

CALL FOR: PhD Candidate Applicant

The Conservation Biology Lab at the University of Neuchâtel is looking for a qualified candidate to jointly submit a project proposal to the Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship in 2026. We will collaboratively prepare the proposal for the project below for consideration for the funding scheme.

Funding scheme: Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships 2027 – 2028

Duration: 4 years (subject to academic progress during the first 12 months).

Start date: 1 September 2027

Deadline to apply: 1 June 2026

Countries: [See the list of eligible countries](#). Candidates based in West African countries are especially encouraged to apply.

Project: Habitat Selection and Avoidance of Cocoa Agroforests by Migratory Birds in Côte d'Ivoire

Long-distance migratory birds from the Palearctic, many of which are suffering steep population declines, regularly overwinter in sub-Saharan Africa, where they encounter a mosaic of natural and human-modified habitats. Despite increasing research on migration routes and stopover ecology, comparatively little is known about fine-scale habitat use and how migrants select or avoid anthropogenic habitats such as cocoa agroforests, particularly in West Africa. These questions are especially relevant in Côte d'Ivoire, where ~70% of the original forest cover has been converted to cocoa plantations. As a result, there have been large-scale changes in the habitat composition encountered by migratory birds. Côte d'Ivoire is the world's biggest cocoa grower, and [recent reports](#) show that cocoa agroforestry could play a major role in achieving the country's forest cover restoration objectives.

Preliminary observations from cocoa study sites in southern Côte d'Ivoire (Jarrett et al. 2021; personal communication C. Jarrett) suggest that Palearctic migrants are rarely seen in cocoa plantations, despite being abundant in nearby savanna habitats at Lamto Ecological Research Station, located only 10–20 km away. *This contrast raises questions about habitat avoidance, resource limitation, and interspecific interactions.* Understanding whether migrants actively avoid cocoa agroforests could shed light on habitat suitability, potential ecological traps, and the broader impacts of land-use change on migratory bird survival and distribution. From Jarrett et al 2021: “In light of the current push to increase cocoa production in sub-Saharan Africa, our results provide policymakers opportunities for more wildlife-friendly cocoa schemes that maximize avian diversity.”

This project aims to quantify habitat selection and potential avoidance of cocoa agroforests by migratory birds in Côte d’Ivoire, using the Lamto savanna and nearby cocoa landscapes as a natural experimental gradient.

Specific Objectives:

- Quantify habitat use and abundance of Palearctic migrants and resident birds across a savanna–cocoa gradient.
- Methods development: Design and test protocol to quantify active avoidance of cocoa agroforests using transect-based distance modelling methods (Bennett et al. 2015).
- Compare temporal patterns of migratory bird presence (arrival, peak abundance, departure) between habitats.
- Using the newly developed method, quantify avoidance of cocoa agroforests by migrants and compare to resident species. From these findings, derive conservation-oriented guidelines on landscape management and land-use change.
- Assess body condition and potential fitness differences between migrants and residents across habitats.

Project Leads

Dr. Ellen C. Martin – Conservation Biology Lab, University of Neuchâtel

Dr. Crinan Jarrett – Migration Unit, Swiss Ornithological Institute (Vogelwarte)

Collaborators:

Prof. Hilaire Yaokokoré-Beïbro, Lamto Ecological Research Station, Côte d’Ivoire and Ornithological Society of Côte d’Ivoire

University Félix Houphouët-Boigny (UFHB), Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire

Desired Candidate Profile

Academic Background

- Strong background in ecology, conservation biology, zoology, or ornithology.
- Solid understanding of avian ecology, particularly migratory systems (Palearctic–Afrotropical migrants).
- Familiarity with habitat selection, land-use change, or agroforestry systems is an advantage.

Field Skills & Experience

- Demonstrated experience with bird fieldwork, including:
 - Visual and acoustic bird identification (Palearctic migrants and/or Afrotropical birds).
 - Line transects, point counts, or distance sampling methods.

- Comfortable working in tropical field conditions, including high temperatures and remote field sites.
- Experience working in savanna, forest, or agricultural landscapes is a plus.
- Willingness to collaborate closely with local researchers and institutions in Côte d'Ivoire.

Quantitative & Analytical Skills

- Experience with statistical analysis in R (required).
 - Interest in or experience with distance sampling, habitat selection or occupancy modelling, temporal analyses of migration phenology.
- Ability to manage, clean, and analyze large ecological datasets.
- Openness to learning advanced modelling approaches if not already familiar.

Other Desired Qualities

- Capacity to work both independently and collaboratively in an international research team.
- Good written and oral scientific communication skills in English.
- Basic French by the start of the first field season is a requirement. Candidate should show willingness to learn basic French if not already fluent. French proficiency is preferable.
- Curious, adaptable, and solution-oriented when working in logistically challenging environments.

Eligibility Criteria:

- Master's degree or equivalent completed by 31 July 2026.
- Date of birth after 31 December 1990.
- Detailed research plan with a timeline specifying key milestones and activities.
- If the applicant already resides in Switzerland: date of entry must not be earlier than 1 August 2025 (submit a copy of the registration confirmation or residence permit).

Benefits:

- CHF 2,400 per month to cover basic living expenses of one person.
Please note: This scholarship is not a salary.
- Health insurance: FCS covers the premiums for compulsory health insurance for scholarship holders from non-EU/EFTA countries. Scholarship holders from EU/EFTA countries must cover these costs themselves.
- One-time grant of CHF 600 for rental deposit.
- Half-Fare Travelcard for public transport
- In addition, the coordinating body organizes excursions and activities for federal scholarship holders.

- Return flight allowance
 - Scholarship holders from non-EU/EFTA countries receive a return flight allowance (amount determined by country of origin). This allowance may be used up to two months after expiry of the scholarship exclusively for the purpose of returning to the country of origin.

For more questions and answers, please see the [FAQ](https://www.sbf.admin.ch/en/faq-swiss-government-excellence-scholarships)
(<https://www.sbf.admin.ch/en/faq-swiss-government-excellence-scholarships>)

Application Required Documents:

To apply, please send the following documents to both Drs. Ellen Martin and Crinan Jarrett at ellen.martin@unine.ch & crinan.jarrett@vogelwarte.ch:

- Complete CV including educational background, degrees, awards, positions, publications, practical experience.
- Letter of motivation (max. 2 pages): Interest in the project and the qualities of the desired candidate profile you possess, reasons for stay in Switzerland, significance for future career and professional plans after the scholarship.

Interviews will be conducted during the week of June 15 – 19, 2026.