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EDITORIAL

I write this editorial having just arrived back from a month in the USA, mainly Alaska and I have to marvel at the bird life here compared to the winter in the cold north. One may think that April is spring in the Northern Hemisphere but if you get far enough north, spring comes much later. Geese and ducks were arriving as the snow was melting but they met temperatures of -30°C in the northwest of Alaska. Before we left the cranes were arriving and redpolls nesting but both the birds and humans were shocked to wake up May first to a blanket of 10–50 cm of snow which ranged from the coast to the interior.

Back in Namibia the late rains were well received by the birds and nesting continued. The first bird I caught in my mist net on 15 May was a recently fledged Yellow-breasted Bunting, the second a young Red-billed Quelea. The nest box I left with four tiny Carp's Black Tits was occupied by a dormouse. Another nest box had 3 small Grey Hornbills which is rather late for this species. In my absence, Pete Leonard visited the country from neighboring Zambia and he has written an account of his visit. He sends his apologies to Steve Braine and Keith Wearne for not having the time to visit. I would encourage everyone to ask their visitors to drop me a page-long account of their observations and memories.

This journal used to have more recent sightings published but I have not been receiving any from the members and I appeal to all to send in their observations directly to me via e-mail at korie@iafrica.com.na. For those of you in the dark, snail mail also works at PO Box 22, Okaukuejo.

MAHANGO WETLAND BIRD COUNT – JANUARY 2001

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The rains this year have been late in coming and by January we were all beginning to fear that we'd been left out in the whole scheme of things. Repeated visits to Mahango National Park and discussions with Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) officials in the area and Rundu confirmed that the rains were late and the river was low. Localized rains in the area and in the Angolan catchment periodically affected the river level causing it to rise but only for a few days before subsiding again. A few localized downpours at mid-month gave us some hope and we decided to go ahead with a wetland bird count. Once again Pete le Roux from Caltex Oil was very forthcoming with some supportive funds. Armed with the usual survival necessities we set up camp on the river in the park, at a different locality from the basecamp of previous counts. We launched the boat and made a few exploratory trips, to keep the crocodile and hippo population on their toes. The Kavango River was still very low for this time of the year with many islands and extensive sandbanks still visible. Hippo activity was still concentrated in the mainstream although some of the waterways in the surrounding reedbeds showed enough water, and adequate grazing opportunities. Some of the inland pan areas amongst the Acacia woodland had water but many were only damp enough to encourage lush grass growth. Game species, however, certainly were benefiting and were concentrating in these new grass areas close to the river. Some healthy herds of Sable, Roan, Tsessebe, Kudu and Impala were regularly seen, as well as Giraffe and the occasional Elephant. The floodplains had some groups of Reedbuck and a few Lechwe. Family groups of Warthogs were everywhere and even an occasional Bushbuck.

The current unstable situation in the region has severely affected the tourism industry. Consequently tourist vehicles visiting the Park and this area have been few and far between. This drop in vehicle activity appears to have caused an increase in the poaching and illegal fishing activities in the park. During regular conversations with the Mahango MET staff members it also appeared

that infiltration occurred more often after sunset and we were asked by MET officials to make our presence known in the area after dark as much as possible, to help discourage these nightly incursions. We therefore moved around at night on the roads with a spotlight on occasion, and also spent some time on the boat at night with a spotlight. This particular activity proved somewhat daunting. On one occasion, returning back to camp, a particularly large and aggressive hippo was spotted in the beam of the spotlight. The result was a nasty, sudden stop on a sandbank while circumnavigating the offensively eyed hippo. Chaos then gently set in when the engine stopped and the spotlight went out leaving us stranded, marooned on a sandbank in the middle of the river, surrounded by unknown nasties. While getting ourselves off the offending sandbank, which had pitched up out of nowhere, we were acutely aware of the close proximity of the "aggressive hippo" that had been the cause of this manoeuvre in the first place. Once off the sandbank, to add to our predicament, the propeller became clogged with weed making a fast getaway impossible. However, with every vestige of dignity forgotten the skipper faced the river with all his survival instincts, now sharply tuned, and limped towards the bank to do battle with the hippo. Surprisingly the spotlight started working after some serious yanking on various electric cables and the "hippo" was hurriedly pinpointed in the same place as before aggressively staring at us with unblinking red eyes. Adrenaline was positively pumping out of our ears the nearer to the foe we got, and then suddenly I saw that the hippo had a numberplate between its eyes and had mutated into the rear of the vehicle at the campsite. Needless to say the skipper's ego has not yet recovered to this day.

Over the weekend and after the major count on the river was completed we did the inland pans which by now were starting to dry out gradually. These pans proved particularly fruitful and delivered a wide variety of birds in concentrations easy enough to count at leisure. The low grass afforded excellent cover for Painted Snipe and the odd Lesser Moorhen.

During our stay and after the major river system had been covered by boat we decided to put up a series of mist-nets a short distance from the campsite and on a small island towards the Botswana boundary. The first afternoon proved very successful and we found our hands occupied with the nets full of Red-

winged Pratincoles and a variety of other waders. The second day, however, proved a bit of an ordeal! We'd left the nets up most of the day and went to check them again during mid-afternoon. On nearing the island I saw one of the poles severely bent and feared a hippo had trotted through. However, on getting to the nets we found no damage to the nets themselves and no hippo tracks. Curiously though only the bent pole. We all walked around dumbfounded. Then I found some really strange looking tracks, which could've been made by a clubfooted Crocodile with no belly or tail drag-marks. Our budding chief tracker Linda then made an alarming announcement that she considered the tracks to be made by a crawling man with clenched fists. The tracks headed across the island to the river and we then further investigated the opposite heavily reeded bank to find the clearly visible exit footprints into the reedbed. This confirmed, we returned to camp, and I headed to the entrance gate to report the presence of what appeared to be a potential poacher.

It now being about 16h00 on a Sunday afternoon I expected little response, if any at all. I was to be pleasantly surprised! Only two MET gate staff were there as I expected, and I inquired about the whereabouts of the others only to hear that they were all away. I explained the incident to Petrina and suggested that they may be able to contact one of their patrols, presumably in the bush somewhere in the Park. Petrina assured me that this was not possible and to my astonishment she appeared seconds later with a male colleague, both brandishing fully loaded automatic weapons. They both had an eager glint in their eyes and were continually fingering the triggers while restlessly stepping around the office. It was clear they were ready for action. I politely unloaded their weapons before getting them into our vehicle to get to the site of the incident while some daylight remained. On the mad dash along the winding park road we almost collided with a Giraffe that had no road sense and was obviously not aware of the urgency of the situation. However, we all got there in one piece and the two armed officials, with vengeance in their eyes, set off into the reeds in pursuit of the offending culprit, who was obviously a Botswana national interested in obtaining some ornithological equipment to further his education. There remained less than an hour of daylight and consequently the follow-up, although carried out in all eagerness, did not result in the capture of the culprit. I was however gratified at the response from the MET officials. We were, throughout the count, constantly running into patrolling anti-

poaching units and a number of visits from the Senior Park officials to our campsite proved a very encouraging attitude of responsibility. One of these officials, Ulafe, arrived at our camp on a Friday afternoon with a vehicle loaded to capacity with wire and cable snares recovered during a weeklong patrol with an anti-poaching unit. We also often heard from these officials about numerous pending court cases involving poachers and illegal incursions from Botswana. I was personally very impressed by this responsible attitude towards their positions as custodians of the Park's wildlife resources, and they are all to be congratulated.

Most of the bird species numbers (Table 1) were similar to the count in January 1999. The low water-level of the river and the subsequent smaller flooded areas made access and coverage easier than the previous year and we were possibly now picking up a few additional skulking bird species previously difficult to see, **Painted Snipe**, for instance.

Openbilled Storks were a significant surprise with comparatively huge concentrations now in this wetland. Being specialized feeders on snails and mussels one can only assume that their huge concentrations were due to an unusually abundant food source.

Red-winged Pratincoles were also extremely abundant when compared to the previous year. Our mist-netting exercise also showed a large concentration of subadult birds indicating a very successful breeding season this year being the possible cause of the increase.

Considering the low water level and the availability of adequate sandbanks for roosting and shallow water for feeding one wonders why we didn't see any African Skimmers at all. This continually brought up the question – what makes these birds move out of an area where conditions are still suitable?

Once again this fruitful little wetland proved a worthwhile and rewarding challenge. This trip also established the encouraging positive change in attitude of the MET officials who now seem to be taking this unique little wetland more seriously.

Table 1. Mahango Game Park waterfowl census, Jan 2001

Roberts' No.	Species	Total
7	Black-necked Grebe	1
8	Dabchick	1
58	Reed Cormorant	84
60	African Darter	37
64	Goliath Heron	16
65	Purple Heron	2
66	Great White Egret	12
67	Little Egret	10
68	Yellow-billed Egret	4
70	Slaty Egret	2
71	Cattle Egret	95
72	Squacco Heron	30
74	Green-backed Heron	24
75	Rufous-bellied Heron	6
76	Black-crowned Night-heron	26
77	White-backed Night-heron	2
79	African Dwarf Bittern	1
81	Hammerkop	6
85	Abdim's Stork	30
87	Openbill Stork	385
88	Saddlebill Stork	1
99	Whitefaced Whistling Duck	38
102	Egyptian Goose	2
107	Hottentot Teal	21
108	Red-billed Teal	15
114	African Pygmy Goose	5
115	Knob-bill Duck	52
116	Spurwing Goose	36
117	Maccoa Duck	15
148	African Fish Eagle	9
164	European Marsh Harrier	1
165	African Marsh Harrier	3
167	Pallid Harrier	2
170	Osprey	1
207	Wattled Crane	7
213	Black Crake	4
215	Baillons Crake	2
227	Lesser Moorhen	3
240	African Jacana	53
242	Painted Snipe	8
246	White-fronted Plover	2
249	Three-banded Plover	11
255	Crowned Plover	3
258	Blacksmith Plover	290
260	Wattled Plover	30
261	Long-toed Plover	31
264	Common Sandpiper	18

Roberts' No.	Species	Total
266	Wood Sandpiper	20
269	Marsh Sandpiper	3
270	Greenshank	20
272	Curlew Sandpiper	7
274	Little Stint	12
284	Ruff	191
295	Black-winged Stilt	11
298	Water Dikkop	46
304	Red-winged Pratincole	1186
338	Whiskered Tern	3
339	White-winged Tern	4
395	Marsh Owl	1
428	Pied Kingfisher	8
429	Giant Kingfisher	2
431	Malachite Kingfisher	2
	62 Species	2953



A SHORT INTRA-AFRICAN MIGRATION

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We eased our way into Namibia gently. We have been living and birding in Zambia for several years but rarely have Kate and I ventured beyond our swampy wetlands or sprawling miombo. So our first night was spent on the banks of the Zambezi, from where we could still see home and still recognise all the local birds. Thanks to the Sharpes (and their cool box) things got off to a good start and as the sun sank we watched a fluffy Finfoot chick ride past on its mother's back and a pair of White-backed Night Herons wake themselves up.

We had been told so many different things about the security situation in the Caprivi that we decided the only way to get to the bottom of things was to go there. Most Namibian friends had told us it was fine, though a handful were cautious and the British Foreign Office website effectively told us not to visit