

Tailorbirds 'rediscovered' in



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Above The forest interior at Serra Jeci.

Below Black-headed Apalis, an inhabitant of Mozambique's miombo woodland.



Tailorbirds (*Orthotomus* spp.) belong to a largely Asian genus renowned for sewing leaves together to form the nest. However, two African species are often placed in this genus: the African Tailorbird or Red-capped Forest Warbler *O. metopias* and the Long-billed Tailorbird *O. moreaui*. They are probably closely related to the camaropteras, which also sew leaves together to make their nests.

Both African species of tailorbird are restricted to the montane forests of Tanzania's Eastern Arc Mountains and Serra Jeci (Njesi Plateau) in northern Mozambique. The Mozambican records date to 1945, when seven birds of each species were shot by Jali Makawa, Con Benson's collector. In Tanzania, the African Tailorbird is fairly common at several mountains, but the Long-billed Tailorbird is known only from the East Usambara Mountains, where it is scarce and apparently decreasing in numbers. It is listed as Critically Endangered in the latest global Red Data book, so there is a pressing need to reassess its status in Mozambique.

Serra Jeci is a range of hills covered in a mosaic of grassland and forest that rises above the miombo (*Brachystegia*) woodland that clothes most of Mozambique's Niassa Province. Con Benson saw the area in 1942 during a visit to Unango, a remote outpost north of Lichinga. He was unable to visit the hills, which lie some 20 kilometres

north-west of Unango, but in 1945 he sent his collector, Makawa, who spent 16 days in the area. Makawa collected 13 bird species in the forest, four species in the adjacent grassland, and a further 12 species on the hill slopes as well as in the miombo woodland. In addition to the two tailorbirds, he also obtained the first specimen of the African Hill-Babbler *Pseudoalcippe abyssinica* found in Mozambique.

We decided to try and revisit Serra Jeci during a trip in June/July 2001 to collect blood from various warblers in south-central Africa. Just getting to the area was interesting in itself. The Niassa Province, nestled on the eastern shore of Lake Malawi, is Mozambique's forgotten province (see *Africa – Environment & Wildlife*, vol.6, no.5). Until recently there was limited road access to the area, and during the 20-year civil war, dissidents were flown into Lichinga, the provincial capital, and left there, because there was little chance of them ever making their way back to Beira and Maputo!

Since the cessation of hostilities, the infrastructure has improved significantly, and the worst section of road was in fact in Malawi, between Mangoche and the border town of Mandimba. Once we were in Mozambique, there was a good road all the way through to Lichinga. Here we enlisted the aid of Fred Berrington, a South African missionary with an interest in birds. He



Serra Jeci, looking south towards the plateau and Benson's site.

Mozambique

agreed to join us and act as interpreter, and we drove north to Unango on a good tar road.

It was exciting to see Serra Jeci in the distance, but it was too far to walk there, given our tight schedule. Fortunately, with Fred's aid, we were able to discover a track leading to a recently-established farm. We followed this track through 18 kilometres of stunning, untouched miombo woodland, and arrived at a small compound to be greeted by some rather surprised farm workers. Fred duly explained our mission, and they agreed to lead us the remaining five kilometres or so to the mountains. The first part of the trail ran through miombo woodland, with bird parties containing specials such as Stierling's Woodpecker *Dendropicos stierlingi* and Olive-headed Weaver *Ploceus olivaceiceps*.

After a stiff climb, we arrived at a small forest patch where we set up camp. Within only a few minutes of erecting the first mist-net, we'd seen a pair of African Tailorbirds in the dense forest understorey – the first Mozambican records for more than 50 years! Other interesting birds included the Evergreen Forest Warbler *Bradypterus lopezi*, Eastern Double-collared Sunbird *Cinnyris mediocris*, Black-headed Apalis *Apalis melanocephala* and Orange Ground-Thrush *Zoothera gurneyi*. The scrub at the forest edge had Bertram's Weaver *Ploceus bertrandi* and Miombo Double-collared Sunbird *Cinnyris manoensis*.

We finally found a pair of Long-billed Tailorbirds the following morning, creeping quietly through the forest canopy. Jali Makawa reported that this was the habitat of the birds he collected, but the species only occurs in the forest edge and understorey in Tanzania, which led Benson to wonder whether a mistake had been made. One possible reason for it occurring in the canopy at Serra Jeci is the presence there of African Tailorbirds and Green-backed Camaropteras, both of which are virtually absent from the area where Long-billed Tailorbirds occur in Tanzania.

We didn't have time to explore the area thoroughly. To the north of the rather scrubby forest patch we visited was a large patch of forest that may well support other interesting birds. However, we now know that both species of tailorbirds still occur at Serra Jeci. Human disturbance is minimal. The only trails on the mountain were game tracks, with a major elephant route along the mountain crest. The locals told us that lions, leopards, sable and zebra were regular in the area. The forests are protected by the local Yao peoples' belief that evil spirits inhabit the mountain peaks, as well as rumours of the odd landmine. Consequently, Serra Jeci probably is the most important site for Long-billed Tailorbirds, and further visits may well see the species reassigned from Critical to merely Endangered. □



The African Tailorbird – 'rediscovered' in Mozambique after 50 years.