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Editorial

This issue of the *Lanioturdus* would have been rather skinny had it not been for Wessel Swanepoel's numerous contributions. The editor is still waiting for the Chairman's annual report delivered to the March 2005 AGM and any trip reports from members on outings.

Peter Steyn and Rob Martin report on the puzzle of Namibia's Booted Eagles. Here is a species that used to be difficult to identify thus adding to the confusion but recent advances in field guides should help even novice birders identify this species. Surely the bird is a more common breeder than we think, people just have to scan likely breeding rocks, kloofs and canyons. Perhaps we can solve the mystery.

New birds have been reported for the country so it is good to see that birders have been active even though it is the dry season. There are two articles on rarities within the country and one from our neighbour, Botswana.

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

In order to ascertain the status of the species at Alpha, the specific locality was also visited in June 2001, June 2002, November 2003 and August 2004. Although no birds were found during any one of these brief visits, its presence at the time at other suitable localities on the Ugab River cannot be ruled out. The birds were recorded on several occasions over a relatively long period and that numbers are apparently on the increase, indicate a range extension and not merely vagrancy. Likely scenarios are that the Alpha birds either present a small resident population along the Ugab River or a seasonal north-south movement during the latter part of the rainy season.

The African Mourning Dove may be more widespread in the arid north-west than the current published records suggest. The preferred habitat of African Mourning Dove exists at various localities along the Huab River to the north and the Omaruru River to the south of the Ugab. As such it may prove to be worthwhile to search for this species along these rivers.

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Is the Black Skimmer at Walvis Bay another "rarities" record destined to obscurity?

Joris Komen
Director, Schoolnet Namibia
<http://www.schoolnet.na>

I was pleased to read that not all my rejected sight records of rarities over the 18 years I spent as curator of birds at the National Museum of Namibia have faded into obscurity, or gone altogether unnoticed <grin>!

A. J. Tree's four-page descriptive article of a sighting of a Black Skimmer at Walvis Bay in *Lanioturdus* 38(1) 2005 refers.

A correction is appropriate given the very surprising fact that the Rarities Committee of the then day failed to keep my rare bird sighting submission on file for future review ain't that a shame?! If my memory serves me well, I recall having sent a fuzzy slide of the bird in flight as part of my submission to the then Rarities Committee – I believe that Tony Tree was a member of this committee at the time?

The Black Skimmer Liz and I spent considerable time watching at the RUNDU Sewage Works near the Okavango river (NOT CUNENE!) on Christmas Day so many years ago remains crystal clear in my mind's eye for simple reason that I decided (against my better academic judgment) to not blow it away and obtain the first specimen of this species in Africa for the National Museum collection, for two reasons. 1. Liz would have been pissed off with me killing the bird in her company on an otherwise very peaceful Christmas Day, and 2. I would have had to recover the specimen by wallowing in shoulder-deep scheid.

This incident, and the subsequent debates about it, the long-legged buzzard we recorded further down the road (I seem to recall that record "was" accepted by the rarities committee of the then day:-), and the numerous European Reed Warblers we caught and ringed (and even collected) during this time in Kavango region, had been the source of much amusement, ridicule and even hot dispute in the bird circles (and journals) of that time.

I learned an important lesson by these experiences - as rightly pointed out to me by John Mendelsohn at the time - "What's hit is history; what's missed is mystery". Apparently Clancey was fond of saying this, but John can correct me on this one. The subsequent (very) determined blowing away (under permit) of a couple of Royal Terns (also hotly disputed sight records of that time!) at the Cunene River mouth comes to mind. These Royal Tern specimens aptly served as the subject of my very last academic contributions published in a memorial edition (in honour of Richard Brooke?) of *Ostrich* by Peter Ryan and company... some years ago. (Peter Ryan should be able to give you the correct citation on this scientific publication, Tim - I don't recall receiving reprints of this paper). But then I was already well on my way out of the esoteric circle of Bostonian corvids and their ilk <grin> and pushing back ICT frontiers in disadvantaged schools in Namibia.

I guess the bottom line here, Tony, is whether your Black Skimmer sight record will also be destined to obscurity given the absence of a specimen to prove the point. I believe it will without a specimen to “INDISPUTABLY” prove a first record for southern Africa (or is it all Africa?)!

I still get enormous pleasure from twitching without the peer-pressure, and though my eyesight is failing me more now than ever before (too many hours in front of computers), and I’m increasingly prone to senior moments, I suspect that my karma is shaping up nicely having not blown away any more birds for quite some years now (maybe I will come back as avian road kill for only another 3438 incarnations!). By comparison, I suggest that your karma won’t be dented much by blowing away one wayward Black Skimmer - I suggest you go for it (I can even arrange to lend you a shotgun and a couple of cartridges)!

Thick-billed Cuckoo at Shakawe Fishing Lodge, Botswana

Christian Boix-Hinzen, Ian Fulton, John Anderson and Trish Aspinall
31 Riverside Drive, Kommetjie, 7975 Cape Town RSA.
Christian@tropicalbirding.com

On 28 October 2004, whilst birding the dryer Leadwood-Acacia woodland behind Shakawe Fishing Lodge we came across an adult Thick-billed Cuckoo *Pachycoccyx audeberti* feeding on caterpillars alongside a Jacobin Cuckoo. It was 07h00-07h30 am, the morning was still cool, skies lazily building up some cloud cover. No wind, no haze and frantic bird activity possibly due to recent showers. The early rains had encouraged local species such as Narina Trogon, Kurrichane Thrush and Orange-breasted Bushshrike to break into incessant call mode. A very evident influx of Palearctic migrants was apparent with Icterine Warblers, Willow Warblers and Spotted Flycatchers sallying and flitting across the road everywhere. Intra African migrants such as Woodland Kingfishers, Broad-billed Rollers, Black Cuckoo and even a Red-chested Cuckoo were sighted throughout the morning and except the latter; the former three species were displaying and calling actively.

As we birded along the edge of the woodland Christian picked up a medium-sized black and white bird, with a very obvious broadly barred under tail bursting out of the canopy and quickly slinking around the back of the tree’s crown. He managed to find the bird again, its tail visible through a gap. Quickly, we were all directed to its whereabouts and we all had good looks at the under tail barring. At this stage Christian was pre-empting a small *Accipiter* (Shikra, Gabar ???) to burst out. We were approximately 100m from the tree, the tree was 10-15m high, and everyone had their bins trained on the bird. Christian inched cautiously towards a better side-viewing spot, but the bird made the job easier for all of us and flew out of its hideout perching out in full view of everyone. Once in the open its identity was blatantly obvious, far from an *Accipiter*, this was a cuckoo.

The bird was very relaxed and proceeded to clean off branches thoroughly studying their underside in search of caterpillars. This behaviour lasted a good 5-6 minutes allowing us ample time to enjoy and get a thorough description of the bird.

This cuckoo had black upperparts (head, crown, mantle, wings and tail) and white underparts. On the head, the black and white met just below the eye and ear coverts. An evident white/ or very pale creamy yellow eye ring was evident around its dark eye. By now Christian had called out the fact that we were watching a Thick-billed Cuckoo and summoned us to pay special attention to its bill, at this distance and given its searching behaviour we were unable to see much detail at the base of the bill. However, a nearby Jacobin allowed us to compare bills and the Thick-billed’s was decidedly heavier. Christian somehow recalled the bill of this species to be heavier. This however, may possibly have been an optical effect, as he explained, most of the individuals he had seen to date were immatures, and somehow the black bill on their black and white scalloped faces contrasts out with a thicker appearance.

We were permanently exposed to flashes of its broadly banded tail, and black and white banded under tail coverts as it lurched about for prey and struggled to regain its balance. In a few of its lurches its “lumo” yellow feet were revealed and by now we were all pretty happy with every feature there was to explore, nonetheless we were dying to lay hands on a bird guide, something we all cunningly left behind that morning, yet this forced us to look even harder at this particular bird.