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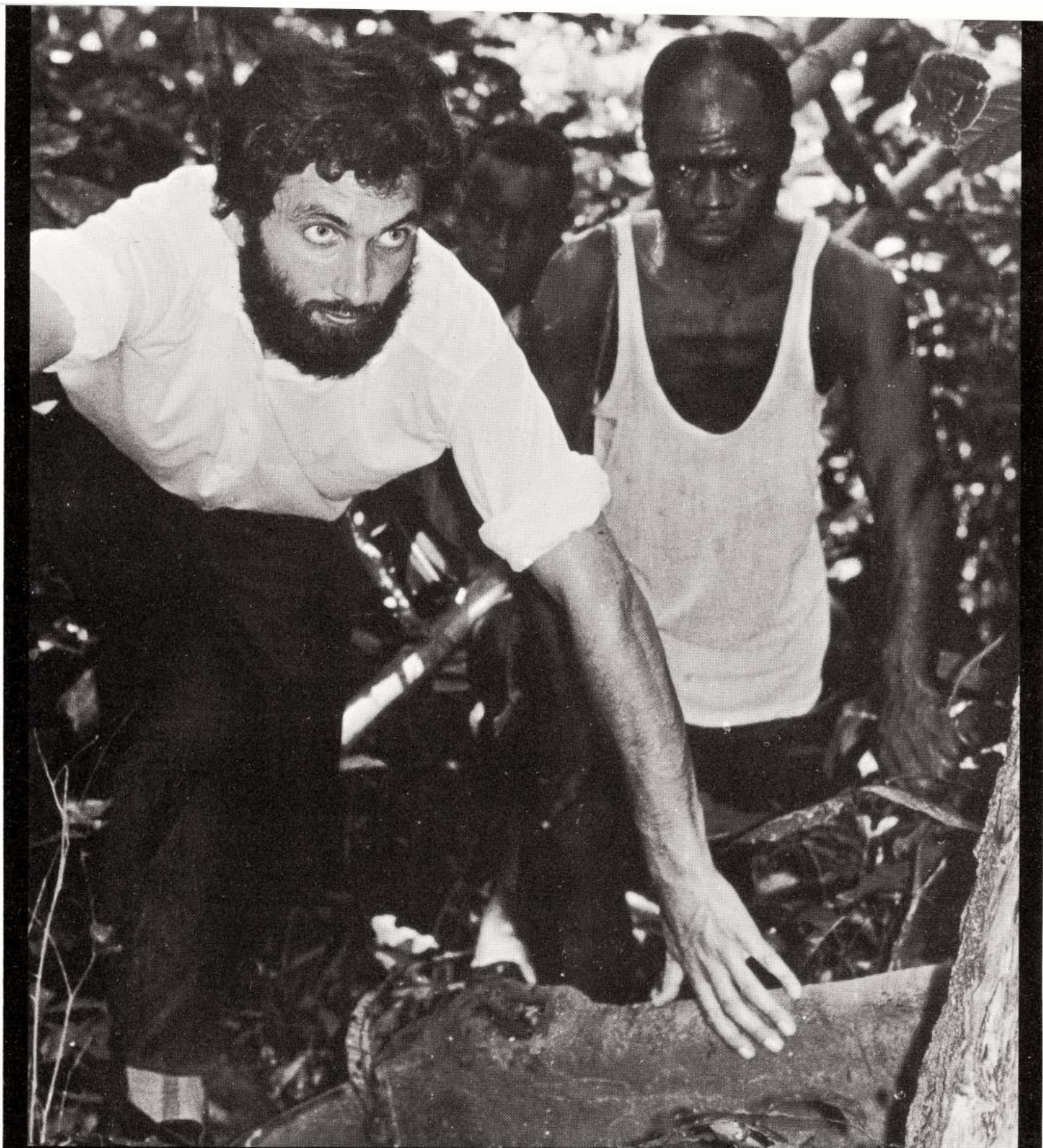
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# Animals

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## To the Forests of Cameroon

Only one specimen of *Picathartes oreas* has ever been seen alive outside Africa, and only a handful of Europeans have ever seen it in the wild. It is certainly one of the world's least-known birds.

ROBERT R. GOLDING set out last year to look for it . . .



ON 2 April 1966 a companion, Martin Henley, and I set off by road from Ibadan, Nigeria, where I am curator of the zoo attached to the Department of Zoology at the University of Ibadan. Our ultimate destination was west Cameroon, and the trip was being undertaken for Antwerp Zoo. Walter Van den bergh, its Director, had asked me to try to find out the rarity of that extremely interesting and little-known bird *Picathartes oreas*, and to investigate the possibility of capturing live specimens for the Antwerp Zoo. The Cameroon forestry authorities (who, incidentally, value their forests and wildlife very highly) had been most helpful and let me have a permit to search for picathartes. The time at my disposal was very limited however, and although I hoped to discover nest sites I realised that I would be fortunate indeed to capture living specimens.

I have been fascinated by picathartes for many years. There are two species – the western *gymnocephalus*, known best from specimens collected in Sierra Leone, and the more southern *oreas*. The latter species is, for me, by far the more interesting, as only a handful of Europeans (myself included) have seen it in the wild, and only one specimen has ever been brought alive out of Africa – by Cecil Webb in 1948. Mr Webb gave an account of this specimen in *ANIMALS* Vol. 2 No. 22.

*Picathartes oreas* is a medium-sized bird, somewhat smaller than a European jackdaw, with a long tail and long, powerful legs. The upper parts of the body are grey, the under parts white; the neck is long, and perhaps the most striking characteristic is the bald head – the skin on the front of the head being dark blue, and that on the hinder part a bright pinkish-red.

*Gymnocephalus* is similar in appearance to *oreas*, but has a yellow head. I have seen specimens in the large bird-hall at Frankfurt Zoo, in Germany. The demeanour of these birds is alert and active, and gives an impression of intelligence. Like the specimen of *oreas* that I observed in west Cameroon in 1957, the birds at Frankfurt tend to keep close to the ground, and move in long leaps.

Both species live in very dense rain-forest, and because they build nests of mud on boulders or rockfaces it seems that they are confined to areas where steep hills or ravines provide such dry nesting sites deep within the forest. I had seen a specimen of *Picathartes oreas* some years earlier in the thick, humid forests of west Cameroon, and I know that area quite well, and so as we set off that morning I had great hopes of learning more about the bird.

During the late afternoon of the second day we crossed the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Throughout our journey across Nigeria it was noticeable that very little mature forest was left, except for an occasional reserve and a small area near the border, but once in Cameroon the red,



*One of two Picathartes nests discovered by the author; it is filled with plant fibres. Both nests were empty. Picture opposite shows the author accompanied by hunters looking for nests in deep forest*

rocky track ran among colossal buttressed trunks, grey and smooth and topped by a thick and virtually continuous covering of shimmering green leaves.

As darkness closed in a storm blew up almost without our noticing it, as is the way with storms in West Africa, and within seconds of the first gusts of wind and the first drops of rain I found myself battling through one of the worst drives I have ever experienced. The road was hardly discernible and much of it was covered with several inches of swirling water. We were alternately blinded and deafened by flashes of lightning and claps of thunder that seemed to shake the massive trees around us to their very roots, deep in the trembling, sodden earth beneath.

We eventually reached Mamfe, which I had decided to make my base. I first wished to visit a village that I knew from previous visits to the area, and near which I had seen my picathartes in 1957.

The next morning I arranged for a guide, to act as interpreter and to carry the few items we wished to take with us, mainly a little food and a gallon of drinking water. We first had to negotiate the Cross River, which receives a tributary near Mamfe and

widens into a broad, almost saucer-shaped depression, in the dry season flanked by sparkling yellow sandbanks. We wanted to cross the river without delay and so we hired one of the dugout canoes that ply the river. This had to be emptied of water with the use of half a gourd (or calabash), after which we climbed in and were taken to the opposite bank by the owner, who stood at the stern and made a series of crunching stabs into the river-bed with a long, slender pole.

The walk from the opposite bank to the village was, as I knew from past experience, an arduous one. It was roughly 5 miles, and although this may not sound very far, the track wound through very difficult, thickly forested terrain, beset with numerous steep slopes on which we slipped and slithered and sweated, the myriad rotting leaves beneath our feet frequently sending us sprawling to the ground. We passed several little groups of huts around which chickens scratched and children scampered.

A sudden flash of red among the foliage caught my attention, and I looked up just in time to see a pair of turacos disappear behind a curtain of creepers. The forest-guards accompanying us were very im-



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pressed by these birds and thought them very beautiful. A small girl suddenly darted after us from one small hamlet and presented each of us with a stick of sugar cane, from which we cut away the hard green outer stem to reveal the white inner portion. We bit out huge dripping sections of it as we walked, delighting in the sweet frothy fluid which ran all over our faces.

After about two hours we reached the village of Okwa, near which I had seen picathartes before, and as we walked down the main track through the village, many of the villagers whom I knew appeared from their huts, and after gasps of recognition shook our hands delightedly. At last we settled in the hut of Nderi, one of the oldest and most respected hunters, and I explained that I had come for *Senen-Ntie*. This is the local name for picathartes – *senen* meaning bird and *ntie* meaning stone. 'Bird of the stone' – a most appropriate description.

As we could spend only a few days in the area I was keen to start work immediately, so at about 2 pm that first day Martin and I, led by Nderi and accompanied by two other hunters, set off into the forest.

The terrain around Mamfe, and I think probably over a large part of the forest area of west Cameroon, has numerous hills and ridges, most of them covered by a continuation of the green canopy that clothes the flatter surrounding land. Behind Okwa there is just such a ridge, and Nderi led us towards it. Soon we were clambering up the steep hillside, grabbing with our hands at every available branch and rock, and after climbing for about 40 minutes Nderi suddenly motioned to us to be quiet and pointed above our heads to a huge rock-face.

As we carefully climbed up to have a better look I examined the rock-face in some detail. It was virtually on the top of the ridge we had just climbed, and was about 20 feet high and 35 feet long. Along most of its length a very prominent overhang sheltered the rock surface and this, plus the fact that there was little ground above to drain on to it, resulted in the rock surface being completely dry, even though the rains had started. Above the overhang was a fringe of small trees and grasses and the whole scene was shadowed by the tall forest trees, some of which grew quite close to the rock face and met above our heads. The only sound was the subdued *chirring* of a cicada. As I stood by that cliff in the depths of the forest I felt very excited: this seemed an ideal picathartes nest site.

As I recovered my breath and began to examine the rock in more detail Nderi silently pointed to a spot about 12 feet above the ground and a little to my left. I froze as I quite suddenly realised that I was looking at a picathartes nest.

It was composed of brown mud, was about 10 inches across, and had been built

directly on the rock face. A small portion of the mud had crumbled away to reveal a few fibres, which no doubt helped to keep the structure together. I could not see into the nest, as it was too far above me, but Nderi suddenly called from the other end of the rock wall. I went over to find him looking at a second nest, a little lower than the first, and of quite a different shape, being narrower across but deeper, on the outside at least.

Nderi disappeared into the forest and came back staggering under the weight of a small tree that he had trimmed of leaves and branches. We leaned this against the rock, and with some assistance from the hunters I managed to climb up it so that I could just see into the second nest. The cup was lined with plant fibres and was empty. On inspection the first nest also proved to be empty.

I questioned Nderi very closely. I should stress that I am now quite expert at this, and believe that I obtained an accurate picture from him. I know Nderi well and respect him for his ability as a hunter and for the confirmed accuracy of his observations. Nderi said that picathartes breed in the rainy season, and said that he had found a nest with young in August, but at a different site. From him I gained the impression that picathartes is not rare in the area, but because it lives in such thick, remote, and undisturbed forest it is not often seen. It also appears to be local, at least during the breeding season, as it is confined to such rock-faces as we had just seen, for the purpose of nest-building. Nderi told me that there were numerous such cliffs in the forests, and although I could not personally inspect a very large area, I believe that this is quite probably true, judging from the number of low hills that I had seen.

One point that puzzled me was how a bird the size of picathartes could have found a foothold to support it while actually building the nest, or at least when starting it, as the rock surfaces surrounding each nest seemed too smooth to provide a really good foot-hold.

We discussed the possibility of using my mist nets to capture specimens, but Nderi and the other hunters insisted that their own methods would yield quick results. In view of this, and as I wished to spend more time exploring other areas and did not think the hunters sufficiently experienced to use the nets on their own, we agreed that they should go ahead and try to capture some picathartes with the local 'rubber'. This is made by boiling the sap of a certain tree with palm oil, the resulting substance being black and very sticky. The hunters smeared quantities of it on appropriate branches in the neighbourhood of the rock, and in addition placed across each nest a number of palm leaf mid-ribs which had been dipped in the 'rubber'.

We visited the site at daybreak the next morning to discover that the bundle of rubbered mid-ribs had been knocked from one of the nests to the ground, and sticking to it were half a dozen white breast feathers. The nest had obviously been visited by a picathartes late the previous evening after we had left. Even though this did not appear to be the breeding season, it seemed that the nests were used to some extent for roosting outside the breeding season.

I suggested that the stickiness of the 'rubber' should be increased, and that this method be tried again. Every one of the hunters was also hunting by night, and Nderi stated that a picathartes had been caught alive on a routine night hunt just two weeks previously. As with the other creatures caught that night, it had been killed, cooked, and eaten! I confess I found the thought hard to bear.

A couple of days later two of the hunters came to me and told me that the previous evening they had visited another rocky place where they had seen two picathartes. I went with them to the area, as always in deep forest, and found a deep ravine at the bottom of which a clear stream bubbled its way through a mass of huge, slippery, lichen-covered boulders. The sides of the ravine were steep and high, and were either bare and almost completely devoid of vegetation, or (in the less steep places where the tree roots had trapped pockets of soil washed down from above) supported moist, dense patches of ferns, mosses, etc.

What struck me about this ravine was that everything was wet. There was not a square foot of rock face that was not dripping with water, and I found it difficult to see how a mud-based nest could be built in a place like this – quite different from the bone-dry, protected rock on which we had found nests.

A prolonged search in fact revealed not the slightest trace of a nest, and as it has been stated that some of the most important items of picathartes' food are crustaceans, snails, and a species of small frog, it seemed to me that the bird was much more likely to use a place like this as a feeding ground rather than for nest building. I gathered that Nderi and the other hunters often saw picathartes in this and other similar wet, rocky areas, but that all the nests found had been on dry rocks, completely sheltered from the rain.

My time limit in the area was soon up, and on this visit I had not been able to glimpse picathartes, although I had obtained what are, as far as I know, the only photographs taken of the nests and nest sites of *Picathartes oreas*. I remain convinced that the bird is far from uncommon in the area, and that, based on the information I gathered from this trip, and given another opportunity and a longer period in those dark forests, there is a very good chance of capturing living specimens.



