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Editorial

Tim Osborne

The dry season is truly upon us with the east winds howling in the interior and the berg winds affecting the coast. News reports state that the winds at Lüderitz were reaching 140 km/h. I wonder if there were any birders there to look for vagrants to the coastal desert? On our farm we have hardly seen any Queleas or Chestnut Weavers in months. I wonder where they have gone, in search of food and water I presume. The rodent high we have been experiencing for the past three years crashed and now the effects are evident in the form of missing birds. Gone are the Barn Owls, Black-shouldered Kites, Marsh Owls and even the Pearl-spotted Owls are scarce.

For those of you with Internet access you should check out the website for SAFRING. Go to www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu/safring_index.htm. The site has life histories of all the birds that have been ringed. Each week more histories are added to the site. If you have ever wondered how many African Hawk-Eagles have been ringed and where you can check it out. It might surprise you how many have been ringed since 1948. There have been 244 birds ringed and with the start of computerized records in 1975 Namibia has the most birds ringed at 76. There have been 10 recoveries with the longest distance being 795 km and oldest time being 22 years, 9 months and 21 days.

It is nice to see more articles being submitted by members from the coast. Lots of interesting birds with some out of place like Black Kites, Flufftails and breeding Gray’s Larks. I have requested the annual Chairman’s and Financial reports for those of us who could not attend the AGM and I will put them in the next edition. I, like many of the outlying members, wonder if any of the outings publicized in the Bird Call were attended, as there have not been any reports submitted to the Lanioturdus. These are important to write up because those of us who cannot attend meetings in Windhoek and outings close to Windhoek would like to know what is being seen and more about club activities.
BIRD NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

On 5 April 2003 we observed a Chestnutvented Titbabbler Parisma subcaeruleum adult feeding a "large noisy" chick in a suburban garden in Windhoek. On closer inspection the chick - which was almost fully grown - turned out to be that of a Diederik Cuckoo Chrysococcyx caprius with its unmistakable metallic green sheen. The Titbabbler parents were struggling feverishly to keep "their" fledgling supplied with food. According to Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa, Titbabbler are known to be predated by Diederik Cuckoo (24 host species authenticated) although the most heavily exploited hosts tend to be Cape Sparrow, Masked Weaver, Cape & Spottedbacked Weaver, Red Bishop and Wagtail. Have Chestnutvented Titbabbler been recorded as host to Diederik Cuckoo from Namibia? [Peter Cunningham & Willie Adank]

On 2 April 2003 I noticed that the topmost leaves of a Syringa Tree Melia azedarach had been heavily eaten by what I initially presumed to be caterpillars of some sort until noticing a horde of Whitebacked Mousebird and Blackthroated Canary in the tree. After observing them closely I determined that it was these two species that were responsible for the tatty-looking tree. Whitebacked Mousebird are known to eat leaves while Blackthroated Canary feed mainly on seed, insects and flowers. Even stranger is the fact that the Syringa Tree is poisonous, with the berries containing the toxic Tripterpenoid (limonoid of which melinoxon & melianol the two major compounds). It is one of the most common human poisonings in South Africa with chickens even occasionally being poisoned. Although the bark and leaves contain less of the toxin it is interesting to note the above mentioned species utilizing the leaves without any visible effects. Fortunately it would seem that for some or other inexplicable reason not all Syringa Trees are poisonous. The question now is - did the Mousebirds and Canaries know this? [Peter Cunningham]

On 25 May 2003 at 11h45 we observed 10 Lappet-faced Vultures and 82 Whitebacked Vultures settle on the ground - dust bathing, bathing & drinking water - at Dolomietpunt waterhole in the north western section of the Etosha National Park. Two Tawny Eagles as well as three Bateleurs were also present overhead. Although no carcass was present at the waterhole it was noticed that the crops of the Whitebacked Vultures were full indicating that they had fed recently. [Peter Cunningham & Willie Adank]

It is always satisfying to find a bird out of place or out of season. Hey, oddball, what the hell are you doing here at this time of year? This is what I said to the Black Kite cruising around Gobabeb in the Namib Desert on 16 May 2003. A medium east-wind was blowing, hot and blustery, when suddenly it careened into view, twisting and turning, tail rudder-like as it compensated for the gusts, keeping close to the canopy of Anartreees in the riverbed. Then it alighted on the ground, allowing me a clear look. The individual had unusual markings, an area of pale cream with darker brown flecks on its lower breast and belly, which met the more usual brown breast in a clear down turned crescent shape. Maybe not a Milvus, I thought for a moment, but the pale head, yellow cere and legs, and flight jizz, were unmistakable. A juvenile? It still puzzles me. Any remarks from raptrophiles on this observation? [John Pallet]

On 14 July 2003 I heard a noisy flock of Helmeted Guineafowl flying in the valley below our lodge. I looked to see what was causing the commotion and saw four Pale Chanting Goshawks (PCG) in pursuit of the flock. I saw one guineafowl running on the ground towards our hill. The four raptors were busy attacking the bird by divebombing it. It ran through the brush towards our waterhole. The other guineafowl were all calling alarm calls like mad. The guineafowl managed to escape the PCGs by running through thick bush but then it came to the waterhole and they dove at it when it was in the open. The guineafowl jumped into the water that was about 15cm deep. The PCGs continued their attack although they did not get into the water. One of the attackers jumped on the fowl's back and pecked at its head, then flew off. Other PCGs sat on the edge of the waterhole and flew short attacks at the fowl. By this time the guineafowl was looking very bedraggled, and I thought it might die at any moment. Eventually the PCGs flew up to the nearby trees and continued their attacks flying from the trees but they lessened the intensity of their attacks. In the end the PCGs gave up and left and the guineafowl crept out of the water and walked off. [Laurel Osborne]
While I was driving along the northern boundary of Etosha National Park near the new King Nehale Gate I noticed a pair of fork-tailed drongos that had been perched on the game fence, hawking insects. As I continued to drive I suddenly became aware that they were only 2 of a flock of 25 drongos that were on the fence. The habitat was open grassland which is unusual for drongos and since they are supposed to be non-migratory residents the occurrence of a “flock” these birds may indicate some sort of local movement due to the very dry conditions currently in northern Namibia. [Tim Osborne]

Here is an update on the Hartlaub’s Francolins at our farm, Windpoort Farm No. 428 in Outjo District. In my last article on the birds (Lanioturdus 35(2):19-21) in 2002 we had two flocks resident around our house. One pair with a juvenile female has moved further east and as far as we know has not bred in 2003. The other pair who had 3 male chicks still has one male juvenile in their flock. They also have not bred in 2003. Both flocks should have bred in May-June but the 2002-2003 rains were very poor with little grass growth. The one covey that lives around our house gives us a wake up call every morning. They fly up on top of our thatched roof each morning and call.

Latest newsflash on the birds. 17 August 2003.
Awoken at 0600h by the three Hartlaub’s calling from the rooftop. After calling for 5 minutes they flew down to the ground and started to feed. At approximately 0800h I noticed a Pale Chanting Goshawk perched about 50 m below our house. A few minutes later I heard the alarm calls of Hartlaub’s Francolins and saw two more Goshawks flying after them up the hill. The perched hawk took off to intercept the Francolin flight but missed. All three hawks pursued the Francolins to the west out of my sight. At 10:30h I walked to my bakkie and noticed a lone Francolin that I thought was the juvenile, hiding under a tree. I did not see any other birds about. Then at 1300h I heard a Francolin calling from the rocks below our house. It sounded like the juvenile calling for its family. It called for 5 minutes and I thought that maybe our Francolin flock was Goshawk breakfast. Then I noticed a pair of birds run across one of our paths and they joined the calling bird. It was interesting to watch the hawks hunt in their cooperative manner. [Tim Osborne]