

## From the Field ■ SOUTHERN CAMEROON



# Rock On

ROCK ISLANDS PROVIDE RARE HABITAT FOR A RARE AFRICAN BIRD **BY AARON FRENCH**

AS I HIKE THROUGH THE TALL GRASS, every step crunches and swishes. At four degrees north of the equator, here in southern Cameroon, on the edge of the Congo basin, the sun shines bare and hot. Tiny black sweat bees swarm into my eyes and ears, not stinging me, but licking salty moisture as I trudge up a rocky hill. Annoyed, I stop paying attention to my surroundings. Soon, a loud snort at the top of the rise jolts me out of my daze.

Climbing slowly, I see a forest buffalo lowering its head and pawing the ground. He looks me straight in the eye. Behind him stand two cows and a calf. I've been told that forest buffalo have poor eyesight. I hope so.

I pause to drink some water and survey the view. Several acres of grassland cover a gently rising hillside, and beyond that an endless sea of tropical forest recedes in the haze. I am on a grass island called a *rocher*, "rock" in French. These islands are formed by the unique geology of southern Cameroon. Exposed layers of schist, sometimes protruding hundreds of meters above the rain-forest floor, have little soil attached to them. Grass and other plants can grow, but few trees. There are only a handful of rochers in Cameroonian forests, and they provide unique habitats for rain-forest and traditionally savanna animals.

The small herd of buffalo is still looking my way. Oxpeck-

ers cling to their backs, probing with red and yellow bills for a morning meal in the animals' thick coats. I need to move on, so I yell and bang my machete against a rock. Startled, the buffalo turn and run into the forest. I am relieved. My Baka pygmy field assistants have told me their number one fear is falling trees, which could crush them in their sleep. Number two is lowland gorillas. Gorillas are still hunted for their meat, which makes them wary and aggressive toward humans. Number three is forest buffalo.

Soon I reach the rocher's bare crown—sun-baked, slate-gray schist hot to the touch. It won't be long before the wet season begins. Then this part of the trail will be treacherous as the schist becomes slick—almost greasy—from the rain. But now in February, at the end of the dry season, I can walk here with ease.

A kaleidoscope of butterflies clusters on the edge of a tuft of grass, sipping morning dew that has dripped into a slight depression. As I walk closer, a bird cries and takes off from a

**Above: *Picathartes oreas*, the bare-headed rock fowl, is one of the most difficult birds to observe in the wild. Opposite: In southern Cameroon, the author uses a mirror to look into the mud cup nest of a picathartes. Two eggs are visible in the mirror.**

nearby rock. The freckled nightjar circles and swoops above me, like a killdeer trying to distract a predator away from its nest. Although the freckled nightjar ranges widely in Africa, it is very rare in the forest because it prefers to nest on outcrops.

I shift my attention to the ground, mindful that a nest might be underfoot. The use of the word “nest” is generous. The single nightjar egg I finally detect is on bare rock, well camouflaged by its dark speckles. (When I return a few weeks later, I find the watchful mother with a new chick nestled alongside her.)

Now, I hurry along, because the reason for my hike is to look for the rare *Picathartes oreas*. I have been in the forest for several months and have yet to see this member of the Old World flycatcher family, which lives in fragmented populations in the Central African equatorial rain forest. However, I've discovered that picathartes are nesting on the far side of this rocher.

*Picathartes oreas*, the bare-headed rock fowl, is on the short list of the world's strangest birds. The size of a small raven, with a crow-like bill, it hops on long legs in search of lizards, insects, frogs, and columns of ants to eat. Its head is bare, with bright red and blue patches of skin. Farther west in Africa, picathartes have yellow and black heads.

This colorful bird builds a mud nest—often in colonies with others of its kind—on cliffs or in caves with overhanging rocks that provide shelter from the rain. Two eggs are laid per clutch. Picathartes is a shy bird. During nearly two years of working in southern Cameroon—an area with one of the highest known concentrations of picathartes in the world—I have seen them only a few times.

My project focuses on the importance of seed dispersal for rain-forest health. I am studying the behaviors of the seven large species of hornbills and nine species of apes and monkeys that live in the Dja Reserve. Collecting data on the breeding and feeding habits of other rare species is a secondary objective. Hence my fascination with picathartes.

On the far side of the rocher, the narrow, steep trail descends through tangled vines. I half-climb, half-slide down onto the forest floor. I have been here a few times already and know the way to the nests. In this area, the rock slopes up and outward, creating a natural shelter for the several dozen mud cups scattered along the wall.

The overhang continues for several hundred feet, and the birds have taken advantage of the entire length. They have selected more than 50 nest sites over the years, some just

smears of mud, some filled with fresh grass and eggs, some abandoned, the grass lining falling out through holes in the bottom. All the nests are within four meters of the ground, but for many, I need a mirror pole to look into them. Nesting takes place between August and October. During the peak of activity in September, as many as 19 nests have been in use at one time.

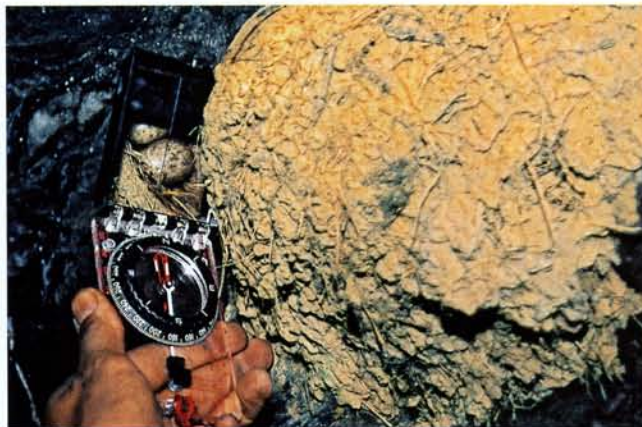
The previous week, I cataloged the status of all the nests. Four had eggs, and two had nestlings, which I measured and banded for identification purposes. This morning I set up a bird blind a respectful distance away. I crawl inside and wait, hoping that an adult will return to attend its nest.

Several hours pass before I detect a slight movement. Sure enough, an adult with the smoothest, glossiest of feathers is approaching cautiously. Hopping along, it stops several times to look in my direction, and continues toward the nest, 20 feet from my blind. Then, without opening its wings, it hops into a sapling, and on to another. Now at eye level, it turns to stare at me before swooping to the ground and hopping out of sight. These are stealthy birds.

Five minutes go by. Suddenly, another adult appears along the nesting wall. This one hops onto a branch, then almost disappears into a cup nest that has two eggs in it. It preens as it settles down to incubate, hidden except for the top of its head and tip of its bill. In this position, the bird's bright head coloring provides a surprising degree of camouflage against the slate-gray rock.

I keep my eyes fixed on this mud cup for a half hour, but then my mind wanders. When I look back, the picathartes is gone. I worry that I may be disturbing these shy creatures, so I quietly pack my bag and slip away. Scaling the steep rock face, I take in the magnificent view from atop the rocher that shelters these wonderful birds.

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