

An extraordinary visitor to Seychelles

Adrian Skerrett

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Catherina Onezia has talent for finding rare migrant birds in Seychelles and has reported literally dozens of these to the Seychelles Bird Records Committee over the last few years. But her latest find at the end of January on Ile Perseverance is perhaps her most extraordinary and a new species for Seychelles. This is a strange bird called a Painted-snipe, with strange plumage and an even stranger lifestyle.

Catherina identified and photographed the female Painted-snipe, sending pictures to me. I emailed them to several bird experts with a Seychelles interest. “What a showstopper!” replied Mike Betts, former warden of Aldabra and Aride. John Phillips, a former Cousin warden said “Gulp! I’m speechless!! What an excellent find!” while Tony Disley, illustrator of the book *Birds of Seychelles* said “The only words are simply WOW!! Definitely one of the best records in Seychelles ever!!” So what is all the fuss about?

First of all, we are talking about a bizarre bird here. In almost all species of birds where there is difference in plumage between the sexes – such as the *Vev* on La Digue, the *Sren* in your garden or *Fregat* at Aldabra – it is the male that is the most colourful. But Painted-snipe are different, the female is larger, brighter and more colourful than her relatively dull male companion. She is decked out with what looks uncannily like a bright white pair of spectacles on her rufous head, two beautiful golden lines down her bronzy-green back, long greenish legs and a stout long reddish bill.

This somersault in the usual plumage scheme is reflected in the breeding behaviour. Unlike most birds it is the female that courts the male. This champion of female rights gathers up to four males within her territory and having bagged her male harem, presents each in turn with a clutch of (usually) four eggs. She then abandons the poor guy to incubate the eggs and bring up the chicks all on his own while she goes off cavorting with some other guy. When the chicks hatch they leave the nest almost straight away and the long-suffering male carries them around on his back for the first few days of life and cares for them thereafter until they can look after themselves.

On top of that you would simply not expect this bird to reach Seychelles. Birds breed in both Asia and Africa but unlike other visitors to Seychelles, they are rather sedentary and do not ordinarily migrate long distances, let alone cross an ocean. We will never know whether our visitor came from Africa or Asia let alone what made it traverse the Indian Ocean. But it is great to see such a weird and wonderful bird here and if it had not been for the sharp eyes of Catherina, we may never have known it was in our very midst on Ile Perseverance.

One of the wonderful things about birdwatching in Seychelles is that absolutely anyone can find rare birds in Seychelles if like Catherina, they keep their eyes peeled. With cost-free digital photography, pictures can be easily captured. You don't even need to know what it is, pictures can be sent to the Seychelles Bird Records Committee and if they are good enough to identify the bird, they will be identified. If you see any unusual bird, please report it to sbrsecretary@gmail.com Maybe you will find the next new species for Seychelles?

By Adrian Skerrett