

Will habitat management along forest edges save the Long-billed Tailorbird in East Usambara Mountains?

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The Long-billed Tailorbird *Artisornis moreaui* is critically endangered, occurring disjunctly in the East Usambara Mountains (Tanzania), and in the Sera Jeci (Mozambique). It inhabits areas in or near forest that maintain dense tangles of vines and climbers, or dense shrubbery, such as canopy gaps, the forest edge, and abandoned cultivations with shrubs. Our WCST studies have shown that of 67 distribution records, 12 were obtained outside of the forest, within 10 to 80 meters of the forest edge, in adjacent subsistence farms. Inside the forest, the species was found up to 1317 m from the edge. These results suggest that the tailorbird requires the presence of natural forest within short distances of its territories, and that any location more than 100m far from forest will likely not be occupied.

While territories inside the protected forest of Amani and Nilo Nature Reserves are considerably safe, the future of those outside the forest is uncertain owing to habitat degradation and changing landuse patterns. Unfortunately, nobody knows what becomes of individual tailorbirds that lose their homes when prime habitat in adjacent farmlands is altered by fire, clearing and livestock grazing.

An experiment to determine if allowing regrowth of shrubs, climbers and vines along forest edges will elicit recolonisation by the tailorbird has been designed. Through the collaboration of local subsistence farmers, 12 private farms have been selected along forest edges in sites where the tailorbird is currently not found, but is known to occur within a radius of <500m. These plots have similar habitat and are divided into 6 pairs, each one being about 0.20 ha. Within each pair of plots, one continues to be cultivated (i.e. the control), and the other permits the regrowth of shrubs, trees and vines. Agreements have been stipulated with owners to ensure vegetation is not removed nor disturbed from the latter plots during the experiment.

Habitat management data, including vegetation parameters and bird use of plots, is recorded every two months to follow regrowth of bushy vegetation (plants <5m tall) and the colonisation of these plots by birds. These data are primary determinant of the recolonisation success of the Long-billed tailorbird and other forest birds in the study sites. Will this experiment produce findings that will help us understand how to better conserve this critically endangered species in rapidly modified habitats? Let us wait and see.