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BIRDS OF THE SWAKOP RIVER LAGOON

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SUMMARY

Summer 1990/91 counts at the ephemeral Swakop River lagoon revealed an average of 963 wetland birds of 31 species. The total for the highest count of each species was 1 381 birds of 36 species. Hartlaub's Gulls *Larus hartlaubii* attempted to breed at the lagoon during the summer of 1989/90, when 150 active nests were counted; all but eight of these were washed away when the river flowed, before any of the young fledged. No nesting by the gulls was attempted at the lagoon during the 1990/91 summer. The Swakop River lagoon is not considered a conservation priority for wetland birds, but it is a well located site supporting a remarkable number and variety of birds for such a small wetland. As such it could be developed for educational and tourism purposes to the advantage of Swakopmund.

INTRODUCTION

The avifauna of the Namibian coast, its sandy beaches, bays and lagoons, has been well studied and documented. Published and unpublished reports cover the status and distribution of wetland birds from the Cunene River estuary on the northern border of Namibia (Braine 1990), southwards along the Skeleton Coast Park (Ryan *et al.* 1984; Tarr & Tarr 1987), the Cape Cross lagoon (Williams 1990), the central Namib region (Whitelaw *et al.* 1978), the Walvis Bay lagoon (Hockey & Bosman 1983; Williams 1987), Sandwich Harbour (Berry & Berry 1975, Simmons 1991), the southern "diamond" coast (Cooper *et al.* 1980), the Lüderitz bay region (Hockey 1982), and the Orange River mouth on the southern border (Williams 1986). No information exists, however, on the wetland birds of the small Swakop River lagoon immediately south of the town of Swakopmund.

The episodic Swakop River rises in the Okahandja district of central Namibia. It consists of two major westward draining catchments, the Khan and Swakop Rivers, which meet about 40 km from the Atlantic Ocean. The Swakop River lagoon is ephemeral in nature; in some years it may be completely dry. The present lagoon has endured since a large flood in the Khan River in 1987. The waterbody is about 2,5 ha in area and it is separated from the sea by a narrow beach about 30 m wide at high tide (Figure 1). The lagoon is backed by a dense stand of *Phragmites* reeds which

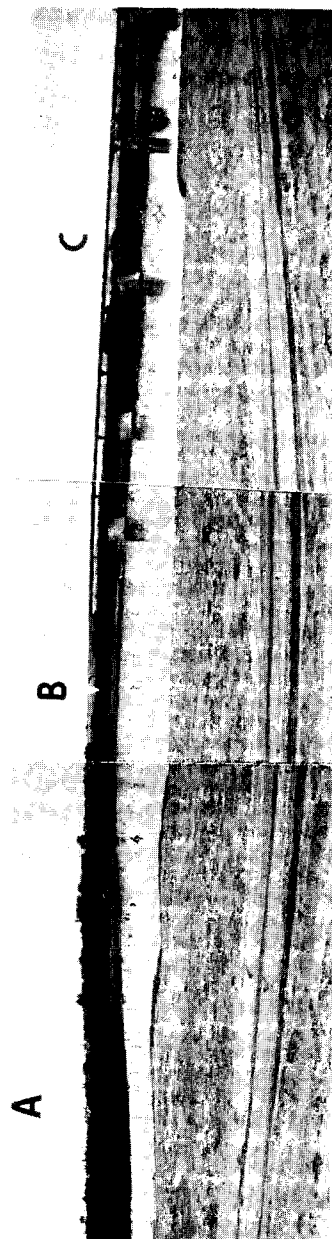


Figure 1: The Swakop River lagoon, from the beach looking eastward. A = town of Swakopmund, B = *Phragmites* reedbed, C = road bridge over Swakop River.

give way to sparse riverine vegetation dominated by small Tamarix bushes and the invasive alien shrub Nicotiana glauca.

Four counts of wetland birds were made at the Swakop River lagoon in late December 1990 and early January 1991, two in the morning and two in the late afternoon, using 8x40 binoculars and a 25x telescope.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Between 829 and 1177 wetland birds of up to 36 species were recorded in the Swakop River lagoon (Table 1). The highest count for each species gave a total of 1381 birds. In addition, the reedbeds bordering the lagoon supported Masked Weavers Ploceus velatus, Common Waxbills Estrilda astrild and African Marsh Warblers Acrocephalus baeticatus, and a nightly roost of about 250 European Swallows Hirundo rustica.

Resident waders accounted for only 3,4% of all wetland birds on the lagoon, and Palaearctic waders only 7,5%. By contrast, at the large Walvis Bay lagoon, resident and Palaearctic waders account for about 10% and 50% respectively of all wetland birds in summer (Hockey & Bosman 1983; Williams 1987). Flamingoes at the Swakop lagoon constituted 27% of the birds, with Lesser Phoenicopterus minor dominating Greater Flamingoes P. ruber by a ratio of about 8:1. At Walvis Bay, flamingoes make up about 40% of the birds counted in summer, and the ratio of Lesser to Greater Flamingoes is about 21:1. At the Swakop lagoon, young birds formed 40% of Greater Flamingoes and 32% of Lesser Flamingoes counted.

The most common species was Hartlaub's Gull Larus hartlaubii with up to 440 birds present at one time. No breeding was evident. In early January 1990 a breeding colony with 150 active nests was found on the mud flats east of the lagoon, between the water and the reeds. 88% of the nests contained one egg and the remainder two eggs, indicating that most breeding pairs had not completed their clutch. In addition, 48 newly-built, but empty, nests were present, indicating that the colony consisted of about 200 breeding pairs. About 780 birds were present. At least three active nests were attended by both a Hartlaub's and a Greyheaded Gull (hybridisation between these two species has been reported previously; Sinclair 1977). On revisiting the site in early February 1990, all but eight nests were found to have been washed away by a flood of the Swakop River in late January.

This breeding site is probably an alternative one to the Swakopmund Sewage Works, where 150-160 nests have been recorded (Williams *et al.* 1990). At the time that the birds were breeding at the Swakopmund lagoon, only a few isolated pairs were found breeding at the sewage works.

Counts of wetland birds at the Swakop River Lagoon in summer 1990/1991. Count a = 30/12/1990 @ 10h30, b = 30/12/1990 @ 19h30, c = 1/1/1991 @ 19h00, d = 3/1/1991 @ 09h30.

| | Counts | | | | mean | range |
|---|--------|-----|-----|-----|------|----------|
| | a | b | c | d | | |
| Resident waders | | | | | | |
| Whitefronted Plover <u>Charadrius marginatus</u> | 8 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 9 | 8-10 |
| Threebanded Plover <u>Charadrius tricollaris</u> | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Blacksmith Plover <u>Vanellus armatus</u> | 5 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 4-6 |
| Avocet <u>Recurvirostra avosetta</u> | 17 | 12 | 9 | 14 | 13 | 9-17 |
| Blackwinged Stilt <u>Himantopus himantopus</u> | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Palaearctic waders | | | | | | |
| Turnstone <u>Arenia interpres</u> | 25 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 12 | 6-25 |
| Grey Plover <u>Pluvialis squatarola</u> | 13 | 8 | 6 | 12 | 10 | 6-12 |
| Curlew Sandpiper <u>Calidris ferruginea</u> | 12 | 7 | 8 | 16 | 11 | 7-16 |
| Little Stint <u>Calidris minuta</u> | 15 | 9 | 11 | 22 | 14 | 9-22 |
| Knot <u>Calidris canutus</u> | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 0-3 |
| Sanderling <u>Calidris alba</u> | 6 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 5 | 3-8 |
| Ruff <u>Philomachus pugnax</u> | 8 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 0-8 |
| Common Sandpiper <u>Tringa hypoleucos</u> | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0-1 |
| Greenshank <u>Tringa nebularia</u> | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1-2 |
| Bartailed Godwit <u>Limosa lapponica</u> | 8 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 0-8 |
| Whimbrel <u>Numenius phaeopus</u> | 13 | 0 | 1 | 15 | 7 | 0-15 |
| Resident non-waders | | | | | | |
| Dabchick <u>Tachybaptus ruficollis</u> | 11 | 9 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 8-11 |
| Whitebreasted Cormorant <u>Phalacrocorax carbo</u> | 19 | 0 | 0 | 21 | 10 | 0-21 |
| Cape Cormorant <u>Phalacrocorax capensis</u> | 76 | 13 | 6 | 114 | 52 | 6-114 |
| Grey Heron <u>Ardea cinerea</u> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0-1 |
| Purple Heron <u>Ardea purpurea</u> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0-1 |
| Cape Teal <u>Anas capensis</u> | 25 | 14 | 15 | 22 | 19 | 14-25 |
| Cape Shoveller <u>Anas smithii</u> | 14 | 12 | 12 | 10 | 12 | 10-14 |
| Southern Pochard <u>Nettion erythrophthalma</u> | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Purple Gallinule <u>Porphyrio porphyrio</u> | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0-1 |
| Moorhen <u>Gallinula chloropus</u> | 8 | 9 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 8-10 |
| Redknobbed Coot <u>Fulica cristata</u> | 28 | 19 | 21 | 24 | 23 | 19-28 |
| Kelp Gull <u>Larus dominicanus</u> | 36 | 11 | 7 | 29 | 21 | 7-36 |
| Greyheaded Gull <u>Larus cirrocephalus</u> | 6 | 9 | 8 | 3 | 7 | 3-9 |
| Hartlaub's Gull <u>Larus hartlaubii</u> | 310 | 440 | 435 | 305 | 373 | 305-440 |
| Cape Wagtail <u>Motacilla capensis</u> | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Intra-African non-waders | | | | | | |
| White Pelican <u>Pelecanus onocrotalus</u> | 10 | 5 | 4 | 13 | 8 | 4-13 |
| Greater Flamingo <u>Phoenicopterus ruber</u> | 44 | 21 | 30 | 22 | 29 | 21-44 |
| Lesser Flamingo <u>Phoenicopterus minor</u> | 276 | 185 | 193 | 260 | 229 | 185-276 |
| Palaearctic non-waders | | | | | | |
| Sandwich Tern <u>Sterna sandvicensis</u> | 11 | 9 | 14 | 9 | 11 | 9-14 |
| Common/Arctic Tern <u>Sterna hirundo/paradisaea</u> | 160 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 40 | 0-160 |
| Totals | | | | | | |
| Total number of birds | 1177 | 829 | 840 | 989 | 963 | 662-1381 |
| Total number of species | 33 | 26 | 30 | 34 | 31 | 26-36 |

Because of the small size and ephemeral nature of the Swakop River lagoon, it is not considered to be of major conservation importance for coastal birds in Namibia. It is remarkably rich in diversity and numbers, however, for such a small site. The lagoon is situated very near to Swakopmund, which makes it ideal for education and tourism purposes. Regrettably, its location also results in much unnecessary disturbance. This is evident from the counts. Before the birds were disturbed in the morning, on average five more species and 235 more birds (28%) were present than in the evening. Some low-key development of the lagoon could alleviate this problem and make it an additional attractive amenity to the town of Swakopmund. In particular, the Municipality should declare the lagoon a bird sanctuary, a fence should be erected on the north side of the lagoon, the beach between the lagoon and sea should be closed to traffic and signs informing the public about the sanctuary should be erected. An observation hide could be built on the edge of the lagoon or on one of the old bridge supports.

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INTERNATIONAL WATERFOWL CENSUS - NAMIBIA

An international census of all wetland birds is again planned for January 1992 (some of you will have already participated in the recent census held in July 1991). It will be ongoing each January and July and is co-ordinated by the International Wetlands and Waterfowl Bureau (IWRB), based at Slimbridge. They have asked local co-ordinators throughout Africa to alert local birders and conservators to count all wetlands in their country. The aim? To understand how birds, particularly migrants, are spaced on the continent and how they move over six months.

In Namibia our wetlands are fairly discrete and it should be possible to cover all of them. At the least the following need to be censused:

Bushmanland Pans
Okavango River
East Caprivi (eastern floodplain)
Cunene River mouth
East Caprivi (Chobe River)
Sandwich Harbour
East Caprivi (Kwando River)
Mouths of all western rivers
Etosha Pan and surrounds
Hardap Dam
Walvis Bay wetlands
Swakopmund saltworks

Places that should be censused but are probably harder to get to:

Ovamboland (Cuvelai drainage)
East Caprivi (Linyanti Swamps)
Namib Desert pans (Sossusvlei, etc.)