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EDITORIAL

This copy of *Lanioturdus* is made up almost entirely of trip reports and observations made during trips around the country. This is encouraging in that it is clear that people are getting out and watching birds – and much of the country is getting covered. The information given in these articles is non-scientific for the most part, but important none-the-less. In Peter Kaestner's article on the North of the country, he reports the first record of Blackfaced Lovebird from the Caprivi for close on ten years. Tony Tree's article gives a brief account of an American Black Skimmer seen in Walvis Bay in February – a first record for Africa. Mark Paxton's account of breeding pelicans in the Chobe area is the first in many years. These articles are largely reports of observations given in a generalised way, but their value in putting important information into print cannot be stressed enough. The point I want to make here is that *anyone* can do it. You don't need scientific training, a degree in journalism or any birding credentials. In this sense I would like to encourage people to join the Club's outings and activities, write them up and contribute to the process of developing the Club.

With regard to outings and activities, the Club Committee as a whole would like to thank Daphne McGivern for acting as our activities co-ordinator over the past couple of years. Daphne put in a tremendous amount of work, and the success of our programme was in a large part due to her inputs. We wish the McGivern family well in Cape Town. We are now looking for a new co-ordinator – anyone interested?

I would also like to thank Carole Roberts for her inputs into *Lanioturdus* over the past year and for volunteering to put the December edition together. I will be away in Australia and the Netherlands until January 1999 and Carole will be handling the magazine. Please submit all contributions directly to her via e-mail at carole@dea.met.gov.na or through the Club's postal address.



A few days later we got a good look at the two parents. Although we could not decide whether there was a difference in size between them, one bird appears to be of the dark form, as it did not have the white markings at the neck, while the other is a paler form.

Another exciting sighting for us recently has been the Giant Eagle Owl. One afternoon in mid-August, I was loading sand on the lorry on farm Goroob-East. I had taken only the binoculars – I know my birds here (sic.). There is an unused pit nearby where birds always come to take water. In the vicinity are some tall *Hyphaene* palms, as well as huge Marula trees. In one Marula is an old raptor nest, smallish, I have never seen it occupied. But out of curiosity I had a look at it: empty. I started sweeping the other trees... A huge owl was looking at me from its perch in the palm tree. I cautiously moved around to get a better view: huge, overall grey and finely barred.

I hurried home with my heavy load, and raced back with Tineke and the spotting scope, hoping to find the owl still in its place. We were lucky. There she was in full presentation: the Giant Eagle Owl. With the scope we could make out the pink eyelids.

The last time we had Giant Eagle Owl was on 1 September last year. It was at a different location, but also during late afternoon just after sunset. Two birds were perched on a dead Tambotie tree. We saw them on two consecutive days. This year perhaps we will be lucky enough to find their breeding site, too.

HIGHLIGHTS OF A SEVEN-WEEK VISIT TO NAMIBIA IN EARLY 1998

AJ Tree

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It was some 27 years since I left Namibia to return to university and the changes evident over that time were great and most towns visited were almost unrecognisable. But that is the price of progress I suppose.

My main intention was to spend most time at the coastal wetlands of Sandwich Harbour, Walvis Bay and Swakopmund with greatest emphasis on studying terns and waders while also fitting in some ringing where this was possible. I also intended to fit in visits to the Fish River Canyon as guests of Canon Lodge and to the Okavango River at the invitation of the owners of Ndhovu Safari Lodge.

The journey through to Ariamsvlei was pretty uninspiring but I was surprised at how readily many of the culverts under this newish road had been colonised by Little Swift, while the Sociable Weaver was having a ball colonising as many telephone poles as possible. As is often said, food is not always a controlling factor in bird populations but rather the availability of suitable nest sites. My wife and I stayed at the Canon Lodge from 17 to 20 January on the way north, but the country was dry and barren and the birdlife not what one would expect if there had been recent rains. Although we scoured the area thoroughly we could find only a paltry 27 species of birds. The most interesting from my point of view were the rather uncommon Cinnamonbreasted Warbler and the Blackheaded Canary, both of which were additions to the locality list, as well as getting to grips with Dusky Sunbird once again.

From there we moved slowly north (we were towing a beach buggy!) and spent the night of the 20/21st at Gross Barmen. I was particularly interested to see if the European Swallow was still using the reedbeds as a nocturnal roost and was not disappointed to find some 5 000–6 000 birds, plus many thousands of Redbilled Quelea, flying in in the evening. The reedbeds

also held a small breeding colony of herons with at least 16 occupied nests of Cattle Egret and four of Squacco Heron whilst 14 Blackcrowned Night Heron flighted out to feed elsewhere. The only other bird of interest was a male Painted Snipe.

We left early next morning making counts of various roadside birds on the way and I was suprised to find such high densities of Lesser Grey Shrikes. Between Gross Barmen and Okahandja 37 birds were counted with 218 between Okahandja and Karibib, 27 between Karibib and Usakos and a further 23 to 55 km west of Usakos. These densities were higher than any that I made in the 1969/70 summer along various roads in this region. Visible Redbacked Shrike were in much lower densities, as would be expected with the dominant larger bird controlling the best vantage points, and did not extend as far westwards into the more arid areas. Ten were seen between Gross Barmen and Okahandja and 51 between the latter and Karibib. Ten European Rollers were seen between Okahandja and Karibib.

Once we had settled down in Swakopmund, exploratory, familiarisation trips were made to the Mile 4 Salt Works and adjacent beaches, just to the north of the town where counts of terns and selected waders were made and ringing of Whitefronted Plover chicks commenced. With the use of a telescope a careful check for colour rings on Sandwich and Swift Terns was instigated the results of which are being published in Safring News. However, details to date indicate that most Sandwich Terns were of Dutch origin, following a three year study there by a PhD student, while details are still awaited on the other rings sighted. Altogether between 15% and 20% of all Sandwich Terns carried metal rings. One bird captured had been ringed in Estonia in 1985, the first indication of a bird of that origin in southern Africa. The few colour marked Swift Terns were from the south-western Cape while about 15% of all birds viewed closely carried metal rings. Taking into consideration the large number of terns carrying rings, this also including about 3% of the 160 000+ Common Terns on the coastline, it is indeed surprising how few ringing recoveries have occurred from the Namibian coast although scavenging jackals and gulls must ensure a very short "lifespan" for any carcasses.

The biannual wetland count started at Sandwich Harbour on 27 January where we joined Rob Simmons and Rod Braby. I was left with, as it turned out, the daunting task of tern counting as I was particularly keen to try and determine the proportions of each species comprising the flocks. By the end of the day on the 28th, I had come up with a total of at least 180 000 birds in all. This figure raised more than a few eyebrows in camp until two independent parties counting the north and south shores simultaneously on the 29th came up with a similar figure. Taking into account my norm of undercounting huge numbers of birds by some 10%, I estimated a possible figure of at least 200 000 terns. From detailed trial counts of over 30 000 birds I arrived at proportionate figures of 160-170 000 Common Terns and 30-35 000 Black Terns plus small numbers of five other species: Caspian (31), Swift (34), Sandwich (210), Damara (28) and Whitewinged Black (70). Taking a break on the 29th from mud sampling and tern counting respectively, Phil Hockey and I scoured the south shore and found an adult Whiterumped Sandpiper, only the second Namibian record, a Terek Sandpiper and 13 Great Crested Grebe. The latter were evidently unexpected (R Simmons, pers. comm.). Earlier on the 28th whilst watching high tide movement of waders on the north shore, my wife and I were fortunate to see a European Oystercatcher and three Blacktailed Godwit. At the rapidly diminishing old lagoon to the north there were 12 Fulvous Duck present. The only camp rarity was a young male House Sparrow that took up residence for the period of our stay. With the huge numbers of terns present, skuas were only to be expected and peak counts of upwards of 30 Arctic Skua could be found within the lagoon at any one time.

Driving back to Walvis Bay on the 31st, Phil and I identified three Leach's Petrel close inshore as well as a single European Storm Petrel and many probables of either that species or Wilson's Storm Petrel. A Sabine's Gull flew along the waters edge and another was found dead on the beach. Five more of the latter were found paddling around on the beach at the seal colony at Pelican Point on 7 February.

Back at Walvis Bay we were once again mobilised by Keith Weame, to count the saltworks. Later, following a report of Franklin's Gull and Wattled Plover at the sewage works, we headed there on the way back to

result of drought displacement. The poorly recorded Slenderbilled Honeyguide was seen at camp on the 10th. Larks were of some interest with a lone Monotonous found on the 15th, a male Chestnutbacked Finch Lark with a party of seven Greybacked Finch Lark, with the latter only on the 14th. A strange absence was the Wiretailed Swallow, normally common in the area.

Ashy Tit is not a normal denizen of the Caprivi thus two singles seen in the reserve on the 14th were of interest, one of which was in full song. Another surprising absence was that of the European Sedge Warbler although Great Reed and African Marsh Warblers were to be found in small numbers. In the heavier papyrus swamp in the reserve a Greater Swamp Warbler, as well as a couple of African Sedge Warblers were heard singing.

The most exciting find was at camp on the 10th, when a pair of Shelley's Sunbird were seen for a short time in flowering mistletoe, a habitat favoured in the middle Zambezi. Evidently there is an earlier record of this sunbird from the Popa Falls, a little further upstream (C Hines, pers. comm). Another uncommon bird for the area was the Golden Bishop of which isolated males were found at several localities, mainly in the game reserve.

With the recent "discovery" of the fact that the Brown Firefinch has its own brood parasite in the form of yet another species of widowfinch a careful watch was made for members of this group of Viduines. The Brown Firefinch was by far the commonest firefinch present but the only parasite found was a male Purple Widowfinch whose host is the Jameson's Firefinch.

With the steady erosion of the macro-vegetation both inside and outside the game reserve changes in the avifauna must result with this probably aiding the spread of grassland and scrub bird species into the area. The steady clearing of timber for agriculture for a growing population plus the destruction of smaller trees and bushes in the game reserve by elephant and by the annual grass fires that sweep in from Botswana must be a great cause for concern in environmental circles. It will give rise to a structural

readjustment of the pre-existing bird balance at a specific level as well as at a numerical level. At this stage, water and waterside birds are probably least affected and the extensive papyrus beds within the game reserve are likely still to be an important breeding ground for many species unless they, too, are affected by grass fires. Very few raptors were seen outside the boundary of the game reserve but the diversity within was still considerable.

Further detailed surveys of this small area both at different times of the year and at the same time in different years would be of interest and fully annotated notes should be lodged with Dr Rob Simmons of the Department of Environment and Tourism.



PROJECTS & ACTIVITIES

IN SEARCH OF FIELD TRIP LEADERS

Successful field trips are what an active bird club is all about. To arrive at a remote campsite in the middle of the bush, after spending hours on the road, only to find there's no water, firewood, or even a fridge (depending upon your expectations) can be a little disconcerting, certainly not the best way to start an exciting weekend birding!

The Club is always looking for people who have knowledge of an area; someone who can liaise with the landowner, find out which gate to enter, how many people can camp, what facilities are available, if any!

Perhaps, you have a favourite birding location, one you wish to share with others? Certainly, you don't have to be an expert at bird identification; also,