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EDITORIAL

Summer has almost come and gone without my noticing it. It has been an odd summer in terms of weather but judging from my discussions with other people, the birding has been excellent this year. The thing I have noticed while putting this edition of *Lanioturdus* together is the really good numbers of rare birds that were seen during these last few months. These records raise the question of what brings these spurts of rarities about.

Is it the unusual rainfall and general climatic patterns experienced over much of the subcontinent? Is just that we are getting more reports of rarities because there are a lot more birders out there at the moment? Is it a consequence of the "Patagonia effect" described by Peter Kaestner in a previous edition of *Lanioturdus*. Whatever the situation is, we have had two new birds added to the Namibian list in the last six months. A presumed Pied Flycatcher at the Windhoek Sewerage Works (October 1998) and a Red-throated Pipit in Swakopmund (March 1999). These records may represent interesting biological indicators of broader environmental processes influencing the sub-continent. These records are interesting in themselves but seen against a background of a large number of other rare birds in the same period we have to admit the possibility of large scale climatic (or other) factors influencing their occurrence in Namibia.

So what happens to these records? Currently nothing much!! All records reported to me are put into the Short Notes section and I encourage people to write up their sightings. My feeling is that a tremendous amount of

TABLE 1: List of species and sites at which they occur in Namibia

SPECIES	SITE						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Monotonous Lark	R*		R*			U*	U*
Rufous-naped Lark	C					C	A
Clapper Lark	U			R	R	U	U
Flappet Lark						R	
Barlow's Lark				C			
Dune Lark		C					
Fawn-coloured Lark	R				R	C	C
Sabota Lark	A		A		U	U	C
Dusky Lark	R*					U*	R
Spike-heeled Lark	C		C	U	C		
Red-capped Lark	A	U		U	C	R	
Pink-billed Lark	U*				U*		
Sclater's Lark					R		
Stark's Lark	C	U	C	U	U		
Gray's Lark		C	C				
Thick-billed Lark				R			R
Karoo Long-billed Lark		U	C	C	C		C
Benguella Long-billed Lark							
Black-eared Finch-Lark				U	R		U
Chestnut-backed Finch-Lark	C*					R*	R*
Grey-backed Finch-Lark	A	C	A	C	A		C

SITES:

1. Etosha
2. East of Walvis Bay (Namib Desert):
3. Namib Escarpment (C28):
4. Rosh Pinah (Succulent Karoo):
5. East of Keetmanshoop (Nama Karoo):
6. Mahango Park, Okavango
7. Windhoek International Airport

STATUS CODES

- A: Abundant, almost always see, many
 C: Common, usually see, few
 U: Uncommon, sometimes see
 R: Rare, very irregular, almost never see
 *: Especially irregular in occurrence

JANUARY WETLAND BIRD COUNT IN THE MAHANGO GAME RESERVE, KAVANGO

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At the start of 1999 I got the usual misguided urges to start the new year by doing something productive that didn't necessarily involve getting bitten by a snake. So after the necessary spade-work with the local M.E.T. authorities I made preparations to count the riverine areas of the Mahango Game Park. My boat, aptly named "Mahango" or alternatively "The Red Bitch" depending on performance levels, was methodically given the once over. I then arranged to carry out the count with the help of Anton Esterhuizen (M.E.T.) and Linda Sheehan. However, as expected Murphy had his piece to say and Anton was unavailable at the last moment. Linda and I decided to enlist the help of other interested parties who could help with bird identification. Surprisingly, we got very little response from the limited Rundu pool of eligible candidates, and we embarked on our mission unaided. It was, however, agreed that we would involve one of the staff members at the Park itself.

When we arrived we found the available staff members otherwise occupied and we sought help elsewhere. Ndhovu Safari Lodge was the obvious choice and we managed to twist some worthwhile arms there. Peter and Lance made their expertise and enthusiasm available on three consecutive days, and there was no additional charge for the scintillating company and dirty jokes.

The level of the river was low, although it had risen quite significantly after the festive season's early rains. Sandbanks had almost all been covered and only the high areas of some remained. The level was high enough to slowly start filtering into the adjoining marshy areas, adding additional suitable waterbird habitat. These areas were however not yet entirely deep enough for the hippo population to leave the main river-course, and they still laid claim to all the deeper areas of the river. As these areas were still the only

navigable areas of the river we had some serious "right-of-way" disputes and we often almost found ourselves playing hopscotch on hippo backs. This count was definitely not for the faint-hearted.

Our first day on the river almost ended in disaster when the skipper gently parked the boat on a series of rocks just below the surface and put some large holes in the hull. We didn't realise the damage until once again on our merry way amongst the hippos we were unable to make headway on a boat getting lower and lower in the water. Some controlled panic ensued where everybody lost faith in the skipper (including himself). We did, however, get the boat and the participants safe before the crocodiles got their way with them. At Ndhovu Lodge we hoisted the boat unceremoniously up on a large tree and did some intricate boat re-building (photographs available). For this we sincerely need to thank Peter and Lance who never faltered in their enthusiasm and who were always on hand to help. Linda made sure we were all fed and watered while coating ourselves in fiberglass dust and gluing our fingers together with resin.

The weather conditions only added to our difficulties. Although most mornings started off with clear and warm weather, by early afternoon the clouds had closed over with scattered showers and accompanying thunder and lightning. This made river travel a high risk at times.

Undaunted by these odds we chose to wander around the many inland shallow pans created by the early rains in the park, when we were not able to be on the river. These pan areas proved extremely fruitful and revealed Slaty Egret, Dwarf Bittern, Ethiopian Snipe and most of the Knobilled Duck and Spurwing Goose population, with a small assembly of Hottentot Teal, together with other waders. Walking through these muddy pans had their risk elements as well. The slippery and tacky mud almost induced mud-fights between the sensible binocular wielding barefooters and those with sensible hiking boots clutching clipboards and trying to record while staying upright and being the object of much ridicule.

The counting along the main river-course went quite well and Linda

quickly got the hang of recording at speed. The skipper adeptly flashed around between hippo heads and backs while identifying and accurately counting unseen birds either flitting over the grass or diving away amongst the reeds. His adroitness and fearless determination can only be admired (even if only by himself).

Because of the slushy "wader friendly" nature of the bank areas we assumed we'd get a lot of joy wading around in these marshy areas shared by the main population of crocodiles. Understandably we got no volunteers on the day set aside for this exercise, everybody seemed to have other pressing arrangements elsewhere. Linda and I, blindly followed by Sukela (the fearless Fox Terrier), therefore sallied forth unaided. These areas proved to be relatively fruitless and only small pockets produced some Saddle-billed Stork, Baillon's Crake, Rufous-bellied Heron and a spattering of other birds already noted elsewhere. We did, however, hear an unusual bird call quite clearly and for long enough to be remembered. On our return I played some recordings and can only assume the bird to be a Striped Flufftail. Not being entirely sure, however, and overly sensitive to ridicule from the "experts" I refrained from adding it to our list. However, after a lengthy chat with Rob Simmons I decided it was worth a mention at least.

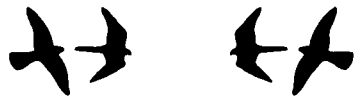
Reed Cormorant and Darter, usually well represented, were few and far between, probably due to the destruction of their usual breeding/roosting trees by the high and fast river after good rains last year. Openbill Stork were surprisingly badly represented, especially as during late December there were circling flocks of between 40 and 60 birds regularly seen overhead.

Longtoed Plover, usually an exception, seemed to pop up everywhere this time, and Wattled Crane in groups of three and two birds were a welcome and encouraging site. It was also nice to get a good long and close look at three Ethiopian Snipe in the inland pan areas. Redwinged Pratincole were in abundance over the festive season, but on the count were only seen on one sandbank in any significant numbers, other stragglers were seen throughout the park. One evening we saw a large fragmented group feeding

inland and assumed them to have been counted on the bank previously. Some birds seen previously on the sandbank showed signs of having nests with eggs. With the lack of suitable sandbanks there was an understandable lack of African Skimmers which although present during December were scarce. The rise in the river which was a month earlier than last year and this definitely had an impact on this year's count.

The count was not without other exciting incidences: We saw an adult male Sitatunga, which we even photographed. This was apparently the first confirmed sighting in the past three years for the Park. I also found the drag marks of a lion kill early one morning, and later that day Linda and I followed the spoor some 600 metres into thick bush where two or three lions had dragged a Wildebeest kill to eat in peace. When Sukela was invited to attend she declined the invitation with absolutely no grace and insisted that she was more needed to guard the car. We surprised the lions while still 200 metres from the kill area and they made off with their customary indignation.

(Mark is looking for volunteers for his next count in April – just get your life insurance sorted out!!! – Editor)



BIRDING ON THE FARM RUSTIG, KAMANJAB DISTRICT

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We are lucky enough to spend most of our time on the Farm Rustig, north of Kamanjab. Our camp is situated at the base of a dolomite ridge and on our doorstep we have a range of habitats, but most of the farm comprises mopane woodland. At the camp we have several nests of Masked Weaver

and about 150 m away is a nest of a Spotted Dikkop with two eggs at the base of a mopane tree. The nest is a shallow scrape in the ground with little pebbles around it. Since the rainy season started we hear Orange River Francolin calling in the evening and Hartlaub's Francolin in the early morning hours. Rockrunner are very active calling all through the morning and much of the day. There melodious calls are a feature of the soundscape here.

So far we have been able to count 114 species of birds at Rustig including a number of Namibian specials like Rüppel's Parrot, Rockrunner and Violet Woodhoopoe. During the day we have Monteiro's Hornbill, Red-eyed Bulbul, Violet-eared and Black-cheeked Waxbill, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Black-throated Canary and the occasional Carp's Black Tit on our feeder and around our birdbath.

During a recent walk with a birder along a dolomite ridge where the vegetation comprises mostly Carrot Trees, Paperbarks and Acacias, we saw Black-chested Prinia, Swallow-tailed Bee-Eater, Pied and Bare-cheeked Babbler, Rüppel's Parrot, Kalahari Robin and Familiar Chat. We were also lucky enough to see a pair of adult African Hawk Eagles teaching their youngster to fly. Game is also abundant on the farm, with regular sightings of Steenbok, Damara Dik-Dik, Gemsbok, Kudu and smaller creatures like Dassie Rats.

Recently we had a both sad and exciting experience involving the capture and ringing of an immature African Hawk Eagle. Every morning I do a couple of hours of mist netting and a Black Cuckoo got caught on this particular morning. Before I could get to him the African Hawk Eagle attacked getting himself entangled in the nets. Unfortunately the cuckoo was killed.

