quite variable. I restricted my comparison to males, since the single *mennelli* specimen was a male. I found tail length to be very hard to measure, and hence a waste of time with these birds. Angolan Streaky-headed Canaries are longer winged than Zimbabwean ones. It's not clear how to identify these species, assuming the skins are correctly identified. I suspect the Black-eared Seedeater is misidentified, but would need to see more specimens to be sure. The wing of the single *mennelli* fell just below that of the six Streaky-headed's from Angola but overlapped with those from Zimbabwe. I think the whole complex (Streaky-headed *gularis*, West African *canicapilla*, Reichard's *reichardi reichardi*, Stripe-breasted *reichardi striatipecta* and Black-eared *mennelli*) may be in need of revision.
13. Based on differences in vocalisations of birds from Uganda and Angola, I investigated Petit's Cuckooshrike *Campephaga petiti* to see whether I could spot any differences between the scarp and Cabinda birds. There may be something in the projection of the tail beyond the wing tips, but this may also be a result of the preparation of the specimens. Then I looked at male Black Cuckooshrike *Campephaga flava*, which I think has a slightly longer wing compared with *petiti*. But it's hard to be sure on the small Petit's Cuckooshrike sample size. Need to look at more at Tring. I'm wondering whether the scarp birds are distinctive from the rest; Angola scarp versus Congo Basin, rather than east of Congo and west of Congo. Would be interesting to hear recordings from Gabon/Cameroon. Also, what are the differences between females? There was one very yellow female Black Cuckooshrike but with strong barring below compared with the female Petit's.
14. I looked at all the *Hyliota* specimens. What's interesting is that there is not a single Southern Hyliota *Hyliota australis* from the miombo-covered plateau. There are nine specimens from the central scarp and one from Longa in Cuando Cubango. In Southern Huliota the white in the wing is confined to the greater secondary coverts, but in Yellow-bellied Hyliota *Hyliota flavigaster* the white runs down the outer margin of the two innermost secondaries. The gloss on the back is highly distinctive and can even be seen very faintly in the female

under strong light (not a field character in females). Colour of the underparts is in no way useful. Photos taken with Southern Hyliota above and Yellow-bellied Hyliota below. Females were much harder to distinguish, although in the hand female Yellow-bellied Hyliota show some gloss in the upperparts. Yellow-bellied Hyliota is slightly greyer-brown than Southern Hyliota, but I'm not convinced this would be useful in the field. One female Southern Hyliota showed white edges to the secondaries (see photos) illustrating that this is not a reliable field character. In both sexes the Yellow-bellied Hyliota is larger in wing length by about 11%.





15. I compared Bates's Sunbird *Cinnyris batesi* and Little Green Sunbird *Anthreptes seimundi*. In general *seimundi* is yellower below than *batesi*, but *batesi* can also show some fairly bright yellow on the belly and the throat of *seimundi* can be quite olive. As a rule, if it has a yellowish throat/upper breast it is *seimundi*, whereas if it's greyish it's *batesi* and if its olive it could be either. The colour of the belly is unimportant. The uppertail of *batesi* has blackish feathers with green margins, whereas those of *seimundi* are all green, but this would be hard to see in the field. The bill of *batesi* is very slightly more curved, but not nearly as much as illustrated in the field guides

(see photos). I'm not even sure if bill shape is a good field character. I would focus first on the colour of the upper breast/throat and second the colour of the tail.



16. I looked at the three species of *Illadopsis*, Brown *Illadopsis fulvescens* (many), Scaly-breasted *Illadopsis albipectus* (1) and Pale-breasted *Illadopsis rufipennis* (3 from Cabinda). This reminded me how much of a misnomer "Scaly-breasted" is. Scaly-breasted *Illadopsis* is best distinguished in the hand by pale feet/legs and very short rectal

bristles. This reminded me too how similar the birds are and how difficult they are to identify in the field if not calling. The most obvious thing about Brown Illadopsis is how the white throat contrasts with the rest of the brownish underparts (although the centre of the belly can be white). Pale-breasted Illadopsis is indeed pale-breasted, with the entire centre of the underparts whitish except for a brown area on the mid chest. The flanks are brownish too. That said, Scaly-breasted Illadopsis has almost identical underparts, so leg colour seems most reliable. And of course call. I could see no real difference to the upperparts of the three species.

17. I compared male White-bellied Sunbird *Cinnyris talatala* and Oustalet's Sunbird *Cinnyris oustaleti*. *talatala* has a clearer white belly, with *oustaleti* having some darker feathers on the belly, giving it an off-white colour rather than clear white, but I'm not sure how well this would show up in the field. On the underparts, the only other noticeable features are the pectoral tufts (orange and yellow in Oustalet's Sunbird, only yellow in White-bellied Sunbird) and that Oustalet's Sunbird has a narrow band of maroonish-tipped feathers (actually the lowest row of iridescent feathers) between the blue-green of the breast and the non-glossy feathers of the belly. Not sure if this will be visible in the field, but under great viewing conditions it should be possible to see. Overall White-bellied Sunbirds's gloss is green, whereas Oustalet's is slightly blue-green, but again I'm not sure if this is a useful field character. The upperparts are basically identical except for this minor difference in gloss colour. There was no real difference in bill shape/structure that I would expect to notice in the field. Thus, unless the birds are calling they would be very difficult to identify in the field unless the pectoral tufts are seen or the transition pattern on the breast is seen exceptionally well.

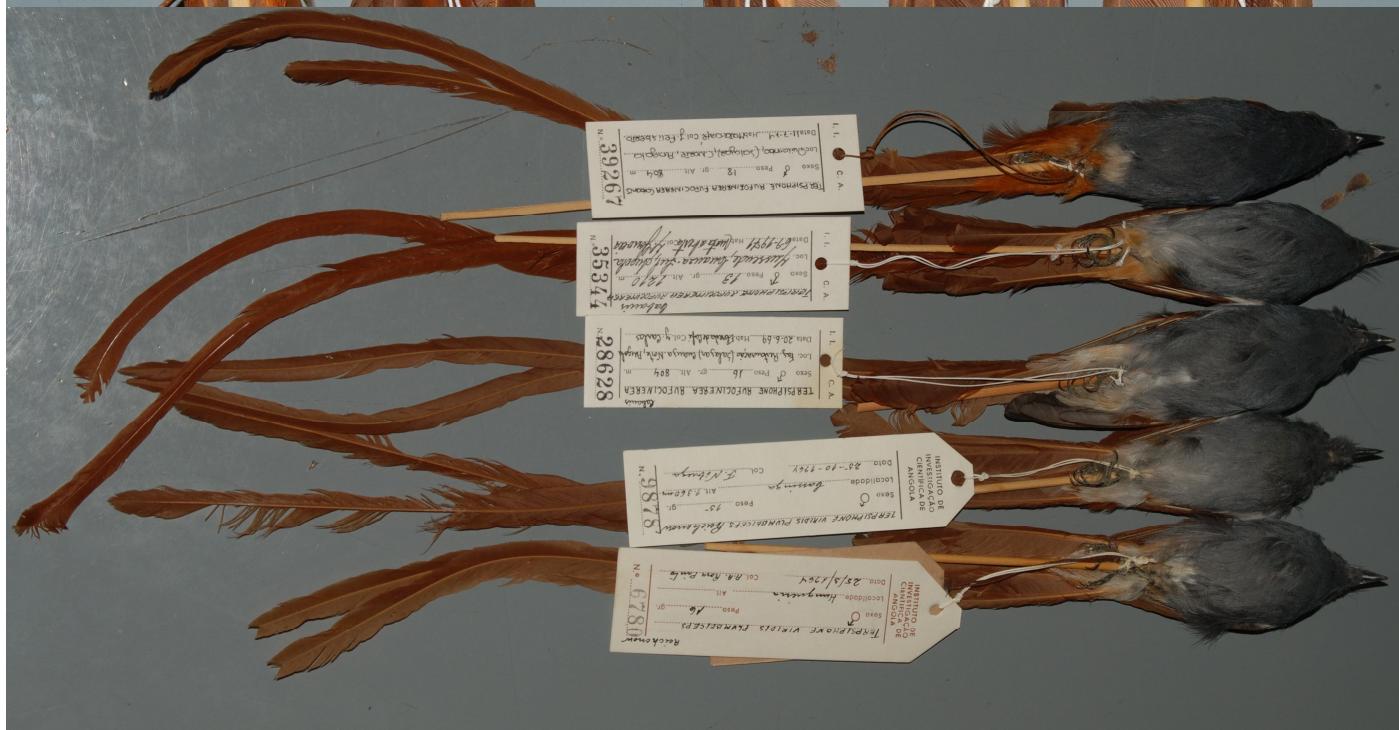


18. I looked at Quail-finches and read Payne & Sorenson (2007) at the same time, and I must say that the distribution pattern of the two "species" in Angola is very messy. Both have been collected from Longa (yes, they

have been correctly identified). Having looked at variation within the group and read Payne & Sorenson (2007) carefully I am fairly convinced by the argument of a single species. In the field, one would need exceptionally good views to distinguish them, especially since some populations are migratory, so you can't go on previous confirmed records for identification. Uganda seems to be particularly complicated, with the western group and central African groups co-occurring.

19. I spent some time looking at paradise flycatchers *Terpsiphone* and I must admit that besides the colour of the vent and head, and the presence or absence of a crest, I couldn't remember any more specific characters and none are mentioned in Sinclair & Ryan (2003). In the Lubango collection there is one bird labelled as *batesi* and 89 labelled as *rufocinerea*. Originally the *batesi* was identified as a *rufocinerea* but this was changed at a later date, although I could not see any reason for this. Within birds labelled as male *rufocinerea* the colour of the head varied quite a lot, mostly due to the presence (darker) or absence of glossy feathers, which spill over to the throat and upper breast on some individuals. It seems that this could be a breeding plumage thing, as males with longer tails tended to have darker heads. Crests varied greatly too, with some having no crest and others having longer crests. This was not always consistent with head colour, as some very pale-headed birds had crests and some dark headed birds lacked crests. Some had very long tails with pretty pale vents, and I suspect that these may be mislabelled *viridis*. But the longest-tailed bird had quite a dark vent. I'm not sure what the characters are that separate *viridis* and *rufocinerea* – if vent colour and tail length vary greatly, and crest length and head colour are variable, then how do you know what you are looking at? Or is Angola the exception to the rule and an area of many hybrids. Perhaps wherever the forest and savanna zones come into contact the situation gets confused? I took photos of five very long-tailed birds with highly variable vent colour (from dark rufous to white; including *rufocinerea* and *viridis*). All five these birds showed crests, and head colour was mostly quite dark. I also took photos of a very confused bird – 28037 – with a moderate tail, whitish-buff vent, long crest and fairly pale head!









20. There are no Brown-headed Apalis *Apalis alticola* in the collection, which I was hoping to compare with Grey Apalis *Apalis cinerea*.
21. I measured all White-headed Barbet *Lybius leucocephalus* in the collection, to compare with specimens in other collections taken from elsewhere within the range.
22. I looked at three very yellow-bellied subspecies of *Eremomela icteropygialis* group, *lundae* (Lago Dilolo), *polioxantha* (Shashami River, collected by Irwin so in Zimbabwe or Zambia) and *salvadorii*, *polioxantha* treated as a subspecies of Yellow-bellied Eremomela *Eremomela icteropygialis*, *lundae* not listed by the IOC list (Gill & Wright 2006) and *salvadorii* its own monotypic species (*Eremomela salvadorii*). All three taxa show hints of olive in the upperparts, although the ground colour in all three is grey with a hint of olive. *salvadorii* had the strongest olive wash, but it was by no means absent in the other two. The amount of yellow on the underparts, and its intensity, varied slightly, with *polioxantha* showing the least and brightest yellow, and *lundae* and *salvadorii* showing similar amounts of yellow, but the yellow being more olive in *lundae*. I can see no argument for keeping *salvadorii* as a separate species when considering the variability in amount and colour yellow on the vent/belly or the colour of the upperparts, which vary from very grey to slightly olive grey within *icteropygialis*. Lump them!





23. I started looking at small cisticolas *Cisticola*, especially the *textrix* group using Lynes (1930). I selected three male skins of each of *ayresii ayresii*, *textrix bulubulu* and *textrix anselli*. I turned to the key on p 138 to learn that *ayresii* had wings less than 50 mm and *textrix* more than 50 mm (my generalisation). The 3 *bulubulu* were 48-47-47, *ayresii* 48-50-48 and *anselli* 54-55-55. Based on this *bulubulu* is a subspecies of *ayresii* not *textrix*. Tarsus length (hard to measure so checked superficially) seems to agree with this, pointing again to *bulubulu* being an *ayresii*. Primary 1 of *bulubulu* was also much more like that of *ayresii* than *anselli*! This requires more investigation, but *bulubulu* is probably a subspecies of *ayresii*.

#### Specific notes on Honeyguide Indicatoridae

Specimens for comparison were both Green-backed Honeybird *Prodotiscus zambesiae* and Cassin's Honeybird *Prodotiscus insignis*, Pallid Honeyguide *Indicator meliphilus* (7), Least Honeyguide *Indicator exilis* (6), Lesser Honeyguide *Indicator minor* (many) and Thick-billed Honeyguide *Indicator conirostris* (two). At the same time I consulted (Chapin 1962).

1. Cassin's Honeybird and Green-backed Honeybird appeared almost identical. Both show the white flank feather. Cassin's seems to be generally darker, but I really cannot see any reason for treating them as separate species.
2. Size differences between different *Indicator* species and within sex are noticeable. I compared and photographed males of each of the species side by side. Pallid Honeyguide is as small as the Honeybird *Prodotiscus* species, while Least Honeyguide is larger, followed by Lesser Honeyguide and then Thick-billed Honeyguide being the largest.



3. However, size can be misleading and female Least Honeyguide is the same size as male Pallid Honeyguide. Female Lesser Honeyguide is the same size as male Least Honeyguide. There were no female Thick-billed Honeyguides to compare with male Lesser Honeyguides. Thus I would conclude that size is of no way useful for identifying Indicator honeyguides to species level, although a very small one would rule out Lesser Honeyguide or Thick-billed Honeyguide and a very large one would rule out Pallid Honeyguide and female Least Honeyguide.



4. The most distinctive feature of Least Honeyguide is the very strong black moustachial stripe.
5. Pallid Honeyguide has a fairly plain face but does have a white loral area. Compared with Least Honeyguide and Lesser Honeyguide, the bill is shorter/more stubby. This may be a useful field feature if experienced, although viewing angles usually make a side-on/profile view difficult.



6. The flank streaking story used by field guides seems to me to be completely useless. They all show flank streaking, and it varies from individual to individual depending on how the feathers lie.
7. The intensity of the green on the upperparts, likewise, seems to be a completely useless field character, as it can vary greatly within Lesser Honeyguide. From Chapin (1962) I take it that the top of the head in Willcock's Honeyguide *Indicator willcocksi* and to a lesser extent Pallid Honeyguide is slightly greenish with darker feather centres. However, on close inspection Least Honeyguide also has small green patches on the crown feathers, and I could not tell the crown of Pallid Honeyguide from that of Least Honeyguide.
8. I could see nothing useful in the contrast between throat and breast colouration.
9. As illustrated in photo 4796, Thick-billed Honeyguide does have a noticeably broader bill than Lesser Honeyguide, although I cannot be certain as to how easily this would be picked up in the field.



10. The pattern of the white in the underside of the outer-most tail feather seemed to vary quite a lot within species, and I don't think is a useful character.
11. The amount of streaking on the mantle varied quite a lot and didn't appear to be a reliable character. One Lesser Honeyguide had as strong streaking as Least Honeyguide, to the point that I was convinced it was a misidentified Least Honeyguide until I measured the wing length and compared with another male Least Honeyguide. The Lesser Honeyguide wing length was comfortably over 90 mm as compared with the Least Honeyguide's being 78 mm. All I can conclude is that a very faintly-streaked-on-the-mantle bird would rule out Thick-billed Honeyguide (although note small sample size) and Least Honeyguide. A well-marked bird does not rule out Lesser Honeyguide. Photo 4799 illustrates the variability of upperpart colouration and streaking within Lesser Honeyguide from Angola.
12. The moustachial stripe of Lesser Honeyguide seemed to be quite variable, and although it was never as dark as in Least Honeyguide it was quite noticeable in some individuals and virtually invisible in others.
13. White loral spots were visible in all birds examined, and it seems would only be useful for excluding Willcock's Honeyguide.

Much more care should be taken when identifying honeyguides. Call structure will quickly place a bird in either the Willcock's/Pallid/Dwarf group, or Least/Lesser/Thick-billed group. I'd like to see a convincing comparison of vocalisations of each taxa within these groups.

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