LANIOTURDUS

Newsletter of the SWA/Namibia Bird Club
Mitteilungen des SWA/Namibia Vogelklubs
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Bird Club Activities

Aktivitäten des Vogelklubs

BIRD CLUB OUTING: WATERBERG PLATEAU PARK
20 - 22 March 1987

On Friday 20 March 1987, a group of 13 members of the SWA Scientific Society Bird Club and Nature Conservation officers converged on the Waterberg Plateau Park for a special study weekend organised by Chris Brown.

Due to the late arrival of two members of the party, the group arrived at the Wilderness Area campsite just before sunset, which gave everybody just enough time to settle in before nightfall.

The campsite is situated amongst natural stone pillars reminiscent of the stone tawers of the Zimbabwe ruins, which tended to give an impression of desolation, in spite of the normal activities associated with a campsite of this size, which consisted of about 8 dome-type tents with shade netting roofs and porches, a concrete fireplace and rhino-proofed shower/toilet facilities, complete with a camouflage water reservoir.

After taking note of Chris' request to use water sparingly, and his warning to treat the toilet seat with respect, everybody settled down round the fire for a social chat, braai and a bit of owl-calling, which, however, proved to be unsuccessful. Chris then gave a brief outline of the next two days' activities, after which the fireside group gradually shrank as people retired to their tents.

On Saturday morning, we set out for the Cape Vulture nesting sites on the two Nature Conservation Landcruisers, with Chris and his assistant, Darryl, at the wheels.

After meeting up with Tryg Cooper, Chief Warden of the Plateau Park, on the way, and getting stuck in the marshy ground below the cliffs for a while, we arrived at the colony site during mid-morning. Here the group split into two: one half went up to the base of the cliffs to look for signs of vulture mortalities, whilst the other half set up mist nets next to a small dam nearby.

Netting results were disappointing, probably due to the widespread availability of water after recent rains; the only catches were an Icterine Warbler, a Titbabbler and a Namaqua Dove.

The party searching the base of the cliffs found no signs of recent juvenile Cape Vulture deaths. Chris explained that this was an encouraging sign, but that juvenile survival over the short term is not as important a factor for the survival of a Cape Vulture Colony as is adult survival, since it takes about five years before such a nesting reaches breeding age. The life expectancy of Cape Vultures is a theoretical 20 years or more: for a colony to remain viable, it must have a stable adult population, and it is in an attempt to achieve this stability that the "vulture restaurant" on the plateau was established.

The main factors, which affect Cape Vulture colony stability, are the use of strychnine by farmers to kill vermin (such as jackals) and the availability of food in a suitable environment. Cape Vultures are heavy birds, and can require up to 100 m of open "runway" to become airborne. Bush encroachment over the last two decades has drastically reduced the open spaces in the vicinity of the Waterberg: Dieter Ludwig recalled that in the late 60's, there were large open spaces, and about 200 breeding pairs in the colony, as opposed to the 15 birds at present.

After a quick lunch, we departed for the vulture restaurant on the plateau. The journey proved to be thoroughly chilly and damp, since it started to rain and very few members of the party even considered taking along rainwear or warm clothing when we left camp that morning.

The vulture restaurant, however, was closed due to lack of customers, no doubt because of the inclement weather. After a quick inspection of the hide and the remains of past vulture meals, we returned to camp, stopping occasionally to identify birds or to watch game.

That evening, after the inevitable braai, part of the group went out on a night drive, using a powerful spotlight to trap nightjars and to spot game.

Sunday morning saw us departing for one of the waterholes, where mist nets were strung, again with disappointing results.

On Sunday afternoon, camp was broken after lunch and the group tackled the journey back to their respective homes in Otjiwarongo, Swakopmund and Windhoek.

A total of 17 species were recorded over the weekend, including Cape, White-backed- and Lappet-faced Vultures, Wahlbergs Eagle, Black Eagle, Little Sparrowhawk, Peregrine Falcon, Rock Kestrel, Black Cuckoo, Bradfield's Hornbill, White-breasted Sunbirds and numerous larks.

Once again our thanks to Chris Brown for making all the necessary arrangements to allow us to spend a very pleasant and informative weekend away from the city lights.

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