

Have any other Woodland Kingfishers been seen with this aberration? Can anyone offer suggestions as to why the lower mandibles were partly red; were the birds hybrids and, if so, with what?

Mrs D.B. Hanmer, Sucoma, P/Bag 50, BLANTYRE, Malaŵi

COMMENT ON "ABERRANT WOODLAND KINGFISHERS"

C.H. Fry

I have handled substantial numbers of skins of Woodland Kingfishers *Halcyon senegalensis* from all parts of Africa without ever having noticed red on the lower mandible (although such a feature would show much less well in the skins than in life). In Nigeria I handled about the same number of netted live birds as Dale Hanmer caught in Malaŵi, and certainly never recorded any with red lower mandibles; nor have I ever seen any in the field, where I imagine the character would show clearly.

Evidently it is a rare condition but Dale, having caught four birds with it out of c. 30 handled, suggests either that the condition has been widely overlooked or (more likely, I think) that her population is genetically unstable in respect of mandible colour.

It is tempting to speculate that the large immature birds might be a first or later generation hybrid between *H. senegalensis* and another species, and the obvious candidate would be the Mangrove Kingfisher *Halcyon senegaloides* (in which the lower mandible is red, and which is larger). But to the best of my knowledge, no population of *H. senegaloides* occurs nearer to Nchalo than about 350 km so introgression of *senegaloides* genes into Malaŵian *senegalensis* populations is most improbable.

Can birdwatchers between Malaŵi and the coast keep a sharp lookout in future? Results might be interesting!

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*A copy of Dr. Fry's comment was sent to Dale Hanmer, who replies as follows:*

I had actually considered the Mangrove Kingfisher as a possible part of the cross, if cross there be. I know Benson & Benson (1977, Birds of Malaŵi) make no mention of the species, but Snow (1978, Atlas of speciation in nonpasserines) indicates that the species occurs as near as about the junction of the Shire and Zambezi Rivers - a mere 160 km away. Considering that in the 1978 edition of Roberts Birds of South Africa McLachlan & Liversidge state that the Mangrove Kingfisher comes inland to breed at up to the 300 m contour, I see no real reason to say that they don't come up the Shire valley even if I have not either seen or caught any. After all, the 300 m contour includes the entire Shire valley south of the falls (rapids) at Kapachira (Livingstone Falls), as well as vast areas of still wooded country on the foothills of the escarpments to both sides. I should not like to suggest that the Mangrove Kingfisher is common or even of regular occurrence, particularly in the northern part of the lower valley, but as I am not trapping in the reserves (Mwabvi and Lengwe, the former being more likely), I would not know if that kingfisher occurred occasionally. Certainly those reserves, with their wooded streams, would be suitable for breeding. Majete, north of Chikwawa, is also a possible locality but if Mangrove Kingfishers came through Nchalo to get there, I would expect to have caught some. Morumbala Hill (in Mozambique, flanking the Shire River) and Malaŵi Hill are likely areas for the Mangrove Kingfisher to breed.

Hence the Mangrove Kingfisher could occur close to the breeding range of the Woodland Kingfisher in limited numbers, a situation which would make interspecific crosses between these related species possible and likely.

*(Hybridization between closely related species is facilitated in zones of contact if one species is common and the other relatively rare. Ed.)*

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