

Observations on the Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* in Yemen, May 2009

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The Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* is a small flycatcher (Plate 1) which breeds in Africa from Mali and the Ivory Coast to Somalia and Kenya and in southwestern Arabia. It was first described in 1901 from a specimen from Gambaga in northeastern Ghana. The species is said to be rare to uncommon in Africa (Urban *et al* 1997), and it is described as a breeding summer visitor to drier parts of the southwestern highlands and foothills (locally numerous in acacia woodlands, more rarely in juniper) of Arabia (Jennings 1995). Salewski *et al* (2003b) recently found evidence for migration of this species in western Africa based on data from the Ivory Coast.

In April 2009 only two photos of the Gambaga Flycatcher were present, and of rather poor quality, in the large African Bird Club bird-photo database (www.birdquest).



Plate 1. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009. The field characteristics are clearly visible: yellowish-orange lower mandible, faint 'washed-out' breast streaking and little streaking on forehead. The bird is sitting quite upright, often the carriage is more horizontal. © Werner Müller



Plate 2. A Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* in its habitat, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009. The species inhabits dry Acacia woodlands. © Werner Müller



Plate 3. Nest, under construction, of Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Mahweet, Yemen, May 2009. The nest is in a fork of an acacia tree and the female is sitting in the nest as if incubating. © Werner Müller

net/afbid). During my visit to Yemen in May 2009, with Yousuf Mohagebh, I had the opportunity to observe the Gambaga Flycatcher and to take photos of this poorly known species.

HABITAT AND NEST SITE

In the area between Sana'a, Al Mahweet and Manakhah, west of Sana'a, we found the Gambaga Flycatcher in all acacia woodlands, even in small patches of only a dozen trees, as well as in villages with trees. The lowest site was in Wadi Sarieh (west of Al Mahweet) at c700 m asl, the highest in Al Ahjur (close to Kawkaban) at c2300 m asl. We recorded the highest density in an open acacia/cultivated area near Al Ahjur with 3 pairs within c4 ha (Plate 2). On 10 May we recorded nest building in a wooded area of Al Mahweet. The nest was situated c3 m above the ground in a fork of an acacia tree (Plates 3 & 4).

Few nests have been found previously: two in the Ivory Coast in February were located in similar parts of trees as our nest (Salewski *et al* 2003b). In Saudi Arabia,



Plate 4. Location of the Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* nest of Plate 3 in a fork of an acacia tree, Al Mahweet, Yemen, May 2009. © Werner Müller



Plate 5. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009. The species has no distinctive markings in flight except for the wing bars. © Werner Müller



Plate 6. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Wadi Sariah, Yemen, May 2009. Typical are the round head, short bill and 'washed-out' breast. The carriage here is quite horizontal. © Werner Müller

Castell *et al* (2001) found four nests, all in juniper trees, two on lateral branches and two in forks. Two nests in Kenya (Urban *et al* 1997) were sited in a hollow at the end of a small dead tree and in the middle of an acacia bush respectively. The height above ground differed from 1–4 m, mostly 2–3 m.

HABITS

During 9–11 May the birds were mostly in pairs, very active and often calling and sometimes singing. They were neither shy nor elusive, often sitting openly on branches and could be approached to less than 5 m. When landing, most of the birds were flicking their wings. This also was often done when calling. During the observation time of 1.5 h at the nest in Al Mahweet only the female was bringing nest material to the nest site. The male was singing no further away than 20 m and accompanied the female when she was flying to the nest site.

Wing flicking is noted in most of the descriptions of the species, only Sinclair & Ryan (2003) say that it rarely flicks its wings. The foraging techniques and habitat selection of Gambaga Flycatchers wintering in Ivory Coast were described in detail by Salewski *et al* (2003a): the authors compared it with the wintering Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* and with a number of African species. The Gambaga Flycatcher showed the highest niche overlap with the Pied Flycatcher in both foraging substrates and techniques as well



Plate 7. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009. Here the short wings and orange lower mandible are clearly visible. This bird is sitting very upright. © Werner Müller



Plates 8 & 9. Comparison between Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009 (left) and Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Tsavo East, Kenya, November 2007 (right). Clearly visible are the differences in the streaking of the forehead and length of primary projection. © Werner Müller



Plates 10 & 11. Comparison between Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009 (left) and Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Yemen, October 1996 (right). Difference in bill colour is obvious but also in head shape (round in Gambaga, more pointed in Spotted) and breast streaking. © Werner Müller

as microhabitat, but used more open habitats than the other species. They also found aggressive interaction between the two flycatcher species.

IDENTIFICATION

It is said that the Gambaga Flycatcher is not well known because of confusion with its close relative, the Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* (eg Urban *et al* 1997). In Yemen the Spotted Flycatcher is a common passage migrant and in October 1996 we saw many of them though none in May 2009. The easiest way to separate the two species seems to be the following (Plates 1 & 5–11): the Gambaga Flycatcher is smaller, has a more rounded head (Plates 10 & 11), its bill is not totally black but the lower mandible is yellowish-orange (Plate 7) and its wings are shorter (Plates 8 & 9). Additionally, the breast is less streaked though streaking does vary (compare Plates 6 & 7). If there are streaks on the breast they

are less distinctive and more 'washed-out' than in Spotted Flycatcher (Plates 10 & 11). On the forehead the streaks are quite distinctive in the Spotted Flycatcher (Plates 9 & 11) and much less (Plate 8) or lacking in the Gambaga (Plate 6). In flight, except for the wing bars, there are no distinctive markings (Plate 5).

In most descriptions (eg Porter *et al* 1996, Urban *et al* 1997) it is said that the Spotted sits more upright and the carriage in the Gambaga is more horizontal, but we have seen both postures in the Gambaga and think this should not be used for identification (compare Plates 6 & 11 with Plates 1 & 7). Of the c50 individuals seen we could only distinguish one female. It was the bird building the nest accompanied by the singing male. The female was duller, more greyish and had almost no streaking on the breast (Plate 12). The bill seemed to be shorter than in many other birds we saw. We do not know if this is just individual variation or a distinct plumage characteristic of females. In the literature there is almost nothing to be found on sexual dimorphism in plumage of the Gambaga. Generally, the description of the Gambaga Flycatcher in Porter *et al* (1996) is good, but the best illustration of the species, compared with our observations and photos, is the one in Zimmerman *et al* (1996).

Unfortunately, the calls and songs of Gambaga Flycatcher could not be recorded. The call was much sharper and shorter than Spotted Flycatcher and seemed higher pitched. The song was much more varied than that of Spotted with a number of notes on a different level.

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Plate 12. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Mahweet, Yemen, May 2009. This is the female which was nest constructing accompanied by the singing male. Even though the bird is not in the sun, this individual is duller and a bit more greyish and has almost no streaking on the breast. © Werner Müller