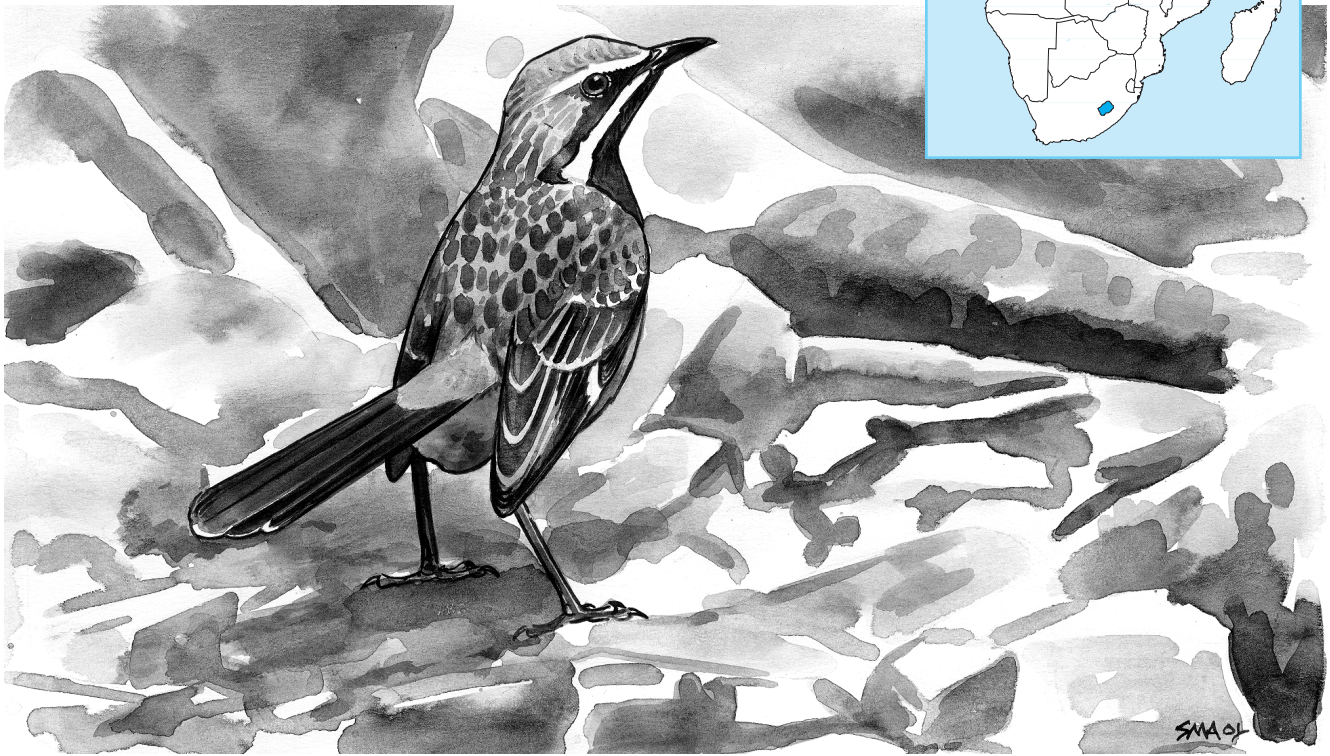


LESOTHO

KEITH BARNES



Orange-breasted Rockjumper *Chaetops aurantius*. (ILLUSTRATION: MARK ANDREWS)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Lesotho is one of the smallest countries in Africa, covering an area of 30,355 km² between 28°44'S–30°40'S and 27°02'E–29°25'E. It is landlocked, being surrounded by South Africa. The population is some 2.1 million people, many of whom live in the rural interior highlands of the country where they practise small-scale subsistence agriculture and graze small stock over wide areas.

Located on the eastern rim of the southern African high-altitude plateau, two-thirds of Lesotho is very mountainous and the entire country lies above 1,388 m, giving it the highest 'lowlands' of any country. The western part of Lesotho consists of grasslands (much modified by agriculture), continuous with those in the Free State of South Africa. Adjoining the eastern boundary of the country is the Drakensberg escarpment, known as the 'barrier of spears' for its sharp, sudden emergence from the plains below. The eastern half of Lesotho lies generally between 2,200 m and 3,200 m and includes Thabana-Ntlenyana (3,482 m), the highest point in southern Africa. The headwaters of the Senqu (Orange) river rise close to the escarpment, and cut deep channels, creating steep cliff-faces and impressive topography, varying by up to 1,000 m between river valleys and adjacent mountain summits.

The climate is temperate and seasonal, with altitude playing a major role in determining local conditions: in general, temperatures fall by 1°C for each rise of 125 m in altitude. In the lowlands (c.1,500–1,600 m) mean daily temperatures are 24°C in January and 8°C in June. Frost occurs widely in winter with temperatures dropping to -8°C in the lowlands and -20°C on the summit plateau in the coldest months of June and July. Lesotho lies in a summer-rainfall zone, receiving over 75% of its annual rainfall between October and March. Mean annual rainfall is from c.700–800 mm in the lowlands to over 1,000 mm on higher ground in the east, although the central mountain valleys receive very much less rainfall (below 600 mm in some places).

The remaining semi-natural vegetation of Lesotho consists primarily of rolling grassland, which sustains intense grazing by

cattle, goats and sheep. There are strong aspects of semi-arid Karoo vegetation to some of the highland areas. On a local scale, one typically finds Karoo-like dwarf shrubland or heath, dominated by *Erica*, *Helichrysum*, *Eumorphia* and *Chrysocoma*, on the drier (sunny) north and west slopes, while grassland occurs on the wetter (shaded) south and east slopes. Although rainfall is high, the semi-arid component comes in through the low temperatures that grossly

Map 1. Location and size of Important Bird Areas in Lesotho.

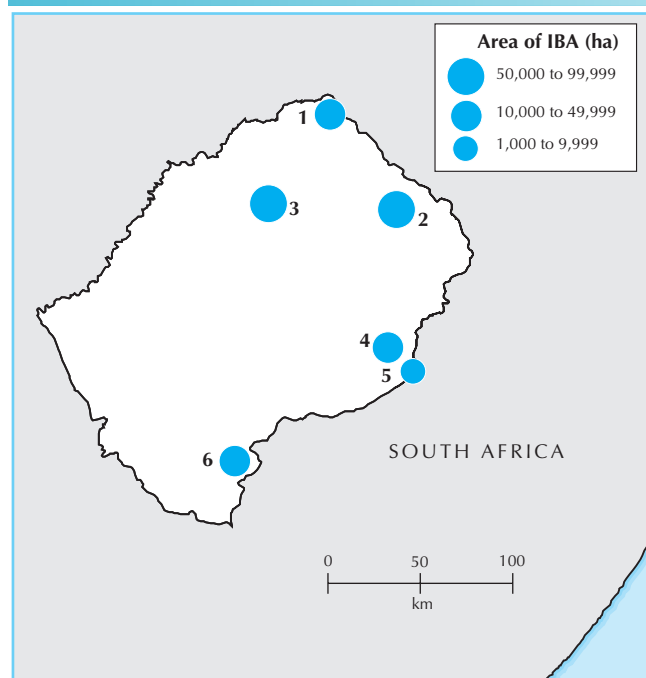


Table 1. Summary of Important Bird Areas in Lesotho. 6 IBAs covering 2,168 km²

IBA code	National code ¹	Site name	Administrative region	Criteria (see p. 11; for A2/A3 codes, see Tables 2/3)			
				A1	A2	A3	A4ii
LS001	L001	Liqobong	Butha-Buthe	✓	✓	✓	
LS002	L002	Upper Senqu river	Mokhotlong	✓	✓	✓	✓
LS003	L003	Mafika-Lisiu	Leribe	✓	✓	✓	✓
LS004	L004	Sehonghong and Matebeng	Thaba-Tseka	✓	✓	✓	✓
LS005	L005	Sehlabathebe National Park	Qacha's Nek	✓	✓	✓	✓
LS006	L006	Upper Quthing valley	Quthing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Total number of IBAs qualifying:				6	6	6	4

1. Barnes (1998).

reduce the 'effective' moisture relevant to plant growth. Trampling and overgrazing by sheep, goats, cattle and horses has led to reduced grass cover and subsequent increased erosion and degradation of the soil. Subsistence agriculture, primarily the growing of maize, sorghum and wheat, is widespread and occupies most suitable ground in the densely populated lowlands. Cultivation is often impracticable on the higher or steeper slopes. Together, subsistence agriculture, cultivation and livestock have, therefore, replaced most of Lesotho's grasslands while wetlands have been reduced by gully erosion and the overharvesting of reedbeds.

Since independence, Lesotho has benefited from many aid programmes, aimed at improving methods of cultivation, livestock breeding and the planting of wood-lots. The greatest environmental impact in the country during the late 1980s and 1990s has been the opening up of the highlands through road construction for the Highlands Water Project. Increased accessibility has influenced land-use patterns and will continue to do so, while the construction of the dams has and will impact dramatically on the functioning of the river systems and their neighbouring terrestrial environment.

Any future socio-economic changes in the interior will affect the functioning of the highland ecosystems. Several rare and threatened species (e.g. vultures) are entirely dependent on the prevailing socio-economic factors operating within Lesotho. For example, improved husbandry techniques may lead to lower livestock mortality and a reduction in vulture food.

Stephenson (1988) noted that the country has acute nature conservation problems and that 'much of the Kingdom's wildlife is severely threatened with extinction'. Much research and monitoring will be essential to avoid irreparable damage to Lesotho's environment.

ORNITHOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE

Some 340 bird species have been recorded in Lesotho over the last 100 years. Although not a species-rich country, the mountains of Lesotho, and the Drakensberg escarpment and foothills of South Africa form an internationally important biogeographic province, and Lesotho is well endowed with many endemic and near-endemic taxa. It also supports 10 globally threatened and near-threatened bird species. Lesotho holds nearly 12% of the world population of *Gyps coprotheres* (VU), comprising some 600 breeding pairs. *Geronticus calvus* (VU) is also fairly common in the highlands, and Lesotho supports globally significant numbers of this species. A tiny population of *Anthus chloris* (VU) is found in Sehlabathebe National Park, but this is estimated not to exceed 50 individuals. *Falco naumanni* (VU) and *F. amurensis* are common in the lowlands during the austral summer and roost in hundreds in large trees in urban centres.

Four species of restricted range occur in Lesotho. Three of these—*Anthus hoeschi* (NT), *Chaetops aurantius* (NT) and *Serinus symonsi* (NT)—have the majority (60–80%) of their global ranges in Lesotho, and together they define the Lesotho highlands Endemic Bird Area (EBA) (Table 2). Lesotho also supports species from three biome-restricted assemblages: the Afrotropical Highlands (A07), Zambezi (A10) and Namib–Karoo (A12) biomes (Table 3). The three remaining species of global conservation

concern (all NT) are *Circus maurus*, *Eupodotis caerulescens* and *Geocolaptes olivaceus*.

Lesotho has very few sizeable wetlands that hold diverse assemblages of congregatory waterbirds, but the highlands contain many rivers.

From a subregional conservation perspective, the highlands are notable for supporting an isolated race (*meridionalis*) of *Gypaetus barbatus* (380 birds, 122 breeding pairs). The nearest population occurs on Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro. This species, however, has a widely dispersed distribution in Lesotho and Africa, and the Important Bird Area approach only partially addresses its conservation. The Lesotho highlands and neighbouring Drakensberg support many isolated subspecies that are endemic to this region, including *Parus afer arens*, *Sylvia layardi barnesi* (a Karoo species), *Stenostira scita rudebecki*, *Cercomela sinuata hypernephela* (a Karoo species) and *Galerida magnirostris montivaga*. Further taxonomic scrutiny may result in the elevation of some of these taxa to full species status. The Lesotho highlands also form a global stronghold for *Monticola explorator*, *M. rupestris*, *Geocolaptes olivaceus* and *Anthus crenatus*.

The scattered agricultural areas in the highlands allow a major community of birds to thrive that are absent in protected areas, where the lack of trampling, grazing, cultivation and fires has allowed dense grassland to develop. Although these bird species are all common and widespread in southern Africa, it nevertheless seems likely that without agriculture the bird species-richness and biomass in the highlands would be much lower, especially since the cultivation is non-mechanized (with much crop wastage) and does not employ pesticides.

CONSERVATION INFRASTRUCTURE AND PROTECTED-AREA SYSTEM

The Game Preservation Act 33 of 1951 provides for the creation of wildlife sanctuaries. A National Parks Act was gazetted in 1975.

Table 2. The occurrence of restricted-range species at Important Bird Areas in Lesotho. Sites that meet the A2 criterion are highlighted in **bold**. Species of global conservation concern are highlighted in **bold blue**.

090 – Lesotho highlands Endemic Bird Area

(three species in Lesotho; six sites meet the A2 criterion)

IBA code:	001	002	003	004	005	006
<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Serinus symonsi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of species recorded:	3	3	3	3	3	3

091 – Southern African grasslands Endemic Bird Area

(one species in Lesotho; no sites meet the A2 criterion)

IBA No:	005
<i>Anthus chloris</i>	✓

Table 3. The occurrence of biome-restricted species at Important Bird Areas in Lesotho. Sites that meet the A3 criterion are highlighted in **bold**. Species of global conservation concern are highlighted in **bold blue**.

A07 – Afrotropical Highlands biome

(three species in Lesotho; six sites meet the A3 criterion)

IBA code:	001	002	003	004	005	006
<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Serinus symonsi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of species recorded:	3	3	3	3	3	3

A12 – Namib–Karoo biome

(two species in Lesotho; no sites meet the A3 criterion)

IBA code:	001	002	003	004	005	006
<i>Cercomela sinuata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Sylvia layardi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of species recorded:	2	2	2	2	2	2

Footnote: Species of the Zambezi biome (A10) also occur in Lesotho, but not at any of the IBAs.

Park and reserve administration is the responsibility of the conservation division within the Ministry of Agriculture. This division is also responsible for forestry. Only one small national park has been proclaimed in Lesotho, and no protected-area network exists. The government commissioned a report on nature conservation in Lesotho, which made recommendations about improving national parks organization and giving protected status to more areas. Although the report suggested that various sites were suitable for national park establishment, the report also emphasized that national parks in the usual African style would not be appropriate in Lesotho as the country has neither the wide uninhabited spaces, big game, or necessary communications and infrastructure to compete with other southern African parks for ecotourism revenue. Passineau (1978) proposed a new Act (the Lesotho National Parks and Conservation Act) to include wildlife legislation. This has not, however, come to fruition. Ambrose *et al.* (2000) summarize the current situation.

INTERNATIONAL MEASURES RELEVANT TO THE CONSERVATION OF SITES

Lesotho has ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention to Combat Desertification and the Convention on Climate Change, and has signed, but not ratified CITES.

OVERVIEW OF THE INVENTORY

The six Important Bird Areas (IBAs) identified in Lesotho cover 2,168 km², or c.7.1% of the country's land surface (Map 1, Table 1). Owing to the homogeneity of much of the country's highland landscape, breeding colonies of *Gyps coprotheres* were used as a basis for selecting IBAs. The chosen IBAs hold 64% of the national breeding population of the species. The IBA approach on its own, however, is not ideal for conserving *Gyps coprotheres*, as individuals have wide foraging ranges and, unlike breeding colonies in South Africa which are fairly stable, the Lesotho colonies have shown a tendency to collapse suddenly.

The interior mountain ranges of Lesotho form an enclave of suitable physical and economic conditions in which *Gyps coprotheres* (and *Gypaetus barbatus*) have become relatively concentrated. Vulture numbers have been reduced outside Lesotho primarily as a result of

persecution and the expansion of highly commercialized livestock farming. The desertion of colonies at Thaba Nchu and Zastron, both in the Free State of South Africa, is evidence of the recession in the distribution of *Gyps coprotheres* in neighbouring areas.

Gyps coprotheres and *Gypaetus barbatus* forage quite widely over rural pastoral lands. The nature of the pastoral economy in the Lesotho highlands is an important factor in the survival of these birds. Apart from sparse populations of the mammals *Papio ursinus*, *Pelea capreolus* and *Redunca fulvorufula*, wild fauna is restricted to smaller creatures and consequently domestic stock form the major source of food for all vultures. Cattle, sheep, goats, horses and donkeys are maintained by the rural inhabitants at densities often considerably above the natural carrying capacity of the land. The rugged terrain and especially harsh winter conditions lead to considerable stock casualty that goes unnoticed; this mortality is the basis of the vultures' food supply. The establishment of protected areas for large, widespread, mobile scavengers is extremely complex and, given the vultures' reliance on humans, any conservation action should consider the prevailing socio-economic conditions in the highlands.

Five of the IBAs are unprotected. In the current situation, this is ideal, as legislative protection of an area, and/or the cessation of livestock farming in the vicinity of a breeding colony, could result in decreased vulture numbers, impaired breeding success and eventual collapse of the colony. What is required for the long-term protection of these birds in Lesotho is a proactive awareness programme to reduce persecution and disturbance. This would be most effectively presented in the Sesotho language and through the use of visual aids. In the short term, however, conservation action at the breeding colonies and in the adjacent foraging areas can also have a positive impact on these populations.

All the sites meet the A2 and A3 criteria, since they all hold significant numbers of the three species of the Lesotho highlands EBA (Table 2) and the Afrotropical Highlands biome (Table 3) that occur in Lesotho.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor David P. Ambrose and David (Hlosi) Maphisa (National University of Lesotho), and Dave Allen (Durban Natural Science Museum), commented on the chapter. Steven Piper provided data on colonies of *Gyps coprotheres* that proved vital in selecting IBAs in Lesotho.

SITE ACCOUNTS

Liqobong

Admin region Butha-Butha

Coordinates 28°40'S 28°40'E

Area 10,000 ha Altitude 2,500–3,300 m

LS001

A1, A2 (090), A3 (A07)

Unprotected

Site description

This site is centred on the 60–90-m-high cliffs of the Mechachaneng Ridge, which runs for c.1 km. The tributaries of the Senqu (Orange) river system have incised deeply into the basalt, creating near-vertical cliffs. The surrounding highlands support a traditional pastoral economy with a low-density population. Approximately 15% of the surrounding area (within a 25-km radius) is cultivated, the remainder being open pasture. The vegetation is primarily montane grassland. High-altitude shrubs form a heath of *Erica*, *Chrysocoma* and *Helichrysum*. The summits are generally rocky, with bare, shallow soil patches and rock sheets near the escarpment.

Birds

See Box and Tables 2 and 3 for key species. This site is centred on an important colony of *Gyps coprotheres* (at c.3,000 m), which forms a stable nucleus of the national breeding population, regularly holding at least 25 pairs and over 75 individuals. The rare *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis* also forages widely across this area. Other cliff-nesting species include *Buteo rufofuscus*, *Falco biarmicus* and *Ciconia nigra*. The high-altitude, rocky, boulder-strewn slopes and outcrops (above 2,000 m) support *Chaetops aurantius*, and the surrounding grassy

slopes and plateau hold *Anthus hoeschi*, which breeds in large numbers during the austral summer (especially above 3,000 m). *Serinus symonsi* occurs commonly above 1,500 m, and has become commensal with humans, occupying and foraging in villages and among fallow and harvested crop fields.

Anthus crenatus, *Monticola explorator* and *Geocolaptes olivaceus* occur commonly in the vicinity of rocky outcrops. *Cercomela sinuata hypernephela*, *Sylvia layardi barnesi* and *Circus maurus* are uncommon. The small, isolated, Lesotho subspecies *Parus afer arenos* also occurs. Small numbers of *Geronticus calvus* occasionally forage in this area, and it is thought that there are breeding colonies in the vicinity.

Key species

A1	<i>Geronticus calvus</i>	<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>
	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>
	<i>Geocolaptes olivaceus</i>	<i>Serinus symonsi</i>
A2 (090)	Lesotho highlands EBA: All three species of this EBA that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 2.	
A3 (A07)	Afrotropical Highlands biome: All three species of this biome that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 3.	

Other threatened/endemic wildlife

The alpine floral communities found in the Maloti/Drakensberg mountains are unique in southern Africa, holding a remarkable number of endemic plants. A recent botanical survey of three valleys in the Maloti yielded many species that could not be identified and

some may be new to science. The high-altitude streams and seepages hold the Drakensberg-endemic frog *Strongylopus hymenopus*.

■ Conservation issues

The IBA is located on communally owned land. The breeding colony of *Gyps coprotheres* may be declining. It is a relatively small colony, but still one of the largest in Lesotho. All activity to and from the colony is in the direction of the KwaZulu-Natal escarpment, and the birds forage there, thus placing themselves at risk to poisoning by commercial small-stock farmers. *Geronticus calvus* may occasionally be taken by local people for food or medicinal purposes. *Buteo rufofuscus* and *Falco biarmicus* are sometimes persecuted as chicken thieves, and *Bubo capensis* is occasionally taken for medicinal purposes. There is no conservation concern for these common and widespread birds, provided that levels of persecution and utilization do not increase. Overgrazing, trampling, agriculture, and other human activities have not seriously affected any of the globally near-threatened, restricted-range or biome-restricted birds. Some species, such as *Serinus symonsi*, benefit from an association with humans.

■ Further reading

Allan *et al.* (1996), Bonde (1993), Brown (1992a,b), Donnay (1990), Jilbert (1979, 1982), Manry (1984, 1985a,b), Meakins *et al.* (1988), Mendelsohn (1984), Osborne and Tigar (1989, 1990, 1992a,b).

Upper Senqu river

Admin region Mokhotlong

Coordinates 29°08'S 29°02'E

A1, A2 (090), A3 (A07), A4ii

Area 80,000 ha Altitude 2,500–3,000 m

LS002

Unprotected

■ Site description

The site is centred on an area of near-vertical cliffs, where the upper reaches of the Senqu (Orange) river have incised deeply into the basal layers. The surrounding highlands support a traditional pastoral economy with a low-density population. Approximately 35% of the surrounding area (within a 25 km radius) is cultivated, the remainder being open pasture. The vegetation is primarily montane grassland, but thick bush and scrub flank the lower gorge walls. High-altitude shrubs form a heath of *Erica*, *Chrysocoma* and *Helichrysum*. The summits are generally rocky with bare, shallow soil patches and extensive bare rock at higher altitudes.

■ Birds

See Box and Tables 2 and 3 for key species. The cliffs hold 84 breeding pairs (226 birds) of *Gyps coprotheres*, in two 'stable nucleus' colonies and four satellite colonies. Several undiscovered colonies are suspected to exist within the IBA. The site also incorporates the foraging areas around the colonies, as well as a roost site. Undoubtedly some exchange occurs between the colonies. The area around Mokhotlong, which means 'the place of the Bald Ibis', is important for breeding *Geronticus calvus*. Several groups, comprising up to 200 birds, have been seen in the vicinity. The steep inaccessible cliffs of the Senqu, Moremoholo and Mokhotlong rivers are undoubtedly one of this species's strongholds in Lesotho. The rare but widespread *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis* also forages widely across this area. Other cliff-nesting species include *Buteo rufofuscus*, *Falco biarmicus* and *Ciconia nigra* (3–5 pairs); the latter is particularly common along the Senqu river valley. The high-altitude, rocky, boulder-strewn slopes and outcrops (above 2,000 m) support *Chaetops aurantius*, and the surrounding grassy slopes and plateau hold *Anthus hoeschi*, which breeds in large numbers during the austral summer (especially above 3,000 m). *Serinus symonsi* occurs commonly above 1,500 m, and has become commensal with humans, occupying and foraging in villages and among fallow and harvested crop fields. *Anthus crenatus*, *Monticola explorator* and *Geocolaptes olivaceus* occur commonly in the vicinity of rocky outcrops. *Cercomela sinuata hypernephela*, *Sylvia layardi barnesi* and *Circus maurus* are uncommon. The small, isolated, endemic subspecies *Parus afer arens* also occurs.

Key species

A1	<i>Geronticus calvus</i>	<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>
	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>
	<i>Geocolaptes olivaceus</i>	<i>Serinus symonsi</i>

A2 (090) Lesotho highlands EBA: All three species of this EBA that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 2.

A3 (A07) Afrotropical Highlands biome: All three species of this biome that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 3.

		Breeding (pairs)	Non-breeding
A4ii	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	70–90	180–240

■ Other threatened/endemic wildlife

The alpine floral communities found in the Maloti/Drakensberg mountains are unique in southern Africa, holding a remarkable number of endemic species. A recent botanical survey of three valleys in the Maloti yielded many species that could not be identified and some may be new to science. Extremely rare and localized butterflies occur in the Senqu Valley region, including *Torynesis pringlei* (endemic), *Metisella syrinx* and *Lepidochrysoys loewensteini* (VU). The high-altitude streams and seepages hold the Drakensberg-endemic frogs *Strongylopus hymenopus* and *Amieta vertebralis*. Near-threatened endemics such as the lizards *Pseudocordylus langi* (LR/nt) and *P. spinosus* (LR/nt) and the threatened mouse *Myodomys albicaudatus* (VU) are also known from this region. The extremely poorly known endemic and threatened small mammal *Chlorotalpa sclateri* (VU) may occur here.

■ Conservation issues

The site is located on communally owned land. The abundant goats and sheep occasionally disturb breeding *Gyps coprotheres* as they are able to approach to within 5 m of the nests. This species is utilized for traditional medicinal and ceremonial purposes, and is targeted by rural residents who use either poisoned carcasses or a gin-trap to kill individuals. *Geronticus calvus* may occasionally be taken by local people for food or medicinal purposes. *Buteo rufofuscus* and *Falco biarmicus* are sometimes persecuted as chicken thieves, and *Bubo capensis* is occasionally used for medicinal purposes, but there is currently no conservation concern for these common and widespread birds, provided that levels of persecution and utilization do not increase. Overgrazing, trampling, agriculture and other human activities have not seriously affected any of the globally near-threatened, restricted-range or biome-restricted birds. Some species, such as *Serinus symonsi*, benefit from an association with humans.

■ Further reading

Allan *et al.* (1996), Bonde (1993), Brown (1992a,b), Donnay (1990), Jilbert (1979, 1982), Manry (1984, 1985a,b), Meakins *et al.* (1988), Mendelsohn (1984), Osborne and Tigar (1989, 1990, 1992a,b).

Mafika-Lisiu

Admin region Leribe

Coordinates 29°06'S 28°19'E

A1, A2 (090), A3 (A07), A4ii

Area 50,000 ha Altitude 1,800–3,200 m

LS003

Unprotected

■ Site description

This site is centred on cliffs on the front range of the Maloti. The surrounding highlands support a traditional pastoral economy with a low-density population. Approximately 15% of the surrounding area (within a 25-km radius) is cultivated, the remainder being open pasture. The vegetation is primarily montane grassland. High-altitude shrubs form a heath of *Erica*, *Chrysocoma* and *Helichrysum*. The summits are generally rocky with bare, shallow soil patches and rock sheets near the escarpment.

■ Birds

See Box and Tables 2 and 3 for key species. The cliffs support the greatest number of breeding *Gyps coprotheres* in Lesotho. Over 100 breeding pairs (22% of Lesotho's total) and 240 birds are found at four 'stable nucleus' colonies. Undoubtedly some exchange occurs between the colonies. The IBA includes adjacent foraging areas. The rare but widespread *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis* forages and breeds widely across the IBA. Other cliff-nesting species include *Buteo rufofuscus*, *Falco biarmicus* and *Ciconia nigra*. The high-altitude, rocky, boulder strewn-slopes and outcrops (above 2,000 m) support *Chaetops aurantius*, and the surrounding grassy slopes and plateau hold *Anthus hoeschi*, which breeds in large numbers during the austral summer

(especially above 3,000 m). *Serinus symonsi* occurs commonly above 1,500 m, and has become commensal with humans, occupying and foraging in villages and among fallow and harvested crop fields. *Anthus crenatus*, *Monticola explorator* and *Geocolaptes olivaceus* occur commonly in the vicinity of rocky outcrops. *Cercomela sinuata hypernephela*, *Sylvia layardi barnesi* and *Circus maurus* are uncommon. The small, isolated Lesotho subspecies *Parus afer arens* occurs. Small numbers of *Geronticus calvus* occasionally forage in this area and it is thought that there may be breeding colonies in the vicinity. In February 2000, the globally threatened *Anthus chloris* was recorded for the first time at this locality (a displaying individual).

Key species			
A1	<i>Geronticus calvus</i>	<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>	
	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>	
	<i>Circus maurus</i>	<i>Serinus symonsi</i>	
	<i>Geocolaptes olivaceus</i>		
A2 (090)	Lesotho highlands EBA: All three species of this EBA that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 2.		
A3 (A07)	Afrotropical Highlands biome: All three species of this biome that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 3.		
		Breeding (pairs)	Non-breeding
A4ii	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	100	240

Other threatened/endemic wildlife

The alpine floral communities found in the Maloti/Drakensberg mountains are unique in southern Africa, holding a remarkable number of endemic plant species. A recent botanical survey of three valleys in the Maloti yielded many species that could not be identified and some may be new to science. Two reptiles endemic to southern Africa, *Bradypodion dracomontanum* and *Pseudocordylus melanotus*, are known from this region, and the poorly known endemic and threatened small mammal *Chlorotalpa sclateri* (VU) may also occur here.

Conservation issues

The site is located on communally owned tribal land and is near to the access points of Phase 1A (Katse Dam) of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project; it stands to be negatively impacted by the water scheme. The EarthPlan group is proposing to develop the area for ecotourism, to take advantage of its natural environmental assets, complete with visitor centre and vulture restaurant. Unfortunately, there is (as yet unpublished) information that the *Gyps coprotheres* colony has recently experienced a 75% decline, possibly because of proximity to the Lesotho Highlands Water Project access road. Vultures are utilized for traditional medicinal and ceremonial purposes and are targeted by rural residents who use either poisoned carcasses or a gin-trap to kill them. *Geronticus calvus* may occasionally be taken by local people for food or medicinal purposes. *Buteo rufofuscus* and *Falco biarmicus* are sometimes persecuted as chicken thieves and *Bubo capensis* is occasionally used for medicinal purposes. There is no conservation concern for these common and widespread birds, provided levels of persecution and utilization do not increase. Overgrazing, trampling, agriculture and other human activities have not seriously affected any of the globally near-threatened, restricted-range or biome-restricted birds. Some species, such as *Serinus symonsi*, benefit from an association with humans.

Further reading

Allan *et al.* (1996), Bonde (1993), Brown (1992a,b), Donnay (1990), Jilbert (1979, 1982), Manry (1984, 1985a,b), Meakins *et al.* (1988), Mendelsohn (1984), Osborne and Tigar (1989, 1990, 1992a,b).

Sehonghong and Matebeng

Admin region Thaba-Tseka

Coordinates 29°48'S 28°59'E

Area 40,000 ha Altitude 2,000–3,300 m

LS004

A1, A2 (090), A3 (A07), A4ii

Unprotected

Site description

The area encompasses the catchments of the Sehonghong and Matebeng rivers, bounded on the west by the Senqu. The IBA covers a set of nucleus vulture colonies and one satellite colony located on steep basalt lava cliffs in the lower reaches of the Senqu (Orange) river. The river and its tributaries are situated near the Lesotho/KwaZulu-Natal border

on the fringe of the Drakensberg. The IBA consists of three colonies and the surrounding foraging area. The tributaries of the Senqu system have incised deeply into the basalt, thus creating near-vertical cliffs suitable for occupation by cliff-dwelling species. The colonies are at an altitude of c.2,750–2,950 m. The vegetation is primarily montane grassland. High-altitude shrubs form a heath of *Erica*, *Chrysocoma* and *Helichrysum*. The summits are generally rocky, with bare, shallow soil patches and rock sheets near the escarpment.

Birds

See Box and Tables 2 and 3 for key species. This site supports 75 pairs of breeding *Gyps coprotheres* (220 individuals in total), which is approximately 2% of the world's breeding population. The two main nucleus colonies, Mohlokohloko (29°41'S 28°53'E) and Monyetleng (29°41'S 28°52'E), each support between 25 and 45 breeding pairs. Monyetleng means 'the place with a narrow passage', probably referring to the route up the cliff. To the south-east of these two nucleus colonies is a satellite breeding colony, Matebeng Pass (29°53'S 28°55'E), which holds between five and 10 birds. The Matebeng catchment holds a colony on Thaba-li-Maqhoa (meaning 'the icy mountains').

The rare but widespread *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis* also forages widely across this area. Other cliff-nesting species include *Ciconia nigra*, *Buteo rufofuscus*, *Falco biarmicus* and *Bubo capensis*. The high-altitude rocky, boulder-strewn slopes and outcrops (above 2,000 m) support *Chaetops aurantius*, and the surrounding grassy slopes and plateau hold *Anthus hoeschi*, which breeds in large numbers during the austral summer (especially above 3,000 m). *Serinus symonsi* occurs commonly above 1,500 m, and has become commensal with humans, occupying and foraging in villages and among fallow and harvested crop fields. *Anthus crenatus*, *Monticola explorator* and *Geocolaptes olivaceus* occur commonly in the vicinity of rocky outcrops. *Cercomela sinuata hypernephela*, *Sylvia layardi barnesi* and *Circus maurus* are uncommon. The site supports the small, isolated, Lesotho subspecies *Parus afer arens*. Small numbers of *Geronticus calvus* occasionally forage in this area and it is thought that there may be breeding colonies in the vicinity.

Key species			
A1	<i>Geronticus calvus</i>	<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>	
	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>	
	<i>Circus maurus</i>	<i>Serinus symonsi</i>	
	<i>Geocolaptes olivaceus</i>		
A2 (090)	Lesotho highlands EBA: All three species of this EBA that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 2.		
A3 (A07)	Afrotropical Highlands biome: All three species of this biome that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 3.		
		Breeding (pairs)	Non-breeding
A4ii	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	75	220

Other threatened/endemic wildlife

The alpine floral communities found in the Maloti/Drakensberg mountains are unique in southern Africa, holding a remarkable number of endemic plant species. A recent botanical survey of three valleys in the Maloti yielded many species that could not be identified, and some may be new to science. The high-altitude streams and seepages hold the Drakensberg-endemic frogs *Strongylopus hymenopus* and *Amieta vertebralis*.

Conservation issues

Owing to the dramatic population declines that *Gyps coprotheres* has experienced in parts of its range, it is essential that a survey of all the *Gyps coprotheres* colonies in Lesotho be conducted to determine the species' current conservation status. These sites urgently require monitoring. Vultures are utilized extensively for traditional medicinal and ceremonial purposes, and they are targeted by rural residents who use either poisoned carcasses or a gin-trap to kill them. *Geronticus calvus* may occasionally be taken by local people for food or medicinal purposes. *Buteo rufofuscus* and *Falco biarmicus* are sometimes persecuted as chicken thieves, and *Bubo capensis* is occasionally used for medicinal purposes. There is no conservation concern for these common and widespread birds, provided levels of persecution and utilization do not increase. Overgrazing, trampling, agriculture and other human activities have not seriously affected any of the globally near-threatened, restricted-range or biome-restricted birds. Some species, such as *Serinus symonsi*, benefit from an association with humans.

Further reading

Allan *et al.* (1996), Bonde (1993), Brown (1992a,b), Donnay (1990), Jilbert (1979, 1982), Manry (1984, 1985a,b), Meakins *et al.* (1988), Mendelsohn (1984), Osborne and Tigar (1989, 1990, 1992a,b).

Sehlabathebe National Park

LS005

Admin region Qacha's Nek

Coordinates 29°55'S 29°08'E

A1, A2 (090), A3 (A07)

Area 6,805 ha Altitude 2,200–2,500 m

National Park

Site description

Sehlabathebe, Lesotho's only national park, is situated on the eastern border of the country, on the edge of the Great Escarpment. It lies adjacent to South Africa's uKhahlamba–Drakensberg Park (IBA ZA064) to the west of Himeville, Underberg and Kokstad. This mountain block comprises high-altitude sandstone capped by basalt on the north side where there are higher mountains, and incised deeply by the tributaries of the Tsoelikana river, thus creating near-vertical cliffs. The surrounding highlands support a traditional pastoral economy with a low-density population. Approximately 10% of the surrounding area (within a 25-km radius) is cultivated, 10% is held in Sehlabathebe National Park, and the remainder is open pasture. The vegetation is primarily high-altitude montane grassland, but thick bush and scrub flank the lower gorge walls. High-altitude shrubs form a heath of *Erica*, *Chrysocoma* and *Helichrysum*. The summits are generally rocky with bare, shallow soil patches and rock sheets near the escarpment. There are patches of wet meadow and marshland at all altitudes. Aquatic vegetation is well represented in the Tsoelikana river and its oxbow lakes and rock pools.

Birds

See Box and Tables 2 and 3 for key species. A colony of *Gyps coprotheres* had been permanent here for some 50 years, until a dramatic decline was followed by the desertion of the site by the birds in the late 1980s. Since this colony was once a 'stable nucleus', birds may return to breed. Despite the disappearance of the breeding colony, Sehlabathebe National Park still represents an important foraging area for the species, free of the threat of being poisoned or trapped. This is the only reliable site for *Anthus chloris* in Lesotho, where it is primarily confined to lush, green, relatively ungrazed grassland above 2,500 m. The rare but widespread *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis* forages widely across this area. Other cliff-nesting species include *Buteo rufofuscus*, *Falco biarmicus* and *Ciconia nigra*. The high-altitude, rocky, boulder-strewn slopes and outcrops (above 2,000 m) support *Chaetops aurantius*, and the surrounding grassy slopes and plateau hold *Anthus hoeschi*, which breed in large numbers during the austral summer (especially above 3,000 m). The grassy slopes and valleys also hold *Sagittarius serpentarius*. The high-altitude tarns support an interesting avifauna, including *Podiceps cristatus*, an extremely rare species in Lesotho. *Serinus symonsi* occurs commonly above 1,500 m, and it occupies, and forages in, the rank grasslands. *Anthus crenatus*, *Monticola explorator* and *Geocolaptes olivaceus* occur commonly in the vicinity of rocky outcrops. *Cercomela sinuata hypernephela*, *Sylvia layardi barnesi* and *Circus maurus* are uncommon. The small, isolated Lesotho subspecies *Parus afer arens* occurs at the site. Small numbers of *Geronticus calvus* occasionally forage in this area and it is thought that there are breeding colonies in the vicinity. *Grus carunculatus* and *Balearica regulorum* were both recorded here during the 1970s and 1980s and, although neither has been seen for a decade, suitable habitat exists for breeding birds to re-establish here.

Key species

A1	<i>Geronticus calvus</i>	<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>
	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>
	<i>Geocolaptes olivaceus</i>	<i>Serinus symonsi</i>
	<i>Anthus chloris</i>	

A2 (090) Lesotho highlands EBA: All three species of this EBA that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 2.

A3 (A07) Afrotropical Highlands biome: All three species of this biome that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 3.

Other threatened/endemic wildlife

The alpine floral communities found in the Maloti/Drakensberg mountains are unique in southern Africa, holding a remarkable number

of endemic plant species. A recent botanical survey of three valleys in the Maloti yielded many species that could not be identified, and some may be new to science. The high-altitude streams and seepages hold the Drakensberg-endemic frogs *Strongylopus hymenopus* and *Amieta vertebralis*.

Conservation issues

The park was established in 1951 and decreed in the Lesotho Government Gazette in 1970. *Anthus chloris* is the only globally threatened passerine species in Lesotho, where it is almost entirely restricted to the lush grassland of Sehlabathebe. The species was probably historically widespread in Lesotho, but extensive overgrazing and burning practices have probably pushed it to the verge of extinction in the country. An awareness campaign concerning the rarity and importance of this species should be introduced, in an attempt to reduce the threat from herdboys who may trap birds for food. The considerable pressure for the park to be opened up to grazing by domestic stock must be resisted.

Further reading

Allan *et al.* (1996), Bonde (1993), Brown (1992a,b), Donnay (1990), Jilbert (1979, 1982), Manry (1984, 1985a,b), Meakins *et al.* (1988), Mendelsohn (1984), Osborne and Tigar (1989, 1990, 1992a,b).

Upper Quthing valley

LS006

Admin region Quthing

Coordinates 30°21'S 28°08'E

A1, A2 (090), A3 (A07), A4ii

Area 30,000 ha Altitude 1,900–2,800 m

Unprotected

Site description

This site consists of the near-vertical cliffs flanking the 230-m-deep gorge of the Qanatu river, together with the surrounding mountainous area, including Letšeng-la-Letsie. These highlands support a traditional pastoral economy with a low-density population. Approximately 35% of the surrounding area (within a 25 km radius) is cultivated, the remainder being open pasture. The vegetation is primarily montane grassland, but thick bush and scrub flank the lower gorge walls. High-altitude shrubs form a heath of *Erica*, *Chrysocoma* and *Helichrysum*. The summits are generally rocky with bare, shallow soil patches and rock sheets near the escarpment.

Birds

See Box and Tables 2 and 3 for key species. This site supports two 'nucleus' breeding colonies of *Gyps coprotheres*, Upper Quthing Valley (the largest single colony in Lesotho) and Seforong, which together hold over 200 birds (95 pairs). The nests are concentrated on the upper third of the cliff, on gorge walls and basalt pinnacles. The rare but widespread *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis* also forages widely across this area. Other cliff-nesting species include *Buteo rufofuscus*, *Falco biarmicus* and *Ciconia nigra*. The high-altitude rocky, boulder-strewn slopes and outcrops (above 2,000 m) support *Chaetops aurantius*, and the surrounding grassy slopes and plateau hold *Anthus hoeschi*, which breeds in large numbers during the austral summer (especially above 3,000 m). The grassy slopes and valleys also hold *Sagittarius serpentarius*. *Serinus symonsi* occurs commonly above 1,500 m, and has become commensal with humans, occupying and foraging in villages and among fallow and harvested crop fields. *Anthus crenatus*, *Monticola explorator* and *Geocolaptes olivaceus* occur commonly in the vicinity of rocky outcrops. *Cercomela sinuata hypernephela*, *Sylvia layardi barnesi* and *Circus maurus* are uncommon. The small, isolated, Lesotho subspecies *Parus afer arens* occurs at the site. Small numbers of *Geronticus calvus* occasionally forage in this area and it is thought that there may be breeding colonies in the vicinity.

Key species

A1	<i>Geronticus calvus</i>	<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>
	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>
	<i>Geocolaptes olivaceus</i>	<i>Serinus symonsi</i>

A2 (090) Lesotho highlands EBA: All three species of this EBA that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 2.

A3 (A07) Afrotropical Highlands biome: All three species of this biome that occur in Lesotho have been recorded at this site; see Table 3.

		Breeding (pairs)	Non-breeding
A4ii	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>	95	200–250

■ Other threatened/endemic wildlife

The alpine floral communities found in the Maloti/Drakensberg mountains are unique in southern Africa, holding a remarkable number of endemic plant species. A recent botanical survey of three valleys in the Maloti yielded many species that could not be identified, and some may be new to science.

■ Conservation issues

The site is located on communally owned tribal land. There seems to have been a decline in the number of *Gyps coprotheres* breeding at these colonies. Apparently, local people kill vultures here—the birds are utilized extensively for traditional medicinal and ceremonial purposes and are targeted by rural residents who use either poisoned carcasses or gin-traps to kill them. As the site holds more than 2% of the world's breeding population of *Gyps coprotheres*, it urgently needs to be monitored, and the rural residents should be the target of a vigorous awareness campaign, to improve the public understanding of vultures and the significance of the site. Fortunately, this area also holds some fine rock art, and there is currently a UN-sponsored project

under the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to develop reserves in Quthing District. This initiative may help to secure conservation of the natural environment and improve management practices within the area.

Geronticus calvus may occasionally be taken by local people for food or medicinal purposes. *Buteo rufofuscus* and *Falco biarmicus* are sometimes persecuted as chicken thieves, and *Bubo capensis* is occasionally used for medicinal purposes. There is no conservation concern for these common and widespread birds, provided that levels of persecution and utilization do not increase. Overgrazing, trampling, agriculture and other human activities have not seriously affected any of the globally near-threatened, restricted-range or biome-restricted birds. Some species, such as *Serinus symonsi*, benefit from an association with humans.

■ Further reading

Allan *et al.* (1996), Bonde (1993), Brown (1992a,b), Donnay (1990), Jilbert (1979, 1982), Manry (1984, 1985a,b), Meakins *et al.* (1988), Mendelsohn (1984), Osborne and Tigar (1989, 1990, 1992a,b).

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