

BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz

The sight of any free animal going about its business undisturbed, seeking its food, or looking after its young, or mixing in the company of its kind, all the time being exactly what it ought to be, and can be---what a strange pleasure it gives us.

Schopenhauer

Chance favors the prepared mind.

Pasteur

For three months in 1990, a group from Cambridge University traveled to a lightly explored area of southwestern Ethiopia known as the Nechisar. It was a trip to see what was there, and not only to collect specimens, but to explore and discover what needed to be protected and preserved. The scientists found 38 large mammal species, a rare population of Swayne's Hartebeest, 23 small mammal species including a rodent and a bat new to Ethiopia, 315 species of birds, 69 butterfly species, 20 dragonfly and damselfly species, 17 reptile species, 3 frog species, and numerous plants. Quite a haul.

What was to become the object of international attention and debate was a bird's wing found in an area of Nechisar National Park known as The Plains. The bird's body had disintegrated, but the wing with a few tail feathers remained in good shape. The origin of the wing stumped the expedition members. All agreed it was from a Nightjar.



After return of the expedition to England, the wing found a home at the British Natural History Museum at Tring. The wing was evaluated by experts in African birds and the world's nightjars. The wing's measurements were compared with as many museum specimens as could be located. The final question was--- could a new species be named based on a single wing? The unanimous answer was---yes. The species was named, and the scientific paper was published in the *Ibis* in 1995.

Taxonomy

Order----Caprimulgiformes

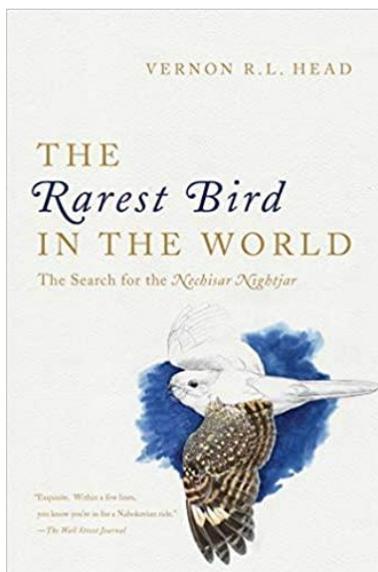
Family----Caprimulgidae----Nightjars

Genus----Caprimulgus

Species----solala----only wing

Common Name----Nechisar Nightjar

But the bird had not been seen---that is until Ian Sinclair a well-known South African birdwatcher was in the British Museum researching for a book on Sub-Saharan birds where he saw the wing in a specimen drawer. He recruited three friends, Vernon Head from South Africa, Gerry Nichols from New York, and Dennis Weir from Belfast, to form the Sinclair Expedition of 2009 to find the rarest bird in the world.



Vernon Head later wrote a book on the experience in which he recounts much more than the chase for a rare bird. He reflects on the relationship between birdwatchers and their ability to observe the natural world, and the importance of preserving the wild places of the planet. Also discussed in the book are examples of current bird species which live only in captivity or whose numbers have decreased to the point where there is no hope of ever having a viable wild population and obtain the title of the world's rarest bird.

So, did they find the Nightjar? They failed to get a photograph, but good looks of the bird were seen in the spotlight which had mesmerized the bird. As it finally lifted out of the light's range the distinctive wing pattern was observed by the four birdwatchers. The Nechisar Nightjar became less rare that night--a living bird was seen.

Vernon R. L. Head, **The Rarest Bird in the World: The Search for the Nechisar Nightjar.** Pegasus Books. (2015).

Some thoughts on birdwatching from Vernon Head:

“Birdwatching is always about the land; it is a holistic endeavor. Finding a bird involves learning everything about its constantly changing world. The invigorating gathering of facts and clues about a bird and its place in the natural system of things help to describe it before one finally sees it.”

“Birdwatching is by no means a sport—it is about a new way of seeing, it is thoughtful and philosophical--but it requires practice all the same.”

Questions and/or Comments email me eapyeritz@gmail.com.