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Editorial

A new year has rolled around and at least we have enough material for an issue of our journal the *Lanioturdus*.

After good rains in October and November we then had a very long dry spell until the first week of January. More good rain then with up to 100 mm at some places but another dry spell into February. The poor birds have had their share this season of starts and stops as far as breeding has been going. The masked weavers have built nests but then they sit and wait for the females who are not quite in the mood. Wait until the next rain!

During the festive season we went to Alaska to see our children and grandchildren. We mainly stayed in the city of Anchorage where the weather was a bit like here with the starts and stops to winter. Instead of just being winter the weather brought freezing temperatures with snow and then it would warm up above freezing and rain. Watching the Bohemian Waxwings (family: *Bombycillidae*) they would huddle in the hundreds during the cold but then when it warmed up descend on the crab apples and other shrubs with berries and eat the defrosted fruit.

Once again I appeal to all members to help the club. If you want to keep the club viable you must also do your part and try and get new members to join.

The Cape Eagle Owl has not been recorded from Angola (Dean 2000. The birds of Angola. British Ornithologist's Union, Tring). I suspect that the owl will probably be found in southern Angola as areas with suitable habitat can be found all along the western escarpment up to Lubango and beyond. From the Kunene River several locations with seemingly suitable habitat on the Angolan side were visible, e.g. the Serra Techicongo and Serra Techimalinde Mountains.

Details of the record:
Locality: 9 km southeast of Otjimborombonga on the Namibia/Angola border in the Okakora Mountains (i.e. a range between the Otjihipa Mountains in the west and the Baynes Mountains in the east) nothern Kaokoveld, Kunene Region, Namibia.
Co-ordinate of record: 17°13.2S, 12°47.0E
Altitude: 1400 - 1500 m a.s.l.
Date: 13 January 2004
Time: 21:30 - 21:45
Observers: Wessel & Hannelie Swanepoel

High density of Dusky Sunbirds in ephemeral river course in the Namib

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The Dusky Sunbird *Nectarinia fusca* is a southern African endemic confined to the arid and semi-arid western regions of the subcontinent. It is particularly common in the Karoo, Namib, the escarpment transition belt and the semi-arid thornveld, including parts of the southern Kalahari system (Harrison 1997). Like many species that inhabit arid areas, the Dusky Sunbird is highly nomadic in response to the availability of food (Maclean 1993). In this note I report on particularly high densities of Dusky Sunbirds in a river course in the Namib in response to the flowering of the parasitic mistletoe *Tapinanthus oleifolius*.

On 29-31 December 2004 large numbers of Dusky Sunbirds were found in the ephemeral, dry Diep River, which is a tributary of the Tsondab River, in quarter-degree square 2415Bb, just west of the Naukluft Mountains. The river crosses a section of the farm Dieprivier for a distance of some 12 km, and varies in width from about 150 to 250 m. On its northern bank is a wide gravel plain with sparse low shrubs and heavily grazed *Stipagrostis* grasses, while on its southern bank to the east (for a distance of about 3 km) is a mobile dune field, giving way to fossil dune cliffs (for a distance of some 5 km), then in the west to gravel plains (Figure 1). The Diep River supports a belt of camelthorn trees *Acacia erioloba* with smelly shepherd's bush *Boscia foetida* trees and shrubs interspersed.

Figure 1: Diep River crossing the gravel plains of the Namib as it heads west (left of picture) towards the Tsondab River and Tsondabvlei.

Over 80% of the camelthorn trees were parasitized by the mistletoe *Tapinanthus oleifolius*, some with over 20 mistletoe plants per host tree. The mistletoe was flowering profusely, and the sunbirds were moving busily from clump to clump feeding on the nectar.

Counts of Dusky Sunbirds were made, per sample blocks of 100 m of river course, in different sections of the river. Six blocks were counted, giving the following numbers of sunbirds: 9, 11, 16, 7, 10 and 6. On average, 9.8 sunbirds were recorded per 100 m of river. Taking the average width of the river as

200 m, the number of birds per km^2 of river was 490, and the number calculated for the entire 12 km stretch of river on the farm was about 1,180 Dusky Sunbirds. This very high density of Dusky Sunbirds attests to their highly nomadic lifestyle in an unpredictable and variable climate. It also illustrated the very high density of birds that may congregate at a good source of food, in this case a dense infestation of flowering mistletoe.

References

Harrison JA 1997. Dusky Sunbird *Nectarinia fusca*. In: The atlas of southern African birds. Vol. 2: Passerines. Harrison JA, Allan DG, Underhill LG, Herremans M, Tree AJ, Parker V & Brown CJ (eds), pp 510-511.Birdlife South Africa, Johannesburg.

Maclean GL 1993. Roberts' birds of southern Africa. 6th ed. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town.

A dietary study of the Bank Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax neglectus*) at Ichaboe and Mercury Islands

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Introduction

The Bank Cormorant *Phalacrocorax neglectus* has a regional distribution from about Walvis Bay to Cape Agulhas in South Africa. The total population is estimated in the vicinity of 18,000 birds (Maclean 1985) with two island sites situated off the west coast of Namibia – Ichaboe and Mercury Islands – supporting two-thirds of the entire population (Tarboton 2001). During 1980, Ichaboe and Mercury Islands, hosted an estimated 4500 breeding pairs (50% located at Ichaboe and 20% at Mercury Island) of Bank Cormorants. Since then their numbers decreased dramatically with currently only about 450 breeding pairs left on Ichaboe Island indicating a 90% decrease. The breeding population at Mercury Island indicates a more stable condition according to numbers recorded.

The Bank Cormorant is confined to the Benguela system compared to the Cape Cormorants, which are endemic to Southern Africa, but disperse as far Congo. In the early 1970s the pelagic fish stocks crashed resulting in most of the predators, which were dependent on the fish, either declining (e.g. penguins & gannets) or changing their diet mainly to the Pelagic Goby *Sufflogobius bibarbatus*, which had become more abundant. This includes the Cape Fur Seal *Arctos* and the Bank Cormorant. In the mid 1990's, at the time of oceanographic anomalies (i.e. low oxygen event in 1994 and a Benguela Nino event in 1995), the pelagic fish stock crashed again. These events probably also affected the Pelagic Goby and about 350,000 Cape Fur Seals died of starvation between 1994 and 1995, while the Bank Cormorant population at Ichaboe Island decreased from about 4,500 pairs to less than 600 pairs between 1994 and 1998.

Bank Cormorant feed mainly on fish, crustaceans, cephalopods and molluscs (Maclean 1985).

Table 1 indicates the drop in Bank Cormorant numbers at Ichaboe and Mercury Islands, respectively.

Table 1. Numbers of active nests at the peak of the breeding season (equals estimate of numbers of breeding pairs) showing the decline at Ichaboe Island after 1993 and the subsequent recovery at Mercury Island.

	Mercury Island	Ichaboe Island
1978 – 1979	1986	4345
1993	No count	4391
1994	811	2625
1998	817	791
2000	1172	631
2002	1845	535