

Is Dja River Warbler *Bradypterus grandis* really globally threatened?

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La Bouscarle géante *Bradypterus grandis*, classée comme vulnérable par l'UICN et connue auparavant de sept sites seulement a été découverte dans un nouveau site au centre du Gabon. Compte tenu de ce que l'on sait de ses exigences en matière d'habitat, il est probable que cette espèce discrète soit plus répandue que ce qui était supposé jusqu'ici. Son classement comme espèce menacée serait plus dû à un défaut de prospection qu'à une véritable rareté.

The Dja River Warbler *Bradypterus grandis* was discovered at Biteye on the Dja River, Cameroon, in 1914⁷, but nothing further was known until 1951, when it was captured in southern Gabon, in two areas 40 km apart (M'Bigou and Mimongo) in the Monts du Chaillu, in dense vegetation within abandoned plantations⁸. Again, it took approximately 40 years before the species was rediscovered: in 1994, P Christy found a small population in a Cyperaceae marsh at forest-edge in Lopé Reserve, Gabon². The song was tape-recorded and described, and appeared quite distinctive³, permitting others to search for *B. grandis* in suitable habitats in Central Africa, and the discovery of three further localities, in Cameroon (Nki Faunal Reserve and Lobéké⁴) and southern Central African Republic (Bai Hokou, Dzanga-Ndoki National Park; P Christy pers comm). Typical habitat for the species appears to be open *Rhynchospora corymbosa* swamps surrounded by forest, known locally as *bais*.

B. grandis is classified as Vulnerable by IUCN⁵, because it is known only from a very few small, scattered localities, and its total population is considered to be below 1,000 mature individuals¹. This is a conservative estimate inferred from the few available data: the Lobéké (Cameroon) population is presumed to be over 100 pairs⁴, the Lopé population has 1–2 pairs and the Bai Hokou population a few pairs (P Christy pers comm).

On 26–30 May 2001, I was at Langoué (00°11'S 12°33'E), an area of dense mature forest with a large *bai* (1,500 m long and covering c20 ha) in central Gabon. During the five days, Dja River Warbler was heard singing almost continuously, with up to four individuals audible simultaneously, making Langoué Bai the fifth known modern-day site for Dja River Warbler.

This very elusive species will only be readily detected by observers familiar with its vocalizations or by mist-netting in suitable habitat, and can very easily be overlooked without knowledge of its song. Favouring areas close to ground level within dense marsh vegetation and very rarely taking flight, the species is seldom seen, and usually only for a few seconds. There are hundreds of *bais* in the forests of south-east Cameroon⁴, eastern Gabon (L. J. T. White pers

comm), northern Congo^{8,11} and the southern Central African Republic⁶, but they are often situated deep within forest and accessible only on foot and/or by dugout canoe, sometimes requiring several days' journey, making the likelihood of most ornithologists encountering Dja River Warbler small, and accounting, at least in part, for its scattered known distribution.

There appears to be no reason why Dja River Warbler does not occur in any *bai* in the region with dense (slightly saline) *Rhynchospora* swamp, as well as in marshes within more open habitat, such as in Lopé Reserve, and perhaps even in drier habitats such as abandoned plantations with dense undergrowth⁹. The species persists even in small marshes, the Lopé population having been recorded in a 10 x 50 m marsh annually since its discovery in 1994 (pers obs, P Christy pers comm). In Langoué, three spots chosen irrespective of the probability of finding Dja River Warbler

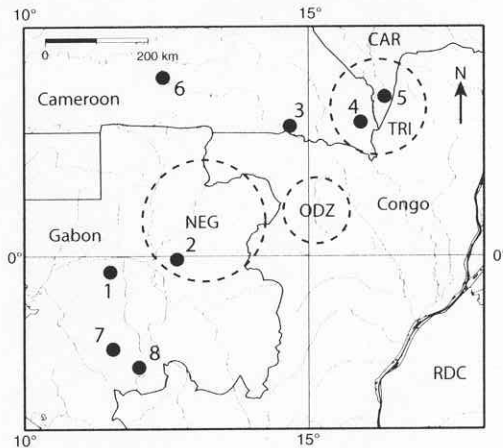


Figure 1. Sites for Dja River Warbler *Bradypterus grandis*. 1: Lopé; 2: Langoué; 3: Nki; 4: Lobéké; 5: Bai Hokou; 6: Dja; 7: Mimongo; and 8: M'Bigou. There is no recent confirmation of the species' presence at Dja, Mimongo and M'Bigou. Dotted circles indicate areas where *bais* are known to be numerous, but does not imply a lack of *bais* outside these areas. NEG = north-east Gabon; ODZ = Odzala area; and TRI = tri-national area.



Figures 1–2. Dja River Warbler *Bradypterus grandis*, Nki Faunal Reserve, southeast Cameroon, January 1998 (Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire)

(two being observation platforms for elephants and one an elephant track leading to the *bai*) produced four, two and two singing birds, all of which were probably different individuals, as the three localities are well separated. Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett⁴ mention 'at least six singing birds holding territory in *Rhynchospora* marsh, in c6 ha' and 'a pair holding a territory in a 1-ha patch of *Rhynchospora corymbosa*' for Nki. From these figures, Langoué *bai* could harbour 20 pairs within its c20 ha. As there are many *bais* in the region, it is probable that the total population exceeds 1,000 mature individuals.

This habitat is not threatened in the near future: logging in Gabon is selective, with only 1–2 trees/ha being removed in logged areas¹⁰, and is usually not accompanied by swamp drainage. There are significant areas of forest with *bais* that have not been subject to logging, partially because they are too remote, such as the Langoué area, or because they are incorporated within protected areas.

For these reasons and provided that further field work in suitable habitat confirms that Dja River Warbler is reasonably common in *bais* in the area, the species is unlikely to meet any of the criteria for listing as Vulnerable⁵, permitting its transferral to Lower Risk (Near Threatened), its population being probably not more than a few thousand mature individuals.

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