

NORTH AFRICA AND MIDDLE EAST

New species of owl recorded in Oman

Ornithologists working in Oman have discovered a new species of owl, which they have named *Strix omanensis*, in the Jebel al Akhdar, in the north of the country. Wildlife sound-recordist Magnus Robb heard the bird's call whilst trying to record the call of another type of owl. After repeated trips he and a colleague captured photographs of the bird. The new species appears to be most closely related to Hume's owl *Strix butleri*, which occurs elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula but not in Oman. Only seven individuals of the new species have been found, in a single wadi in the northern mountains. The new species has been described on the basis of sonograms and photographs. The team plans to gather DNA evidence from the owl's feathers to confirm the find genetically.

Source: *Dutch Birding* (2013), 35, 275-10, and *BBC News* (2013) www.bbc.co.uk/news/24374313

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Vocal profiles for the Galagos: a tool for identification

The galagos (Family Galagidae) of Africa are nocturnal, small and often difficult to observe, and most species are phenotypically cryptic. As such, galagos are frequently difficult to identify with confidence, particularly in the field. Being nocturnal, conspecifics mainly identify each other using auditory and olfactory cues. All galagos produce species-specific 'loud calls' or 'advertisement calls' that have several functions, one of which is long-distance species identification. The Nocturnal Primate Research Group at Oxford Brookes University maintains a collection of calls of African wildlife, which includes >300 hours of recordings. From this extensive collection, obtained by the Group's members from numerous field sites over the past 40 years, 27 vocal profiles for 24 taxa of galagos have been compiled. These recordings are now freely available at www.wildsolutions.nl/vocalprofile.htm. Each species presented on the website is illustrated and an Audio-Map depicts the site at which each recording was made.

Source: www.wildsolutions.nl/vocalprofile.htm (2013)

Gardiner's frog listens with mouth

Researchers have discovered how one of the world's smallest frogs is able to hear with its

mouth. Gardiner's frogs, which live in the forests of the Seychelles, have no middle ear region and were assumed to be deaf. But a study utilizing highly sensitive X-ray imaging techniques has revealed that the tiny frog uses its mouth cavity to convey sound-wave signals to its brain. The discovery solves the mystery of why the frog produces loud, high-pitched squeaks. Researchers made recordings of its calls and played them back to wild frogs to observe their behaviour. The frogs were able to hear the sounds and either changed position or made a call in response to the recordings. It is hoped the discovery of the species' novel hearing mechanism may be applied to assist with certain types of human deafness.

Source: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2013) dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1302218110, and *BBC News* (2013) www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-23897430

Rhinos follow path of destruction

As one of Africa's largest land animals, elephants leave a trail of destruction when foraging in the bush. However, research has shown that rhinos can more than double their food intake by following in the paths of their destructive neighbours. A study focused on black rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis* in the Addo Elephant National Park in South Africa revealed that the felling of trees and similar acts of destruction by elephants allow rhinos to access otherwise impenetrable thicket and increase potential food intake by 223%. However, although rhinos may benefit from using elephant pathways in the short term, overuse and increased competition will eventually reduce food availability, forcing rhinos to forage in grasslands rather than tree thickets.

Source: *Biotropica* (2013) dx.doi.org/10.1111/btp.12066

Death by cyanide

Nine poachers have been arrested following the deaths of more than 80 elephants in Hwange National Park. The death toll includes more than 40 elephants discovered following a poisoning incident in Zimbabwe's largest game park. The elephants were killed for their ivory by the poachers, who used cyanide to poison a water hole in the Park. The arrests were made after rangers tracked the poachers to a cache of hidden ivory. It is believed that the poison was also responsible for the deaths of several other animals in the Park and the predators that feed on them.

Source: *BBC News* (2013) www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-24234927

Power line to be replaced

A Migratory Soaring Birds (migratorysoaringbirds.undp.birdlife.org) workshop prompted the Sudanese government to replace one of the most deadly power lines in Africa. Constructed in the 1950s the 31-km long Port Sudan power line is estimated to have claimed the lives of hundreds if not thousands of large migratory birds. A recent survey found, in 1 month alone, the carcasses of 17 Egyptian vultures along the power line. As all the birds were found under power poles, 15 under metal poles and two under concrete poles, electrocution is the most likely cause of death. The new power line will run parallel to the existing line and the 510 new poles will be insulated with XLPE-insulated aluminium conductors. The work is expected to take 2 months, after which the old power line will be removed.

Source: *BirdLife International* (2013) www.birdlife.org/community/2013/09/sudan-government-acts-on-killer-power-line/

Scientists point to elephant intelligence...

People have long been aware of the intelligence of elephants and the complexity of their social systems, and this awareness is now supported by a growing body of scientific evidence. Research in Kenya revealed that elephants can distinguish between different languages, interpreting English as safe, because it is spoken by tourists, and Swahili as generally safe. It was observed that elephants became anxious on hearing Maa, the language spoken by Maasai warriors, who occasionally kill elephants. An animal psychologist at Sussex University, in the UK, found that elephants can recognize more than 100 individual voices, and researchers in Japan have found that elephants can count. Scientists have now discovered that elephants also have an innate understanding of pointing, without needing to learn the gesture from humans, and they may use their trunks to communicate in a similar manner.

Source: *Current Biology* (2013) 23, 2033–2037, (dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2013.08.037), and *The Guardian* (2013) www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/elephants-intelligence-pointing-hunted

...adopt smart technology to help protect elephants in Kenya...

According to the UN Kenya is facing its most serious threat from poaching in almost 25 years, with growing demand for illicit ivory in Asia. In response, conservationists in the Maasai Mara National