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## CONTENTS

THOMSON N	Editorial	1
THOMSON N, STEHN H AND BRIDGEFORD P	The Dordabis Vultures Eat Poisonous Plants!	2
BROWN C	Huge Assemblage of African Openbills in Caprivi, Namibia	5
KEMPER J	Kelp Gull <i>Larus dominicanus</i> drowns Sandwich Tern <i>Stella sandvicensis</i>	7
THOMSON N	Ringling at Blue Hill Escape	9
DEMASIUS E	Owling or Finding Owls	11
KOLBERG H	Trends in Namibian Waterbird Populations 7 : Ducks and Geese (Part 2)	15
THOMSON N	More Short Notes and Interesting Observations	19
DEMASIUS E	A Different Kind of Birding – Birds on the Stamps of Namibia : Namibia's 5 <sup>th</sup> Definitive Series	22
BARTLEWSKI S	A Visit to the Austin Roberts and Barberspan Bird Sanctuaries	26

THOMSON N	Vulture Ringing at Farm Frauenstein	29
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RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS	32
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## Editorial

The symposium and dinner to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Namibia Bird Club have come and gone. I am very pleased to be able to say that our members attended these events in numbers and that we had over seventy people there (including the invited speakers). The symposium went off without any real problems – none of the speakers overran his allotted time slot and on the technological front the laptops and the beamers communicated with each other.

There will be a special edition of *Lanioturdus* incorporating the papers presented so I will not go into detail here. Suffice to say that all the talks were at layman's level, all the feedback we have had has been positive and that we have had a number of people enquiring when we will be presenting another symposium – the answer to that one is simple – not before we have again accumulated sufficient funds.

Many people were able to obtain the software necessary to commence atlasing thanks to Arnold van der Westhuizen's efforts. SABAP2

The two areas where this has been observed in Namibia are nearly 500 km apart but from HS's personal observations together with the reported observations of other farmers in the Dordabis area it would appear that the vultures in that area at least are ingesting plant material on a relatively regular basis. Domestic cats and dogs regularly eat plant material which may or may not induce vomiting but the reasons for this are poorly understood. Dr Peter Mundy (pers. comm.) suggests that swallowing grass/plants is to provide the vultures' stomachs with indigestible fibre to aid digestion by giving the muscular contractions of the stomachs something to work against as has been observed in Lappet-faced and White-headed Vultures which "never" eat grass but whose stomachs are full of hair (same function) from their diet.

If the ingestion of plant material by vultures happens on a regular basis why has it been observed so seldom? Or has it occurred more frequently but gone unrecorded? Are the Dordabis vultures in some way unique? Have they discovered the medicinal value of certain plants which other vultures have not? Have these birds perhaps started to eat hides as well as soft body parts thus requiring them to rid themselves of indigestible material?

Further close observation of these birds may reveal more in this regard.

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## Huge Assemblage of African Openbills in Caprivi, Namibia

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All photographs in this article are by Chris Brown

On 29 September 2011 I visited the Impalila conservancy, traveling by boat on the Chobe River from Kasane in Botswana. As we approached the Impalila-Kasane rapids large numbers of storks and other wetland birds came into view. So dramatic was the concentration of birds, mainly African Openbills that, after completing our work on Impalila Island, I hired a boat to get closer to the birds. There were birds perched in the trees and on nests, standing on the banks of the river and circling and thermalling overhead. Large numbers of birds were coming and going, presumably to feeding grounds on the eastern Caprivi floodplains.



I spend about two hours counting the birds from Impalila Island, and about one hour from the boat, moving slowly across the rapids to try and cover the whole area. I divided the area into sections and counted and photographed each section. There were sections behind the trees downstream that we could not reach but I would estimate that we covered about 70% of the area. We could not get close to the trees where most of the birds were nesting because of the rocks in the rapids, so the count of Openbill nests is way too low.

My visual count of African Openbills in the air, in the trees and on the ground was 3 080. When I reconciled the visual counts with the photographs the number increased to 3 435

Openbills (Table 1). There were birds we could not see (in the trees and downstream), large numbers of birds were coming and going all the time, and presumably many more birds were out foraging. While 3 435 African Openbills is the minimum number, my guess is that there would have been at least 5 000 Openbills associated with this breeding and roosting site.



A total of 485 African Openbill nests were counted from the photographs, spread over more than 40 trees. This was only a part of the “heronry” that could be seen from the boat.

Nests deep in the trees and nests in trees behind the front row of trees were not recorded. Nonetheless, this breeding colony of African Openbill is one of the largest recorded to date in southern Africa.

Sixteen other wetland bird species were counted in the immediate vicinity of the “heronry”, with three other species breeding in the heronry, namely Yellow-billed Stork (48 nests), African Spoonbill (5 nests) and White-breasted Cormorant (43 nests).

This breeding site should be checked in future years to ascertain whether it is still being used and if so, the number of birds and nests present surveyed and recorded, as this is one of the largest assemblages of African Openbills in southern Africa and accounts for a significant proportion – perhaps more than 30% - of the total Namibia and Botswana populations.



**Table 1: Birds and nests counted in and immediately around Impalila-Kasane Rapids "heronry" on 29 September 2011**

Species	Birds / nests	Number
Yellow-billed Stork	Adults	64
	Nestlings & recently fledged young	118
	Nests	48
African Openbill	Birds	3 435
	Nests	485
Grey Heron	Birds	1
Goliath Heron	Birds	2
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Birds	8
Yellow-billed Egret	Birds	4
Little Egret	Birds	50
African Spoonbill	Birds	18
	Nests	5
African Sacred Ibis	Birds	1
White-breasted Cormorant	Birds	175
	Nests	43
Reed Cormorant	Birds	50
African Darter	Birds	20
Water Thick-knee	Birds	2
Blacksmith Lapwing	Birds	20
Grey-headed Gull	Birds	11
African Skimmer	Birds	16
Rock Pratincole	Birds	17