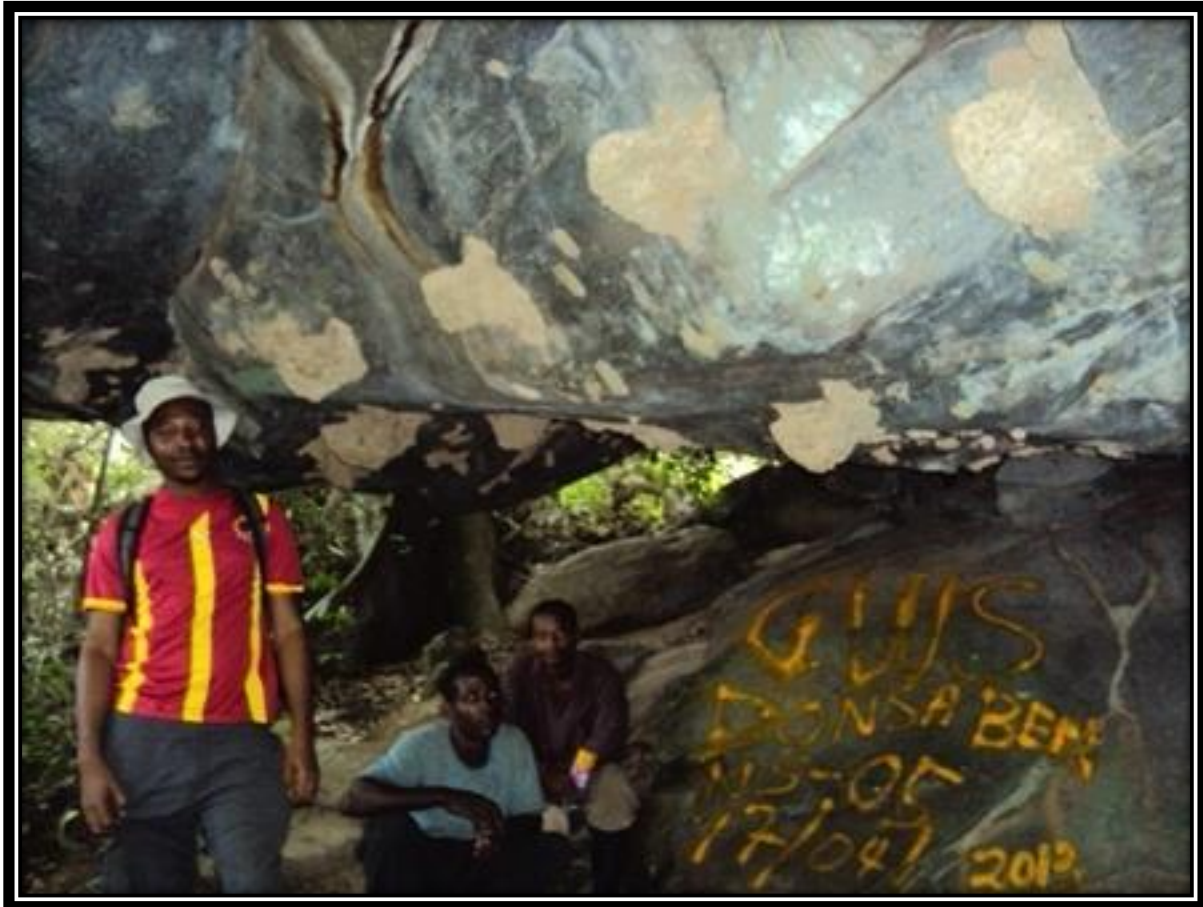


Expanded search for Nesting Areas of White-necked Picathartes in forest reserves in Parts of the Central and Western Region



Prepared

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Introduction

The recent study on the ecology, conservation and distribution of White-necked Picathartes in Ghana concluded that the currently-known population of the species exists in seven spatially isolated fragments located at relatively small area of the high forest area of Ghana. The estimated population based on the known nesting colonies suggested that the species has probably declined in population as well as the extent of occurrence in Ghana. A number of reported sightings of the species in some forest reserves within the high forest zone could not be verified due to logistical constraints. The need to identify and document all possible nesting colonies so as to establish a more comprehensive spatial distribution and population size in Ghana, necessitated the expanded search for White-necked Picathartes nesting colonies in other parts of the high forest zone.

Rational of the Exercise

Ghana Wildlife Society with support from the Leventis Foundation and ALA of Switzerland has began field search in some selected forest reserves in parts of the Central and Western Regions to identify nesting colonies of the globally threatened White-necked Picathartes. The field search team was led by Dr. Augustus Asamoah and comprised Kwame Boafo and Nicholas Gyan as field assistants. Two outings have been carried out in the exercise to expand the search of the species to other parts of country. The first outing was on the December 12, 2012 and the first target area was the Opong Mansi Forest Reserve. Using the scouting approach the field search team visited the following farming communities; Asaase, Atobiase, Famanye, Tegyemuase, Opong Valley, Obengkrom, Obesekrom, Yawkrom, Wasa Akuapem and Nsiakrom) in the vicinity of Opong Mansi, Bona Ben, Ben West and Nkotoben Forest reserves.

Methodology of Field Search

Scouting entailed informal interview with local farmers and hunters in fringe communities of target forest reserves using a colour picture of White-necked Picathartes to ask about their knowledge of the bird in the picture. Respondents were randomly selected but in most cases selections were informed by the perceived knowledge of the respondents particularly with respect to their knowledge of the forest in the neighboring areas of their community. Respondents who were adjudged to be consistent and credible in the account of their knowledge

of the bird were engaged to lead search team to the field to verify their claim. During the first outing to the field some of the claims by local people in some communities of their knowledge of the bird turned out to be wrong.

Starting with Atobiase located at the fringe of the mid western portion of the Opong Mansi Forest Reserve, the initial interactions with some inhabitants of this primarily farming community was quite successful. A number of young men in the community could recognize the bird and knew of a nest site. A subsequent visit to the nest site the following day confirmed the existence of the nest site on a huge rock out crop but it was found to have been abandoned. There were several nests on the rock outcrop but none of the nests was active and there was no sign of recent use of any of the nests. The sighting of the nest site was quite refreshing as it confirmed the prospects of the species occurring in the Opong Mansi Forest Reserves. Some other members of the Atobiase community reported the sighting of the species and their nest sites but could not readily tell the specific location of the reserve where the nest sites were sighted.

The scouting continued in Obengkrom, Yawkrom Nsiakrom, Obesekrom and Wassa Akuapem and several hamlets within and at the fringes of Bonsa Ben and the Ben West forest reserves. During interactions with local community members in these fringe communities it became obvious that the species was previous common in the Bonsa Ben and the Ben West Forest Reserves but factors such as hunting appeared to have contributed to the steep decline in the population of the species in the area. Interaction with local community members was also used to educate them on the global conservation status as well as the socio-economic significance of the bird to Ghana. It was almost always evident that people in this part of Ghana were completely unaware of any conservation significance of the species. Scouting at Obengkrom, Yawkrom and Wasa Akuapem was quite successful. At Obengkrom a public announcement was made on the village's communication centre (an announcement centre) and this facilitated the spread of the news on the bird pretty quickly throughout the surrounding villages and this led to several people with knowledge on the occurrence of the bird in the area.

Results

Using this approach, nesting sites of the bird was located in the Bonsa Ben and the Ben West Forest Reserves. The nest sites located comprised both active and inactive nest sites. Active nest sites with signs of recent breeding activities were located in both Bonsa Ben and Ben West Forest Reserve. The location of White-necked Picathartes nest sites active or inactive were reference with a GPS and then marked with a code using spray paint. Besides the status of the nest sites, the status of the vegetative cover in the immediate vicinity of the nest site was documented. Two active nesting site, each within the Ben West and the Bonsa Ben Forest reserve.

Table 1. Details of Nest sites that have been identified in the Ben West and the Bonsa Ben Forest Reserves

Site ID	Date Recorded	GPS Reference	Status
Ben West 02	12/14/2012 12:10	N5 32.995 W1 53.348	Active
Ben West 03	12/16/2012 9:54	N5 32.525 W1 54.009	Inactive
Bonsa Ben 03	4/11/2013 9:52	N5 38.530 W1 47.345	Inactive
Bonsa Ben 04	4/11/2013 10:03	N5 38.567 W1 47.297	Active
Bonsa Ben 4B	4/11/2013 10:12	N5 38.564 W1 47.281	Inactive
Bonsa Ben 05	4/11/2013 11:10	N5 37.298 W1 48.951	Active
Bonsa Ben 01	12/15/2012 8:24	N5 36.323 W1 48.877	Inactive
Bonsa Ben 02	12/17/2012 14:14	N5 36.468 W1 49.266	Active

At the nest site within the Ben West forest reserve there were signs of human disturbance near the nest site as well as the destruction of nests and eggs of the bird. The active nest site with over ten active nests located within the Bonsa Ben Forest reserve was fairly intact with almost no sign of human disturbances in the immediate vicinity. Two of the four abandoned nesting sites were located within the Ben West forest reserve, one was at the edge on the Oppong Mansi

Forest reserve close to a farm in Atobiase and the last one was within the Bonsa Ben Forest reserve.



Plate 1: Members of the Field search team at a nest site in the Ben West Forest Reserve

The second outing was carried out April 2013 as a follow up of some information on nests that were received from communities scouting had been carried out in December of the previous year. Following the first outing during which awareness was created on White-necked Picathartes using an educational poster of the bird and also engagement with fringe community members to educate them about the ecology of the species, the field team has been receiving information on the existence of the species from a number of fringe communities. The second outing was used to follow up on information received after the first outing and also to extend scouting to other fringe communities that could be reached during the first outing. A field visit with some community members from Yawkrom located two additional active nest sites in the Bonsa Ben Forest Reserve. This brings the number of active nest sites in this reserve to three. There were also fresh report on the existence of nest sites in other parts of the Ben West Forest Reserve but these could not be located.



Plate 2 Members of field search team at an active nest site in the Bonsa Ben Forest Reserve

The field team has also received information from Agyenpoma, one of the fringe communities of Bonsa Ben Forest Reserve where scouting was carried out during the second field visit. The next field outing would verify this information and others that are pending. With the commencement of the expanded search for the White-necked Picathartes in parts of the Central and Western regions, it has become obvious that there exists a population of the species in some forest reserves in parts of the Central and Western Region and that more effort would be required to locate. The effort to locate new nest sites of the species is often frustrated by unwillingness of local people to lead search to the field for various reasons. There appears to some level of mistrust of local people for people from outside their communities, especially those cities with the suspicion of being used for ritual.



Plate 3: A degraded and inactive nest site in the Bonsa Ben Forest Reserve

Recommendation

One of the outstanding outcome of the first second outing is the level of hunting pressure in the Bonsa Ben and the Ben West Forest Reserve. Surrounded by many settlements and also with several admitted farms, there appears to high hunting pressure in the forest reserves and the reserves appear quite bereft of large mammal fauna. Also absent from the forest reserves are the large hornbills and the great blue turaco which according to the local people used to be common and widespread in the area but are not seen or heard anymore. There were ample signs that the White-necked Picathartes is hunted for food among the inhabitants of the fringe communities. Several people who reported seeing the bird before also confirmed killing the bird for food on several occasion. As shown in Plate 3, some of the nest sites are also used as camps for local hunters. Some compartments of the Bonsa Ben Forest were being logged at the time of the first and second outing, whilst several other compartments had been logged. Habitat disturbances associated with logging has been identified as one of the factors that adversely affect the species in Ghana as well as in the West African Sub-region.

During the second outing, the field search had the opportunity to meet with officials of the logging company that hold the Timber Utilization Contract in the Bonsa Ben Forest Reserve. The officials made clear their willingness to protect the species from disturbances associated with their logging operations, by excluding logging from the immediate vicinity of all nest sites

that would be located within the reserve. It also became clear that more education is needed in the fringe communities as well as the timber contractors operating within them about the protection and conservation of the White-necked Picathartes. The establishment of local site support groups would go a long way to conserve and protect the White-necked Picathartes. It is obvious that with more efforts more nest sites may be located within the Bonsa and the Ben Block of forest reserves.