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EDITORIAL

This is the final edition of *Lanioturdus* for 1997 — the fourth of the year and an achievement for all those people who contributed to the journal over the past year. Although we have seldom exceeded 40 pages in any one edition we feel that the value of the magazine has increased in that we are keeping our members informed and hopefully fostering more interest in birding in Namibia as a whole. Many thanks to all the authors and artists who submitted material for the year and I hope that the articles will keep on rolling in to make 1998 as successful as 1997.

The summer heat is upon us and with the first migrants having already arrived, you should all be looking forward to some excellent birding over the coming holiday period. This may be a particularly interesting year — the predictions of the weather boffins is that *El Nino* is likely to negatively influence the rainfall patterns in the country. This in turn will have a major effect on the distribution and breeding of birds over the next couple of months. I encourage all of you to get out there and look at what's going on — keep field notes on your observations and make some comparisons with what you know of previous years. This applies equally to common as well as rarer species. How much do we really know about doves in this country? I have noticed that in Bushmanland and at Aris, near Windhoek, that the numbers of Namaqua Doves is highly variable both within and between years. I suspect the same thing of Laughing Doves which seem to disappear at certain times of the year. Keeping basic notes and records can tell us so much about the birds we take for granted (many of which are surprisingly poorly studied). Your notes and records do not have to take the form of detailed scientific observations — casual and incidental observations are also valuable. Collect information, put it together in the form of an article and send it to *Lanioturdus*. Anyone can do it and I encourage of all of you to try!!!

On behalf of the Namibia Bird Club Committee, I would like to wish you all a merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year. Good birding in 1998 and let's hear from you.

Congo basin, from west to east Africa. After breeding, these birds migrate south to southern Africa, and constitute the bulk of our non-breeding Yellowbilled Kite population. These birds arrive some months after our breeding birds, but timing and dispersal (and thus numbers in a particular region) depend on rainfall patterns. They are nomadic and follow the rain fronts, being most common in the semi-arid and dry sub-humid regions of Namibia, Botswana, western Zimbabwe and the northern Transvaal. (2) The smaller population breeds in southern Africa, mainly in the northern and eastern regions. These birds arrive early, in August, and breed from September. After breeding, they migrate northwards, probably to the sahelian regions of west and east Africa, where they arrive probably some months after the breeding population. In their northern range they are probably nomadic and follow the rain fronts in semi-arid and dry sub-humid regions.

It now simply remains for us to gather the evidence to prove (or disprove) this hypothesis.

**A RASH OF RARITIES:
BIRDING AT IMPALILA ISLAND AND ALONG THE
ZAMBEZI RIVER**

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Impalila Island, the eastern most extension of the Caprivi Strip, is a small area (4 km x 10 km) of relatively high ground at the confluence of the Zambezi and Chobe Rivers. Bounded in the West by the Kasai Channel and in the North and South by the Zambezi and Chobe Rivers respectively, the island is basically formed on the western most extension of the basaltic rocks characteristic of the Victoria Falls area. The island comprises a mosaic of diverse habitats, ranging from open water and rapids, to

permanent wetland systems dominated by *Cyperus papyrus* and *Phragmites* reedbeds, to dry woodlands characterised by Mopane. The eastern end of the island is much lower than the central-western end and the vegetation here is made up of bare open grasslands, extensive river margin grasslands and patches of waterberry (*Syzygium guiniense*) thickets on the river margins. On the sandier islands just to the north of Impalila the vegetation is a mixture of dense Ana Tree (*Faidherbia albida*) woodlands with Sausage Trees (*Kigelia africana*), Jackal Berry (*Diospyros mespiliformis*) and a variety of understory shrubs and small trees. The island lies at the junction of a wide range of broader habitats (Kalahari Woodlands, wetlands, Mopane, riverine forests, etc.) and has always been thought of as an area of diverse birdlife.

Although there were regular visits to Impalila during the mid to late 1980's, the area is relatively poorly documented from an ornithological point of view. Koen (1988) describes few records from Impalila as does Branfield (undated manuscript). Steve Braine visited the area regularly during the late 1980's and these records are included in *The Atlas of Southern African Birds*.

Anton Coy (AC), Elmarie Coy (EC) and I (CH) visited the island from 18–22/11/97 on a birdwatching trip and were guided by Simon Parker (SP), Tim Figaji (TF) and Patrick Sawena (PS).

Late on the afternoon of 18/11/97 AC, EC and CH accompanied TF on a boat trip to look for Western Banded Snake Eagle on the islands to the north of Impalila. On the small island immediately north of Impalila, TF spotted some guineafowl in long grass on the floodplain margin. On circling back these were identified as Crested Guineafowl (*Guttera pucherani*). We then landed and went to check the numbers on the island. Only two birds were flushed. This record constitutes a first for Impalila and extends the known range of this species in the Caprivi. It is largely known from dense woodlands and thickets along the Kwando River and in the forest reserve area between Katima and the Kwando River. There are very few records from Namibia. Several days later, we met up with Kim Nixon, a guide with AfroVentures who reported seeing two or three birds in the

Mowana Lodge area immediately opposite Impalila in Botswana.

With the onset of rains in the area, large numbers of skulking brown warblers were very vocal in the reed beds. With some patience we were able to get good views on the first afternoon (and subsequent days) of calling Greater Swamp Warbler (*Acrocephalus rufescens*), Cape Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus gracilirostris*) and African Sedge Warbler (*Bradypterus baboecala*). On several occasions we had good views of Great Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*) and European Sedge Warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*), both Palearctic migrants. A notable migrant had been seen around the lodge earlier in November by TF and SP. An Olive Tree Warbler (*Hippolais olivetorum*) had been in the large baobab (around which the main lodge is built) for several days and had been seen by just about all the lodge staff. This large warbler is probably overlooked in Namibia and must be regular through the Caprivi on passage to and from its wintering grounds in Botswana.



The morning of 19/11/97 saw us (AC, CH and PS) sneaking along through river margin woodlands looking for African Finfoot (*Podica senegalensis*). Although we were unable to find any we were rewarded with excellent views of mixed flocks of Melba Finch (*Pytilia melba*) and Golden-backed Pytilia (*Pytilia afra*). Impalila is probably the only place in Namibia where both these species are seen together with any regularity. Golden-backed Pytilia are known to be eruptive and have turned up at widely separated sites in the eastern Caprivi. We were too

early to find the pytilia's brood-parasite, Broad-tailed Paradise Whydah (*Vidua obtusa*), in breeding plumage, but it also known from the island. Other highlights were our first good looks at suspected (Northern) Grey-headed Sparrow (*Passer griseus*) (see the article on Grey-headed Sparrow complex later in this issue, for more details) and several cuckoos, including Striped (*Clamator levaillantii*) and Jacobin (*Clamator jacobinus*).

A possible Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) in an area of flat rocks and rapids had us guessing, but we were unable to confirm the sighting — frustratingly it was the one morning we decided that we did not need to take a telescope along — a sobering lesson.

The afternoon was taken up with an extended boat trip along the Chobe River, a must for anyone visiting Impalila. The "standard" birds, such as White-faced Duck (*Dendrocygna vidua*), Coppery-tailed Coucal (*Centropus cupreicaudatus*) and Red-winged Pratincole (*Glareola pratincola*), were all along the river as were herds of Elephant, Impala, several Chobe Bushbuck and Puku. While watching some Long-toed Plovers (*Vanellus crassirostris*) we were rewarded with outstanding views of a male Pink-throated Longclaw (*Macronyx ameliae*) at about 10 m. An adult Slaty Egret (*Ardea vinaceigula*), was equally obliging, preening and stretching on a small sandbar next to the boat. It is seldom that you get to see the wine-coloured throat from which this magnificent birds gets its scientific name. Further west up the river (near Puku Flats) while watching a Lesser Jacana (*Micropara capensis*), we found a pair of Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*), which were at first were suspected of being one of the golden plovers in the same genus. They subsequently took off and the dark axillaries confirmed their identification. This is, however, a rare sighting as there are few records of Grey Plover (essentially a coastal species) from the interior of southern Africa.

An adult Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), which had been known to overwinter was the highlight of the afternoon. We spent at least 30 minutes watching the bird as it "water-skied" — a type of behaviour none of us had previously ever seen. The bird would fly off its perch and go into a relatively highwinged glide while approaching the water, it would then

lower its legs into the water (the skiing part), dip its head and drink from the surface of the water. It repeated this behaviour on four occasions, with one pass consisting of an extended "ski" (25–30 m) with only a single head-dip for drinking. No reference to this behaviour could be found in the literature.

The staff of Impalila Island Lodge have reported seeing Olive Woodpecker (*Mesopicos griseocephalus*) on several occasions and AC, EC, CH & PS left the lodge early on 20/11/97 to look for this species in the dense mixed *Faidherbia* and riverine woodlands on the small island immediately north of Impalila. Kemp (1971) collected Olive Woodpeckers from an island two kilometres downstream of Katima Mulilo (Hippo Island??) and there are a few records for the Katima area from the Atlas period. The form occurring here is the distinctive central African subspecies (*M.g. ruwenzori*) which reaches its southern most limits in the Caprivi.

Using dug-out *mekoros* we were able to get downstream through the rapids with the minimum of hassle, approaching Rock Pratincole (*Glareola nuchalis*) to within five metres. The dense vegetation on the island makes for difficult birding and the morning got off to a slow start. Fleeting views of Schalow's Lourie (*Tauraco schalowi*), Heuglin's Robin (*Cossypha heuglini*) and Yellow-breasted Apalis (*Apalis flavida*) provided some compensation, but the woodpecker remained elusive. Green Pigeon (*Treron calva*) were all around the place but again we battled for good views.

Klaas' Cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx klaas*) started calling and while scratching around trying to get a view of it, we were surprised to hear an Emerald Cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx cupreus*) call very close by. Moving into a clearing we had a fleeting glimpse of the bird as Black-eyed Bulbuls (*Pycnonotus barbatus*) chased it off. After trying to call the bird back, using tapes, we were just about to leave, when PS found a bird hopping slowly through the upper canopy of some tall trees in the riverine vegetation on the edge of the clearing. Unable to get the scope onto the bird quickly enough, it flew about 40 m across the clearing and into the next set of tall trees. We had been unable to get an ID on the bird, but the flight was distinctive, slow and flopping and when the bird landed it gave an exaggerated wingflop and tuck-

away. It was, however, distinctly cuckoo-like — odd indeed. We were immediately able to get a scope onto the bird and were surprised to find a Thick-billed Cuckoo (*Pachycoccyx audeberti*), a first for all of us. The bird was identified on the basis of its uniform dark upper parts, large bill, uniform pale underparts with a few distinctive bars on the undertail coverts. The eye was large, with a distinctive yellow eye-ring. We were all able to see the bird clearly through the scope as the bird sat out on a branch for about 90 seconds. This record may constitute the first record for this species in Namibia, but it has been expected to occur for a long time. The principal (and only known) host of this species is Red-billed Helmet Shrike (*Prionops retzii*) which is common along the major rivers of north-east Namibia. Thick-billed Cuckoo are known from northern Botswana and near Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe (Vernon, 1997).

The eastern end of Impalila Island is distinctly different from the rest of the island in that it is made up of alluvial sand and clay deposits, is sparsely vegetated and has numerous small pans and flood areas which form grassy plains during periods of low water. We (AC, CH & SP) visited this area on 21/11/97. Several Jacobin Cuckoos were found calling in small patches of *Acacia kirkii* and our list of cuckoos was rounded off nicely when we found a Great Spotted Cuckoo (*Clamator glandarius*). This particular bird showed distinctive rufous patches in the primaries a characteristic associated with juvenile/immature birds. This is far too early in the year for immature birds from the intra-African breeding population to appear in Namibia — this may indicate that at least part of the population visiting southern Africa is derived from a population occurring north of the equator.

Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) are generally uncommon to rare in Namibia, with a handful of records from around the country in any one year. In some open fields and grasslands we were surprised to find at least 150 birds of several races in loose association. During the course of the morning we found several other pockets of birds and we estimate that we saw over 300 in the morning and the following day on a trip up the Zambezi River. Races clearly identified were *M.f. flava*, *M.f. thunbergi* and a single male of the yellow-headed race *M.f. lutea*.

After flushing hundreds of Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*) we were eventually rewarded with some good views of Ethiopian Snipe (*Gallinago nigripennis*) and a single Slaty Egret. Most of the pans had filled too recently to harbour many birds, but later in the rainy season these pans will probably be very productive.

With the day warming up fast, we decided to head into the Waterberry (*Syzygium guinieense*) thickets along the Chobe River before going back to camp. In an area with scrubby Date Palms (*Phoenix reclinata*), we were almost immediately rewarded (and extremely surprised) with (admittedly poor) views of Collared Palm Thrush (*Cichladusa arquata*). The birds responded to a brief tape play-back but remained hidden and difficult to see. This sighting may again constitute a first record for Namibia, but is not unexpected. This species has been recorded breeding in the grounds of the Mowana Lodge on the banks of the Chobe River (Randall, 1996), literally 30 m from Impalila Island. It is also well known from the Zambian side of the Zambezi where it is known from isolated patches from Livingstone all the way up to Sesheke (P Leonard, pers comm) near Katima Mulilo. Further exploration of suitable habitat on Impalila and its associated islands, is sure to turn up more records of this species.

Night birds were difficult to find on the island, and the only nightjar identified visually (we had heard Natal Nightjar, *Caprimulgus natalensis*) was a single Mocambique Nightjar (*Caprimulgus fossii*), found behind the main lodge buildings. A short boat ride with spotlights gave us excellent views of White-backed Night Heron (*Gorsachius leuconotus*), as well as numerous roosting species such as Blue-cheeked Bee-Eater (*Merops persicus*), Brown-throated Martin (*Riparia paludicola*) and Malachite Kingfisher (*Alcedo cristata*).

The next morning (22/11/97) four of us (AC, EC, CH & SP) left early for the long haul up the Zambezi River to Kalizo near Katima Mulilo. The first birds of interest were the large numbers of African Skimmers (*Rhychops flavirostris*) on the sandbars and islands. SP took us to a small sandy island (downstream of Nantungu Island) where birds were still breeding. This surprised me, in that on the Okavango River most of the breeding is over

by the middle of October. Although most of the birds found on the island were mostly well feathered and would shortly fly, some of the birds were still downy, with the lower jaw only marginally longer than the upper part of the bill. Further upstream, near the top end of Nantungu, we stopped to look at a large congregation of between 250 and 300 roosting skimmers. In a group of about 160 birds we counted 63 immature birds and in a separate group of about 60 birds there were 19 fledged immature birds. The population of skimmers on the Zambezi obviously had a successful breeding year compared to those on the Okavango River where very few nests were found and few young were raised (D. Pritchard, pers. comm.).

At the same site we came across more Yellow Wagtails and an assortment of waders, including an Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*), Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*), Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*), White-fronted Plover (*Charadrius marginatus*) and groups of Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*). While working through the groups of waders we noticed a long-legged, long-billed wader, immediately recognisable as a Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*), a rare Palaearctic migrant. This, however, was not the only rarity in this particular little patch. While looking at the Ringed Plovers we had noticed a bird which was distinctly larger, longer legged and deeper bodied than both the Ringed and White-fronted Plovers. The bird had a much heavier bill than both those species, a poorly developed supercillium, had distinctive brownish shoulder/breast patches which did not meet in the centre of the chest and unlike either of those species did not have a white collar going round the back of the neck. We were able to get fairly close to the bird, which was clearly seen in both the scope and binoculars by everyone. The bird was identified as a Mongolian Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*), a rare Palaearctic migrant, with very few inland records in southern Africa. There are some records from Zimbabwe, two from Etosha and several from wetlands in Zambia (Hockey 1997).

After this extended stop we needed to move on, but only got a couple of kilometres upstream before we had stopped again. This time for huge flocks of Black-winged Pratincoles (*Glareola nordmanni*) roosting on sand banks. There were probably between 3 500 and 4 000 birds on the sandbanks near Mwandu, as well as numerous smaller groups between Nantungu and

Mwandi. Interspersed among these large flocks were relatively high numbers of Caspian Plovers (*Charadrius asiaticus*), a bird normally associated with short-grass plains and drier areas in Namibia.

The day ended well at Kalizo where we sat and watched a group of three males and one female Painted Snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*) feeding in a small backwater near the lodge. Even more exciting was the group of four Spotted-necked Otters which came past the following morning — but the birding wasn't over yet. As we (AC & CH) were walking out of the camp we were both drawn by a distinctive call, that of Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*). We spotted a single bird flying rapidly upstream, calling. Although relatively regularly recorded inland in southern Africa it is generally rare on inland waters.

CH, AC and EC would like to thank all the staff at Impalila Island Lodge for the time and trouble they put into making the time we spent there so pleasant and successful. We can strongly recommend to anyone looking for exciting birding to visit this fantastic site, there are we have no doubt, many more exciting discoveries to be made here. My prediction is that the next rare bird to turn up in the area will be Gull-billed Tern (*Geochelidon nilotica*), a Palearctic migrant recorded on several occasions most notably at Victoria Falls (Pollard, 1992)



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BEWARE!!! GIN TRAPS AT THE SEWAGE WORKS

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One Saturday in November this year, Margot Van Heerden and myself visited the Gammams Water treatment ponds for the morning. We were slowly working our way along one of the moats that bisect the eastern-most ponds, trying to tune our ears to the calls of Baillon's Crakes but unfortunately after three hours of search we were unable to hear a single one. We were amused by two melanistic Gabar Goshawks being mobbed by a flock of Wattled Starlings and later by two Grey Hornbills. Finally we saw the goshawks taking their frustrations out on a Steppe Buzzard. Margot's highlight of the day was a sub-adult Greenbacked Heron that perched, confidently, in good light. I had a great morning scouting the reed edges, but in doing so I came across a rather unnerving sight, a dead Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) with a gin trap clamping its tarsi.

The bird had clearly struggled in vain to free itself — its thigh was raw but the bone was not broken. Presumably the gin trap must have been attached at some stage to an anchoring peg, but judging by the looks of things some sort of predator got there before whoever had set it, did. The head and neck of the moorhen were covered in dried saliva whilst the rest of the body appeared untouched; as if a snake had tried to ingest it but given up. The body had started to decay, but I brought it home to take some pictures and illustrate the trap so that you can all have an identikit of this item.

The trap mechanism is identical to that of a gin trap, except somewhat more "ethno". The beauty lies in that the whole spring mechanism is made out of one single strand of steel wire, easily acquired from any fence in the vicinity. Two separate, yet identically shaped, wire arches had been carefully hinged to the spring lever which snaps them close once the trigger is set. In Spain, they bait them with live mealy-worms (*Tenebrio molitor*) and flying ants. Once a starving migrant (anything from a Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) or a Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*) to a Robin