

# LANIOTURDUS

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## Editorial

In a past editorial (Lanioturdus 42-4) I mentioned the changing distributions of certain species. One species which seems to be a lot more common around Windhoek these days is the pin-tailed whydah. When I first moved to Windhoek some 28 years ago this was a species which one saw perhaps twice in five years. Now it is regularly seen at Avis Dam and we are getting more and more reports of these birds from suburban gardens all around Windhoek. Its host species, the common waxbill, is not a terribly common species around Windhoek and I certainly have not noticed any great increase in the numbers of these birds. However, both Roberts VII and Trevor Carnaby (Beat about the Bush *Birds* – Jacana Media 2008), indicate that it is suspected that the red-billed firefinch may be a secondary host although this is not proven. Come on you citizen scientists out there – this is a chance to make a name for yourself in the world of ornithology. We have a burgeoning population of red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek and if they are indeed secondary hosts to pin-tailed whydahs this might just be the time and place to prove it.

## Kavango/Caprivi Trip 2009

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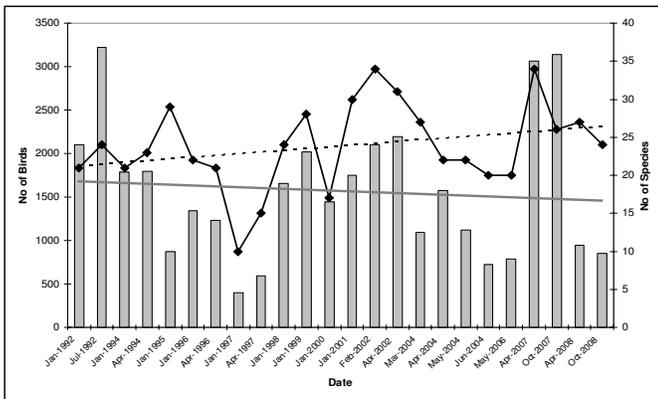
All photographs in this article are by Eckart Demasius

The birds of the north-east were calling so Richard and I responded by traveling to the Kavango and Caprivi Regions to repeat a previous well-proven itinerary.

Our first stop was Shamvura Camp, some 120 kilometres east of Rundu. Over dinner we discussed various options with Mark Paxton and early the next day we set off to find, amongst others, Souza's shrike.

As I had seen Souza's shrike before, for me it was not so much about finding the bird but to experience Mark's unbelievable birding technique. He is a truly superb birder and really knows his patch very well. Having him as a guide makes any bird outing worth the while. We stopped numerous times and were rewarded with sightings of, amongst others, Meyer's parrot and copper sunbird. Then suddenly Mark jumped out of the still moving vehicle shouting "Sharp-tailed Starling". That caused an immediate stop from me and armed with binoculars and camera we followed Mark, who was already some hundred metres away, into the bush. We managed to get good sightings of about fifteen sharp-tailed starlings but unfortunately it was a rainy day and not good for photography. The call and behavior of this starling is completely different from any starling I have seen before.

Before we reached the place where one usually finds Souza's shrike we had a good sighting of an African hobby and of green-capped eremomela. Our first attempt at finding Souza's did not deliver anything – or so we thought, when Mark stopped and pointed out to us a Souza's some 100 metres away. It seemed smaller than a sunbird at that distance and I was totally amazed at the wonderful eyesight of this man. At another location we saw a pair and this time with lots



**Figure 10: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Swakoppoort Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).**

### 2.11 Von Bach Dam

Von Bach Dam is the main supply dam for Windhoek and lies just south of Okahandja. The counts here are consistently low and are perhaps an indication of the disturbance caused at the dam by recreational activities.

*Area counted:* Approximately 4.5km<sup>2</sup> when the dam is full.

*Number of counts:* 14

*Last counted on:* 1 June 2004

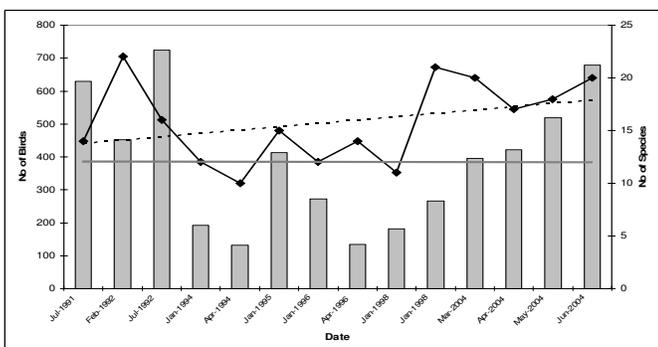
*Average number of birds:* 387

*Average number of species:* 16

*Maximum number of birds:* 724

*Maximum number of species:* 22

*Species past 1% population level:* White-breasted Cormorant (1).



**Figure 11: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Von Bach Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).**

and lots of patience I managed to obtain some photographs of the bird.



After nearly four hours in the veld we returned to camp for a somewhat delayed breakfast and a well deserved rest. During this time we were entertained by a red-headed weaver building its nest directly over our camp. What a treat!!



That afternoon we spent on the river with Mark and we were delighted by the marvelous sight of southern carmine bee-eaters at their breeding site. On our way back to camp we were rewarded with some beautiful sightings of rock pratincole which were also enjoying the last sunrays of the day.

The next day was spent on and along the river in search luapula cisticola, little bittern and warblers. A little wader really had us foxed and we thought we were onto something big here but later identification with the help of

Mark Boorman and Trevor Hardaker brought us back to mother earth – our mystery bird turned out to be a juvenile little stint!!! It is strange how waders appear so completely different in an unusual environment. Our tally for Shamvura was 118 bird species positively identified.

On day three we were on our way to Kalizo Lodge, close to Kalembesa east of Katima Mulilo. The mighty Zambesi River was a magnificent sight, 350 metres wide and this was long after the floods. We saw photographs taken during the floods and it must have been even more awesome then.

The main draw card for Kalizo at this time of the year, apart from the rarities recorded there, is the thousands of southern carmine bee-eaters gathered in a breeding colony within walking distance from the camp. What a sight and what privilege to witness such again!!!



Moving closer to the colony one could be forgiven for wondering who had planted a Bougainvillea out in the veld when suddenly the “flowers” take to the air and the sky is filled with flying red birds!! The colony contains some 5000 birds and when they all take off it is one of the big sights in Namibia for me!!

The next morning we undertook a boat trip for bird watching and apart from the many birds associated with the river the highlight for us was provided by African marsh-harrier and a beautiful fly-past by a pallid harrier. Western-

banded snake-eagle was another highlight that morning.

Because of the exceptional floods the vleis in the flood area were still full of water and provided an excellent opportunity for birding. We had splendid sightings of African pygmy-goose, African fish-eagle, Rufous-bellied heron and a number of other herons and egrets.



Sooner than we would have wished our time at Kalizo was over and with some 87 birds recorded we were heading towards Namushasha Lodge on the Kwando River. In the afternoon we joined the game drive to Horseshoe in the eastern Bwabwata area. This is still my favourite game drive and it will take a lot to beat this one. Although we did not see much game the wonderful forest with its splendid trees made up for it. At Horseshoe not only our group was very thirsty - much to our delight the elephants were also thirsty and joined us for a refreshing drink. We must have made quite some noise when alighting from the truck with the prospect of a cool beer as we scared away a broad-billed roller but we still managed to get a good sighting of it. Some things in life will always be more important than others!!!!

Bwabwata Area and Nambwa Camp was our destination for the next day. It is indeed as Pompie Burger describes it in his book "Birds in Namibia", apart off course from his opinion on the rugby !!! What a tranquil spot. We had breakfast at one of the camping sites and during this time the birds came and joined us. It was a pity we had only limited time, but the camp will see us both back and then certainly for a much longer period. We attempted to

reach Horseshoe from the north but there was so much water in the veld that we decided not to be foolish and risk getting stuck in the mud. We clocked up 75 bird species in this area.



Satisfied, we left for Mahangu Safari Lodge just north of Mahango Game Reserve. We booked a boat with a knowledgeable bird guide for the afternoon. I was able to get some good photographs of a malachite kingfisher while Richard's patience was tested a little but this was soon made up for by the excellent sighting of a pair of white-backed night-herons. We could not but agree that it always pays to take a local guide - local knowledge is unbeatable as we had already experienced in the company of Mark Paxton at Shamvura.



A whole day was set aside for a visit to Buffalo Core Area. After some camp birding we departed to be greeted by a herd of inquisitive buffalo on arrival at the flood plains. We had some good views of storks and vultures, egrets and herons and some eagles.

By lunch time the temperature of over 40 degrees Celsius forced us out, so we cooled off at Popa Falls where it was some 35 degrees. The view of the falls from the northern embankment remains the best indeed compared to the views from the Wildlife Resorts Camp and this time we recorded about nine rock pratincoles on the exposed rocks in the river.



By now we had seen so many birds each day that we decided on a challenge for the next day, i.e. to clock up 100 birds for that day. Early in the morning we began counting. Mahango Game Reserve was on the itinerary and by the time we reached Kwetche we had already totaled 50 bird species. Piece of old cake I thought, but it proved to be far more difficult to get the second fifty together.



However as the sun set and we returned to our camp we had counted just over 100 species for the day. A special highlight was a juvenile martial eagle which landed clumsily

on a tree barely strong enough to support this heavy raptor!! In total we recorded 127 bird species for the Mahango area.

Every trip comes to an end and so we had to move on to our last overnight stop just east of Rundu, Nkwazi Lodge. Signs of flood damage were still visible. The big trees around the lodge, a rarity along the Okavango River, provide a healthy habitat for many birds. White-crested helmet-shrike and yellow-billed oxpecker were recorded for the first time on the trip. We closed off our visit with a Sundowner cruise on the river and although this is certainly not a good method of bird watching we were still rewarded with a splendid view of a juvenile black-crowned night-heron and a lesser jacana.

On Tuesday 13 October we had to return home. We looked back on a wonderful birding trip during which we had recorded 208 different species. We believe that the timing of our visit the region, i.e. a birding trip in October, once the migrants had appeared, although it was hot during the day, together with the use of local guides and their knowledge, really makes such a venture worthwhile. Make use of local knowledge in the form of specialist bird guides. The additional cost of local guides is very small in relation to the total cost of the venture and is worth spending as in our case the results proved to be worth of every cent we spent on them.

Still high on our birding experiences over the last couple of days we entered Otjiwarongo where reality mixed with some humour hit us. Well, we then were truly on our way home and hoping to be away birding again sooner rather than later!!

