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AVIAN RANGE CHANGES

HOW THE EAST WAS WON: BREEDING RANGE EXTENSION OF THE GREY-BACKED SPARROW-LARK *EREMOPTERIX VERTICALIS*

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The Grey-backed Sparrow-lark (GBSL) *Eremopterix verticalis* is a southern African near-endemic occupying a range of open, sparsely vegetated habitats in arid and semi-arid areas. These include gravel plains, short, burnt or overgrazed grasslands, dry pans, dwarf shrublands, and recently harvested or fallow fields (Lloyd 2005). Its core range is in the arid western regions of the subcontinent where it occurs from the coastal plains of Cabinda (Angola) in the northwest, south to the Agulhas plain in the Western Cape (South Africa). Historically, the eastern edge of its distribution extended to approximately 27°E, from the karroid regions of the Eastern Cape Province in the south-east to the arid, savannah woodlands of north-western Zimbabwe in the north of its range. However, some distribution changes have occurred since the publication of the first South African Bird Atlas Project (Dean 1997).

A small population of GBSLs appears to have become established on the Polokwane Plateau (~23°40'S, 29°10'E), Limpopo Province, South Africa, since July 2013. Although there have been sporadic records of the species from this area prior to 2013, small numbers are now fairly regularly encountered in all months of the year. They are typically found in heavily grazed communal lands and fallow fields in the rural areas of Chebeng, Moletzie and Serowe to the

north-west of Polokwane. The Polokwane Plateau population is suspected to be a resident, breeding population as a juvenile bird was seen in the company of some adults in the Chebeng area in July 2014 (Joe Grosel and DE, pers. obs.). However, as yet we have been unable to find any definitive evidence of breeding on the plateau, e.g. a nest with eggs or nestlings.

Grey-backed Sparrow-larks are nomadic and flocks may sporadically erupt in areas way outside their normal distribution range, stay for a couple of weeks or months before dispersing again. These eruptions are often associated with severe drought conditions within their distribution range, or severe droughts creating suitable, open habitat in areas outside its usual range. Some of these out of range eruptions include records from central Zimbabwe's midlands, south-west of Harare (Tree 1992), the Beitbridge-Musina region (Tarboton et al. 1987; Roberts 2005) and several records from South Africa's Lowveld, including the Kruger National Park (Lawson 1995; Lawson 2003; Lawson B 2007; Lawson P 2007; Leinberger 2000; Hulett and Hulett 2007). The Kruger National Park records represent the current eastern limit of the species.

On 6th June 2017, I found some GBSLs in the company of Chestnut-backed Sparrow-larks (CBSL) *Eremopterix leucotis* in an open field (22°09'43"S; 29°36'29"E) at the Noordgrens Estate on the farm Almond 120MS east of Weipe in the Limpopo River Valley, South Africa (Fig. 1). The edge of the field is only about 150 m from the Limpopo River and is approximately 20 ha in size. The vegetation was structurally simple with no tree cover and dominated by very short grasses represented by species such as *Aristida* spp., *Cenchrus ciliaris*, *Enneapogon cenchroides* and *Sporobolus iocladius*.

Not only was this an unusual record for the area, but my attention was immediately drawn to a number of GBSL males displaying and singing so far away from their known breeding range. I also noted some typical mate-guarding behaviour and before long I found a pair

carrying nesting material. I located the nest which was still under construction but, unfortunately, I had to leave. I did not consider nest construction as unequivocal evidence of an extension of its breeding range and decided to return a week later to confirm if this pair, or any others, were breeding at the site.



Figure 1. The open field at the Noordgrens Estate where Grey-backed Sparrow-larks were breeding.

On 13th June 2017, I relocated the nest which now contained two eggs (Fig. 2) - definitive evidence of a breeding range extension of GBSLs. Interestingly, a pair of CBSLs was also incubating two eggs approximately 4.5 m from the GBSL nest. During the course of the day, I found several more nests of both species of sparrow-larks, as well as fledglings and juveniles of varying ages (Figs. 3 and 4). This suggests that breeding - for the GBSLs at least - started at least in May and as some pairs were still constructing nests on 13th June, nesting at this site would have extended into July.

Although GBSLs have been recorded in the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area (GMTCA) to the west of the

Noordgrens Estate, there are no breeding records from this area. Brewster (2004) regarded the species as a rare winter visitor to the Bobirwa area (which includes parts of the GMTCA) in eastern Botswana. A little further west of the Bobirwa area, Brewster (1993) recorded several influxes of GBSLs into the Tswapong area in the early 1990's. It is worth noting that although Brewster (1993) often observed GBSLs in pairs during these influxes, no breeding was reported. The closest published breeding records to the Noordgrens Estate is Brewster's (1996) records from south of the Sefhare Hills area (~27°30'E) in the Tswapong South region of eastern Botswana. These records are about 250 km south-west of Noordgrens Estate and represent a 2° of longitude easterly extension of the known breeding range of GBSLs.



Figure 2. Grey-backed Sparrow-lark nest at Noordgrens Estate near Weipe, Limpopo Province, South Africa. June 2017.

The establishment of a breeding sub-population/s in South Africa's Limpopo Province represents a considerable easterly range extension of the species. Furthermore, the increasing frequency of occurrence of GBSLs in areas outside its historical range, particularly in the eastern Lowveld regions of South Africa, including the Kruger National Park, is noteworthy. The species range expansion should be monitored so that we can accurately map this species conquest of the east. Is the GBSL perhaps "the canary in the coal mine" with regard to climate change in southern Africa?

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Figure 3. A male Grey-backed Sparrow-lark leading a recently fledged bird to safety. Noordgrens Estate, Weipe. June 2017.



Figure 4. A pair of Grey-backed Sparrow-larks at their nest in the Limpopo River Valley. Noordgrens Estate, Weipe, June 2017.

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