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RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS

ANSWERS TO THE BIRD QUIZ

Editorial

In a past editorial (Lanioturdus 42-4) I mentioned the changing distributions of certain species. One species which seems to be a lot more common around Windhoek these days is the pin-tailed whydah. When I first moved to Windhoek some 28 years ago this was a species which one saw perhaps twice in five years. Now it is regularly seen at Avis Dam and we are getting more and more reports of these birds from suburban gardens all around Windhoek. Its host species, the common waxbill, is not a terribly common species around Windhoek and I certainly have not noticed any great increase in the numbers of these birds. However, both Roberts VII and Trevor Carnaby (Beat about the Bush *Birds* – Jacana Media 2008), indicate that it is suspected that the red-billed firefinch may be a secondary host although this is not proven. Come on you citizen scientists out there – this is a chance to make a name for yourself in the world of ornithology. We have a burgeoning population of red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek and if they are indeed secondary hosts to pin-tailed whydahs this might just be the time and place to prove it.

2.4 Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*)

IUCN RDB Status: Least concern

Namibia RDB Status: Vulnerable

WI Trend: Increasing



Photo: Eckart Demasius

The importance of Hardap Dam and Walvis Bay as breeding localities for this species is confirmed by the number of times the 1% population mark has been passed at these two places. Although this bird is regularly recorded at most sites, consistently high counts are only reported from three sites.

No of times counted: 421

No of times past 1% population (=300): 59

Maximum count: 2953 at Ekuma River on 12 June 1995

Past 1% population at: Ekuma River (1), Hardap Dam (13), Lake Oponono (2), Sandwich Harbour (12), Swakoppoort Dam (6), Walvis Bay (22)

Trend analysis

Number of sites: 18

Number of observed counts: 233

Number of missing counts: 91

Total number of counts: 324

Sites containing more than 10% of the total count:

Site	Number	%
Hardap Dam	8201	25.5
Sandwich Harbour	6304	19.6
Swakoppoort Dam	3350	10.4
Walvis Bay	7376	22.9

Overall slope: Stable

1.0019 ±0.0194

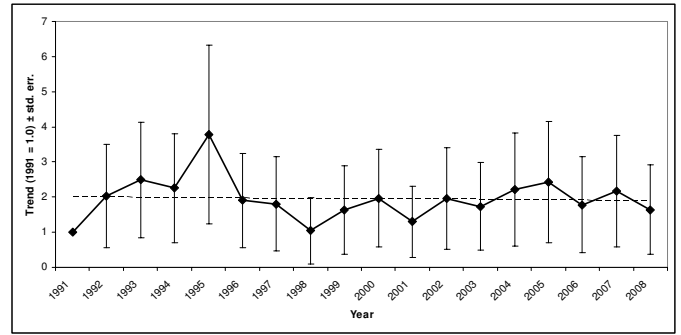


Figure 4: Trend of Great White Pelican population in Namibia from 1991 to 2008.

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Breeding Success of Flamigos on the Etosha Pan, Namibia, for 2006, 2008 and 2009.

Wilferd Versveld
(wversveld@met.na)

Abstract

For the rainy seasons of 2005/06, 2007/08 and 2008/09 Namibia received normal to above average rainfall in the north resulting in much run-off water flowing into the Etosha pan. In the 2007/08 and 2008/09 seasons there was exceptionally high rainfall in the highlands of Southern Angola resulting in extensive flooding of the north-central region of Namibia. This water eventually ended up in the Etosha Pan filling it with floodwater to a level last seen in 1976 (H.H. Berry pers.

comm.). Water remained on the pan until the start of the next rain season ensuring that the fledged flamingo chicks survived.



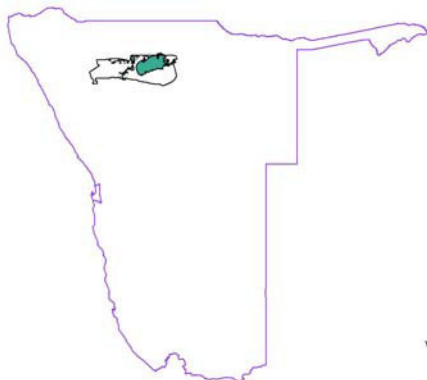
Photo: Eckart Demasius

Introduction

The breeding attempts of the two flamingo species, the greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* and the lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor* are well-documented for the Etosha Pan, Namibia (Archibald, T.J. & Nott, T.B. 1987, Berry, H.H. 1972, Fox et.al. 1997, Berry, H.H. 2000 & Simmons, R.E. 2000). These past sporadic breeding attempts were not always successful. In these recent years there were heavy early rains in the season resulting in both species starting to breed in Botswana (Sua Pan) (Flamingo, Number 16 and G. McCulloch pers. comm.) in early January and possibly at the new artificial site at Kamfer's Dam near Kimberley, South Africa. In these years the flamingos arrived in Etosha during May or June with nesting and breeding activity taking place shortly thereafter. In previous breeding attempts nesting usually took place with the onset of the rains during January.

Study area

The Etosha Pan is a large saline clay pan situated in north central Namibia within the Etosha National Park. Average annual rainfall varies from 300 mm in the west



to 450 mm in the east (Fox et.al. 1997).

According to Berry, 1972, the pan has never been full of water in living memory but is subject to periodic and partial flooding during the rainy season which usually extends from December to April. The flooding of the pan is mainly dependent on floodwater from the southern Angolan highlands and to a lesser extent on inflow from the Omuramba Owambo from the eastern side of the pan. As in 1976 (H.H. Berry pers.com.) the 2007/08 and 2008/09 rainy seasons were exceptional years which resulted in the pan becoming flooded.



Photo: Eckart Demasius

Methods

The Etosha Pan is not readily accessible by vehicle and the flamingos and their nesting sites are not visible from the edge of the pan, so use was made of random aerial flights over the pan in a Cessna 182. When the pan water level is high, flamingos can be seen feeding in the Ekuma River and on the eastern shores of the pan, where the water's edge is close to the tourist roads.

Results

2006:

Nesting activity was found at three sites along the northern side of the pan and not at the main breeding sites to the west of Okerfontein on the southern side of the pan as in the past.

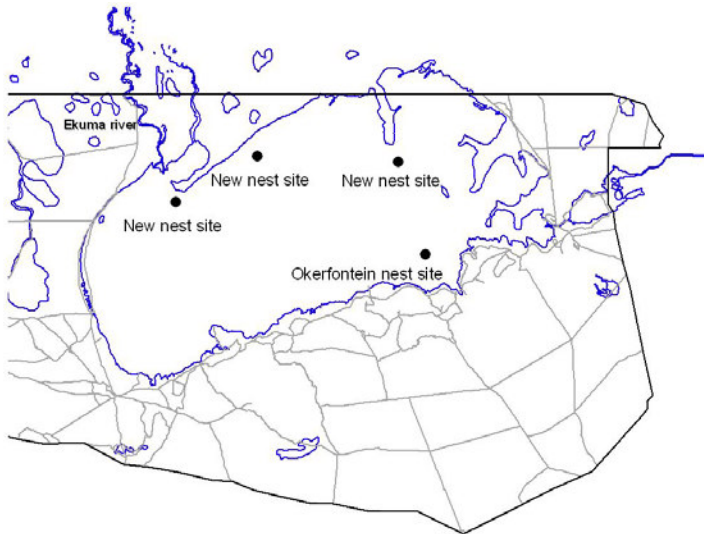
In 2006 an aerial crane survey was conducted on 25th and 26th April and no flamingos were observed on the pan during that period.

On 14th June a flight over the pan revealed nesting/breeding activity. We estimated the following numbers of flamingos in and around the nesting sites: greater flamingos 22 000, lesser flamingos 24 000 and a mixed group of both species of 17 000. This gave a total of 63 000 flamingos on the pan. At this stage there were only nests with adults on eggs and no chicks.

The next flight on 20th August revealed about 15 000 birds of both species together with a small group of approximately 2 500 grey chicks (hatchlings) accompanied by lesser flamingo adults on the northern side of the pan near the Ekuma and Oshigambo river mouths.

As the water on the pan dried up the flamingos moved up into the Ekuma River as it is deeper and keeps water for longer periods.

Nest sites for 2006.



2007

2007 was a below average rainy season and no nesting or breeding activity was observed.

2008

Nesting activity was found along the southern side of the pan, to the north east of the Gonob

Peninsula and again not at the main breeding sites to the west of Okerfontein as in the past.

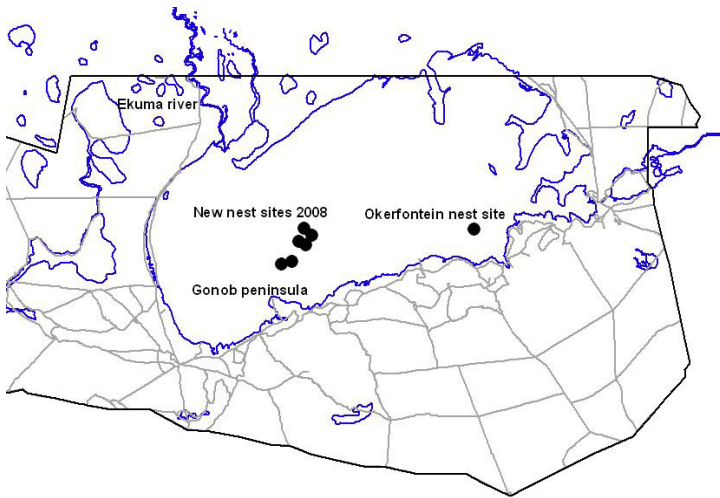
The first flight over the pan was on 5th March and only a small number of flamingos was found. They were found in small scattered groups over the pan with the biggest group 4 000 of both species on the old nesting site to the west of Okerfontein on the southern side of the pan.

An opportunistic flight on 9th May revealed a group of 10 000 flamingos to the northeast of Gonob Peninsula and small scattered groups over the pan. The observers did not distinguish between greater and lesser flamingos.

The 2008 flamingo census took place on 20th and 21st July in Etosha, when breeding and nesting activity was found to the northeast of the Gonob Peninsula. A conservative estimate was made of 52 000 adults, mainly lesser flamingos and the estimate of 5 700 grey chicks was later changed to 10 000 grey chicks (hatchlings).

The next flight was on 9th September and the grey chicks (hatchlings) were found to be “trekking” in a northeasterly direction from the nesting sites towards water accompanied by some adults. Only about half the chicks were “trekking” while the others were still at the nest sites with adults. At this stage the water was drying up around the nesting site but the northern section of the pan had much water.

On 8th January 2009 when the wetland bird count was done many adult flamingos, mainly greater flamingos with young grey birds, were found in the upper Ekuma River. Two weeks later, after the rains had started, most of the flamingos had left the upper Ekuma River and mainly lesser flamingos were found. A pan to the west of the Ekuma River on the park northern boundary had been found to have lesser flamingos on it since October 2008. It is impossible to count them as they move around on the pan, usually to the far side where they cannot be approached for counting.



Nest sites for 2008 and 2009.

2009

The first flight was taken on 26th January but due to clouds the whole pan could not be surveyed. The Okerfontein nesting site had about 1 000 birds which seemed to be attempting to breed. No distinction could be made as to whether they were lessers or greater.

On the 18th February the lesser flamingos at the Okerfontein site seemed to have attempted nest building and about 1 000 were estimated. On the rest of the pan about 3 000 lessers were counted in scattered groups.

On 6th June nesting activity had started at the 2008 nesting sites to the northeast of the Gonob peninsula. About 10 000 lesser flamingos were estimated and birds were sitting on the nesting mounds. About 2 500 grey flamingos were also seen in the area but these were too big for hatchlings so they could have been young birds from the 2008 season or from Sua Pan in Botswana or Kamfer's Dam in South Africa. The Okerfontein nesting site was under water and therefore no nesting activity had taken place there. Some 5 000 greater flamingos were counted in scattered groups on the pan.

On 8th August we estimated 3 500 lessers with 1 500 grey chicks (hatchlings).

Summary

2006

In the 2005/06 season about 2 500 chicks had fledged. This figure could be much higher as some of the bigger chicks could have migrated to the coast with the adults when the pan water dried up and only the very young chicks that could not fly had stayed behind in the Ekuma River. In this period the greatest numbers of birds counted were lessers (24 000), greater (22 000) and a mixed group of 17 000 with 2 500 chicks. Towards the end of the year only 15 000 lessers with the 2 500 chicks were found on the pan.

2007

No breeding activity was observed during this season.

2008

For the 2007/08 season we estimated that 10 000 chicks fledged. During the July 2008 flamingo census 52 000 adult lessers were counted/estimated and the hatchlings were estimated at 10 000.

2009

For the 2008/09 season it is estimated that 1 500 chicks fledged successfully. The 2 500 grey birds seen on the pan during June were possibly young birds from the previous year's breeding or from Sua Pan or Kamfer's Dam. By August these grey birds were not on the pan as only 1 500 hatchlings were estimated. In this period the largest number of birds counted were lessers (10 000), greater (5 000) and grey birds (2 500).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Namibia, for aircraft time and fuel to make it possible to monitor this important flamingo population on the pan and permission to fly at low level over

the pan. To all the pilots who have assisted; Ole Friede, Mark Jago, Frans Henning, Poverie Saushini, Mr and Mrs van Niekerk and Bernd Brell and especially Steve Braine from Hobatere who made his aircraft available at short notice.

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Photo: Eckart Demasius

Collared Palm-Thrush

Günther (G) & Tineke (T) Friederich
PO Box 207
Grootfontein
Namibia
bateleur@iway.na

During October 2009 we received a report from our cousin on the farm Choantsas 292, Tsumeb District (Quarter Degree Square 1818CC), that an adult Collared Palm-Thrush *Cichladusa arquata* was hanging around near his homestead. He was attracted by its call which he had not heard before on the farm. Near the homestead were a number of tall Makalani palms, *Hyphaene petersiana*, to which this bird was keeping. Consulting the books he came to the conclusion that it could only be this species. Taking into consideration the narrow black collar he noticed, this bird had to be the Collared Palm-Thrush, as there are no other confusing species.

The *Hyphaene p* were starting to flower in October so it could be that this bird was attracted to them. We have an abundance of *Hyphaene p* in the area, a plant species which this bird requires. I (G) never got the opportunity to see this bird to take a photograph for confirmation.

Referrals:

1. It (Collared Palm-Thrush) is "...found only where palms of the genus *Borassus* and *Hyphaene* grow..." "...but also nests in them..." "...there are only a few birds which are tied in this way to a plant species." (C.J. Vernon) from: *The Complete Book of Southern African Birds* by Ginn P.J., McIlleron W.G. & Milstein P.leS. Struik Publishers, 4th Impression 1994.
2. ..."it is highly localized, being generally dependent upon thickets in palm savanna of *Hyphaene* and *Borassus* palms in some of the main river valleys, but even so it is sometimes inexplicably absent where these occur, such as the Caprivi Strip, the Okavango Delta..."