

## *Picathartes* (Rock Fowls or Bald Crows)

I have chosen another fairly little known bird for this article on species that feature rarely on bird stamps, viz, the *Picathartes* often known as Rock Fowls or Bald Crows. The fact of a variety of names stems from a long-running debate on the correct classification of these birds which were once considered to be part of the *Corvidae* (Crows) but have from time to time also thought to be closely related to babblers, flycatchers or starlings. Currently they are assigned to their own single genus with only two species, the White-necked *Picathartes* (WNP) which has yellow and black bare skin on its head while the Grey-necked *Picathartes* (GNP) is slightly more colourful with its bare skin patches of red, lilac-blue to powder-blue and black. The Latin generic name is based on *Pica* for “magpie” and *cathartes* for “vulture”; maybe we should call them Magpie Vultures!



**Cameroon 1991 SG 1143 and 1144**

**Gabon 1971 SG 435**

The genus is found in Western Africa with WNP inhabiting Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast and Ghana while GNP inhabits territory further east in Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) and Central African Republic. They are birds of lowland rainforest but with access to rocky terrain where nests of mud and leaves are typically built on fairly inaccessible rock faces. Normally two eggs are laid in the rainy season and the chicks fledge in about 25 days. Both species are considered vulnerable and are rare but widespread in their preferred habitat.



**Benin 1996 SG 1426**

**Nigeria 1990 SG 601**

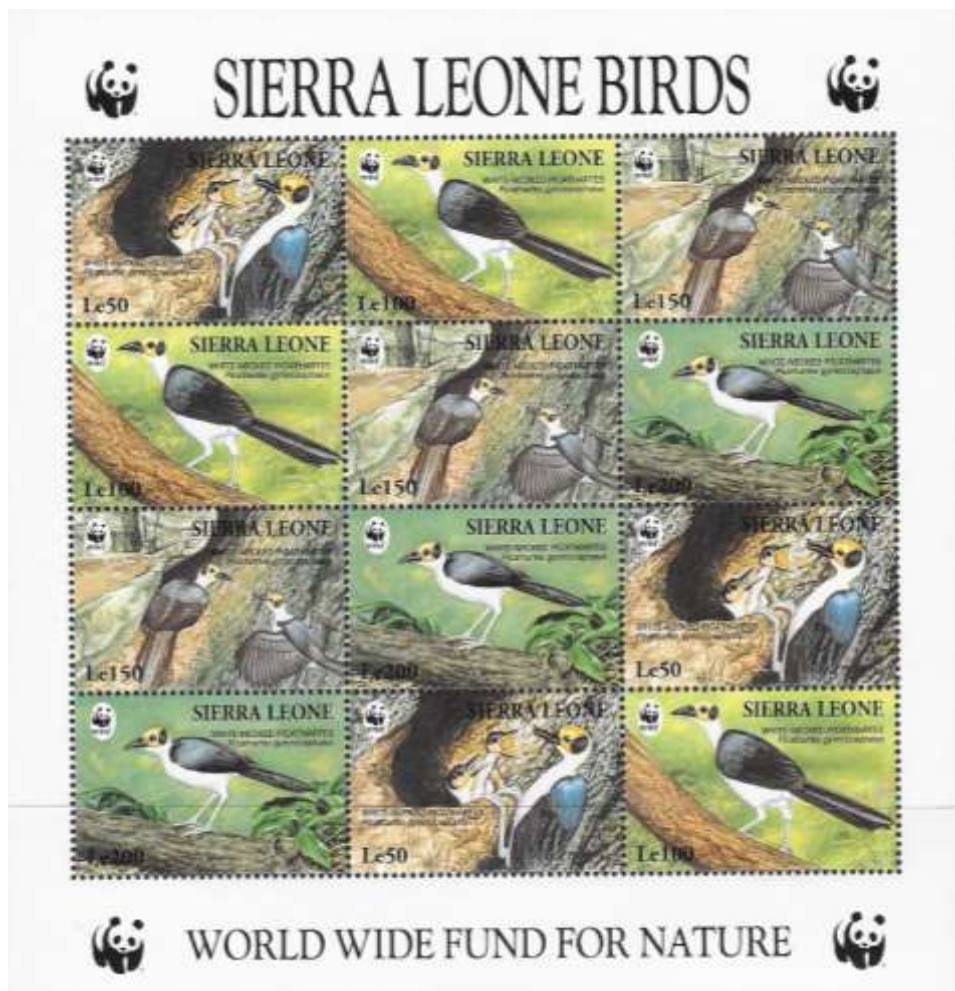
**Sierra Leone 1990 SG 1911A**

The idea of a bald bird probably conjures up concern that it may be stressed or ill in some way such as the affliction of domestic species whose feathers either fall out or are pulled out. However, it is quickly remembered that most vultures have largely un-feathered heads, a primary advantage when foraging inside the carcass of a dead animal. Observations of rooks show that much of their faces are bare, again presumably an advantage when pecking into muddy ground. As far as I can ascertain, no-one has observed the necessity for *Picathartes* having bare heads other than their decorative coloured skin patches. They forage on the forest floor using their strong feet and legs to bound gracefully along while hunting for mostly insects and other invertebrates but the naked head would not appear to offer any advantage for this aspect of their biology; chicks are often fed with small frogs and even crabs.

There are only about a dozen stamps that feature these species and are typically issued by the countries where they are found. Sierra Leone has the majority as the illustrations within this article show and feature not only a single stamp in the larger definitive sets but also a miniature sheet as well as a “sheetlet” of 12 stamps (3 sets of four values) produced in conjunction with WWF in 1994.



**Sierra Leone – 1994 SG MS2158**



**Sierra Leone – 1994 SG 2150-3**

Information for this article came from various sources including Wikipedia and Handbook of the Birds of the World Vol.12 which co-incidentally has a fine picture of the GNP on its cover.

**Tony Statham**