

New breeding records of African River Martin *Pseudochelidon eurystomina* and Rosy Bee-eater *Merops malimbicus* in Conkouati Reserve, Republic of Congo

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L'observation de colonies rapprochées d'Hirondelles de rivière (*Pseudolangrayen* d'Afrique) *Pseudochelidon eurystomina* et de Guâpiers gris-rose *Merops malimbicus* dans la Réserve de Conkouati, République du Congo, souligne l'importance de la conservation de cette aire protégée. Les terriers des hirondelles avaient en effet apparemment été occupés par une colonie de Guâpiers gris-rose l'année précédente, un phénomène qui a déjà été signalé.

Introduction

Few breeding sites are known for African River Martin *Pseudochelidon eurystomina*. It has been recorded breeding along the Congo and lower Oubangui Rivers and at one site, on the coast, in the Gamba area of Gabon⁹, where Christy & Alexander-Marrack noted c800 birds in five colonies. One of these colonies was thought to be an old Rosy Bee-eater *Merops malimbicus* site that was being re-used by the martins⁹. Another site in Gabon (Animba), had up to 600 adults and it was reported that Rosy Bee-eater had nested there the previous year¹. Only six breeding colonies of Rosy Bee-eater were known prior to 1984⁷. Subsequently, Christy & Alexander-Marrack found the colony at Gamba, Gabon, mentioned above⁹. On the Cabinda coast they were noted to breed following arrival in May⁷, and in Gamba the birds were still entering burrows in mid-October⁹.

Conkouati Reserve

Among protected areas, Conkouati Reserve probably contains the highest habitat diversity in Congo. It encompasses an area from the Atlantic Ocean to Niari Plain, and includes lagoons, freshwater lakes, littoral forest, littoral and inland savannahs, sublittoral forests on dry ground, marsh forests and closed tropical forests^{3,7,8}. A body of work on the fauna and flora of the region, with particular reference to the possible effects of timber and mineral extraction, was produced in the early 1990s, concentrating on the Kouilou basin, to the south of the reserve⁴. Conkouati has been identified as an Important Bird Area (IBA)⁵, and it is also an important conservation area for several large mammals on the Red Data List and on Appendix I of CITES^{2,10,11}.

The coastal area of the reserve is, like the Kouilou coast to the south and Gabon (Gamba area) to the north, relatively undisturbed by human activity. The

littoral consists of a mosaic of woodland and grassland, mangrove forest and numerous inlets and lagoons. Littoral savannah at the mouth of the Conkouati lagoon was investigated by the authors on foot. Here, the soil is white sand and the herbaceous vegetation consists of short sparse grass. Common trees are *Manilkara obovata* and *Feigimanra africana*.

New colonies

In early October 1996, in the littoral of Conkouati Reserve a colony of African River Martin was found in a flat sandy area with sparse grass. Nearby was a similar colony of Rosy Bee-eater (Fig 1). The martins numbered several 100s and the bee-eaters 1,000–1,500. Both colonies were surrounded by littoral woodland and scrub.

Our description of the martin colony is very similar to those described by Alexander-Marrack¹ and Christy & Alexander-Marrack⁹: it was a roughly circular area c100 m across, with many burrows. The birds were actively excavating, with sand being constantly sprayed out of several burrows. Occasionally the birds flew around calling and many were catching yellowish flying insects over the colony. Our guide mentioned that, the previous year, the burrows had been occupied by a Rosy Bee-eater colony. The current bee-eater colony was larger—c150 m across—and was also very active, with birds excavating and flying around frequently. Finally, there was an uninhabited colony which local people informed us had also held bee-eaters the previous year. All these sites were within c2 km of each another.

Conclusions and conservation importance of the site

These observations, at a previously unknown site, lend further weight to the suggestion that African River Martin utilises old Rosy Bee-eater burrows. The

date of digging activities for both species (October) was at the end of the rainy season (as at Gamba and Animba in Gabon^{1,9}). These breeding records underline the conservation importance of Conkouati Reserve.

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Figure 1. Rosy Bee-eater *Merops malimbicus* colony, Cokouati Reserve, Republic of Congo, October 1996 (Fiona Maisels)



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