

CONTENTS

VOLUME 34 (2), 2001

EDITORIAL	1
PAXTON, M. & L. SHEEHAN. Mahango wetland bird count – Jan 2001	2
LEONARD, P. A short intra-African migration	7
SIMMONS, R.E. & J.P. ROUX. A survey of African Black Oystercatchers	14
SIMMONS, R.E. Nambian wetland bird counts: Jan, Apr, Jul 2000	19
OSBORNE, T.O. Carp's Black Tit nesting observations	23
DANTU, S. A dilly penguin	26
DANTU, S. Observations at a White-throated Canary nest	28
BOORMAN, M. Unusual coastal sightings	29
BIRD OBSERVATIONS	31

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.

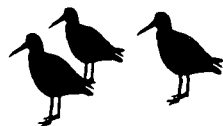
representing almost 10% of the world population. This is a very conservative estimate given that more than 220 birds have been seen at high tide on Flamingo Island alone (October 2000, T.G. Cooper – we encountered only 92 at low tide), hundreds of birds have been seen on Seal, Penguin and Halifax islands at other times (I. Cordes, J. Kemper), and the Lüderitz peninsula itself (not included here) is known to hold about 80 birds (RES) and Elizabeth Bay another 90 birds (RES) at this time of year.

A more realistic estimate of the importance of Lüderitz and the surrounding rocky shores for ABOs is as many as 950 birds which is about 20% of the world population. Alternatively the world population may have been underestimated!

A full and instantaneous count is required to be able to give more precise figures. We will leave it to Phil Hockey's group to ascertain its importance for young oystercatchers and thus its importance for South Africa's oystercatcher population. We appeal to all birders to report sightings of rings or large flocks of birds to us or to Phil Hockey

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Phil Hockey for initiating and funding this survey of oystercatchers and providing us with details of the ageing criteria, to NAMDEB for allowing us access to the diamond mining areas of the Sperrgebiet, to Mark Tapsell for bike hire and especially Volker Jahnke and Luffie Druker of Coastways Tours for some critical logistical support at crucial times at Saddle Hill. Trygve Cooper, Antje Burke, Jessica Kemper, Ingrid Wiesel and Imke Cordes added numerous useful observations and assistance.



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NAMIBIAN WETLAND BIRD COUNTS: JANUARY, APRIL AND JULY 2000

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Good rains over Namibia in 2000 saw a successful – and unusual – breeding attempt of flamingos on Etosha Pan and record numbers of birds at the coast.

January rains were about average for northern Namibia but below average for the south. By the time the rains ended in April, however, all southern Namibia (bar the Namib Desert) had experienced over 120% of their long-term average and some areas had falls of over 240% (WHOT 2000). Four Namibian wetlands are now covered on a monthly basis (three at the coast and one inland dam) and long-term trends (figures 1.2) reveal clear seasonal changes with a general decline in peak bird numbers at the inland dam.

Highlights for 2000

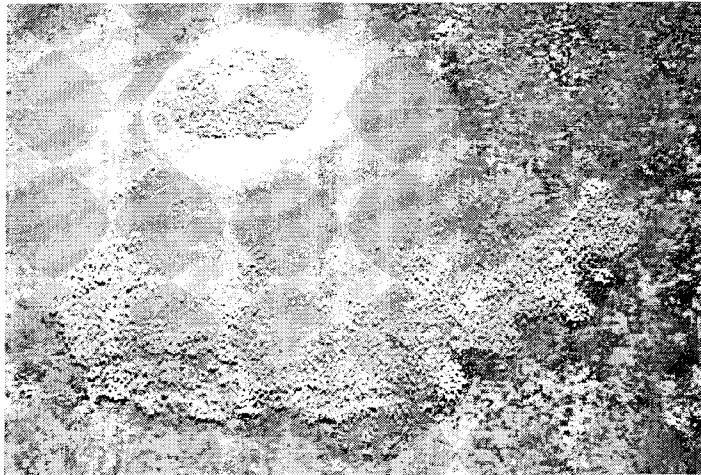
- Greater and Lesser Flamingos bred successfully on Etosha Pan in April.
- A juvenile with an engraved ring was spotted 500 km SW 9 months later.
- Walvis Bay reported record number of coastal wetland birds.
- A flamingo island was constructed in a newly flooded saltpan at Walvis.
- High species richness was recorded at the Orange River mouth.
- Rivers were well covered with counts from the Zambezi (2), Kavango, Chobe and Orange Rivers.

Flamingos

In December 1999 about 35,000 flamingos were found at the coast and by 20 January they had all but disappeared. Many were heard (at night) heading inland in late December in response to rains in Etosha. Once again they took an indirect route there – up Namibia's coast and then inland. As early as 2nd January 2000–3000 birds were seen constructing nests near the old drainage channels that cross the Pan (Rietfontein) and another of about the same

magnitude were seen at Okerfontein (see photograph).

The unusual thing about this was that only local rains had flooded the pan and no inflow from the northern or eastern feeder rivers was apparent. By early February a familiar sequence was emerging – no water remained around either colony and about 2000 adults at Rietfontein and 3000 birds at Okerfontein were tending just-hatching chicks that were destined to become jackal and vulture food. Just as both colonies were due to fail, 70 mm of rains fell in the 3rd week of February and most hatched chicks were saved. On 12 April with water still on the pan a ringing operation was set up and about 2000 flightless chicks were rounded up to be driven into waiting holding pens of nets. The birds panicked however, escaping the enclosing circle leaving only two birds to be captured. The first engraved rings used in Namibia were put on these birds and remarkably 9 months later (12 Jan 2001), one birds was reported alive and well from Walvis Bay 594 km south west. A 50% resighting rate! [a copy of the full report is available from Rob Simmons]

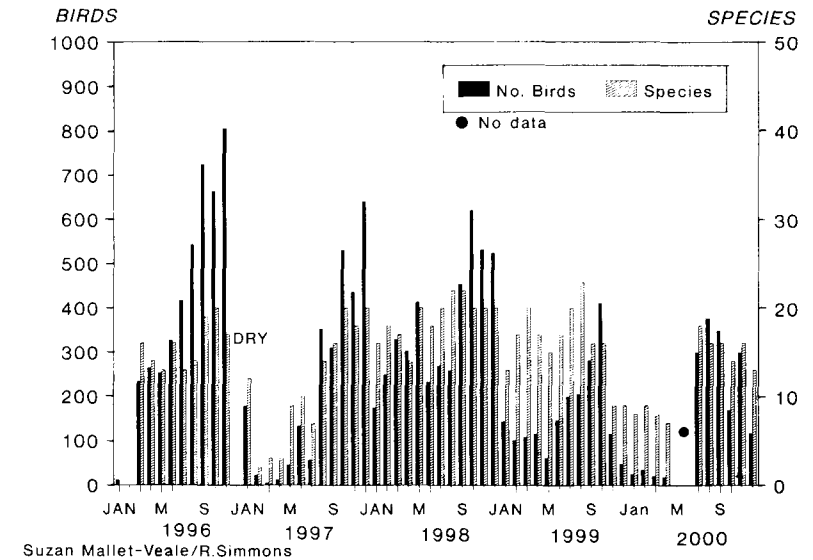


The Rietfontein flamingo colony on Etosha Pan, photographed in January 2000. A mixed colony of Lesser (~60%) and Greater Flamingos numbering 1550 nests.

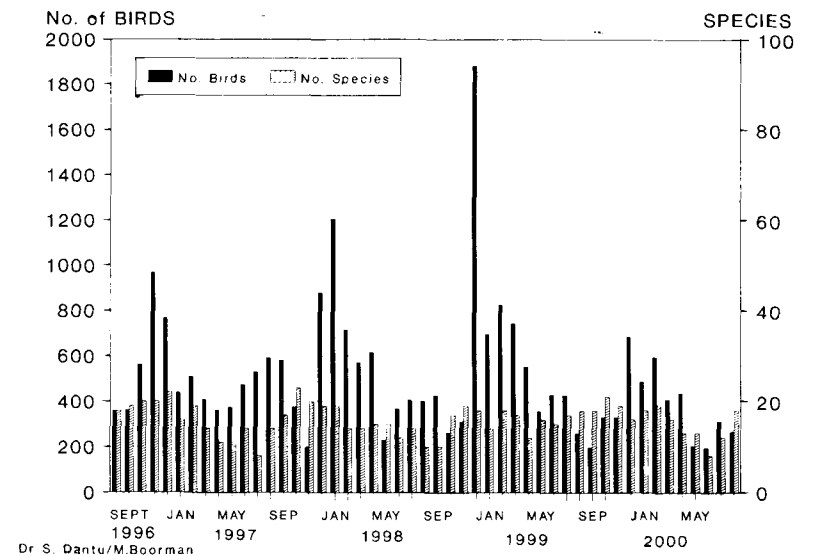
Photograph Wynand du Plessis

Monthly fluctuations in wetland birds recorded at one inland dam (Avis) and one coastal sewage works (Swakopmund) from 1996 to 2000. Both graphs indicate predictable increases in birds as the dry season progresses (drying up ephemeral wetlands elsewhere) with a sharp drop as the next rains begin between November and January. A gradual decline in peak numbers is evident at Avis Dam over the 5-year period.

WETLAND BIRDS AT AVIS DAM 1996 - 2000



WETLAND BIRDS AT SWAKOP SEWAGE WORKS 1996 - 2000



A flamingo island was constructed in September 2000 at a newly constructed salt pan on the coast in the Walvis Bay Ramsar site. It measures about 120 m by 50 m and has been constructed out of an existing raised beach. About 50 clay nests have been added to it to entice birds to come and breed. This was a collaboration between the Walvis Bay Salt Refineries (Roy Stanton), the Coastal Environmental Trust of Namibia (Keith Wearne) and the Ministry of Environment (RES). While flamingos have never bred successfully at the coast, they have tried twice in living memory.

The **Orange River Mouth Ramsar** site is counted up to three times a year in a collaboration between South African and Namibian ornithologists. Just to prove its worth as both an IBA and a Ramsar site, the counters (Mark Anderson and Holger Kolberg) recorded over 50 species at the mouth in January. The second most species rich site was the Kavango River with 44 species (Mark Paxton and Linda Sheehan).

The site with the most birds was **Walvis Bay** where a massive 156 000 birds were recorded in January. The bulk of this total was comprised of (30 000) Curlew Sandpipers, Common Terns (6000) with many unidentified terns (probably a mixture of Common and Black Terns) and 5600 Black-necked Grebes. Ever-increasing numbers of Rednecked Phalaropes (4) Franklin's Gull (2) and Black-tailed Godwit (2) made up the rarities.

Namibia's rivers were well sampled with Orange River counts in March, Zambezi River counts in April and July (Val Sparg), Chobe River in June (M. Paxton and L. Sheehan) and the Kavango River in July and August (MP and LS). These are valuable counts because they have shown that Namibia's tropical rivers support at least 10 times the number of birds (and more species) for every kilometre of river, than the two desert rivers (Orange and Cunene). We (Simmons & Allan 2001) have also shown that there is also a curious increase in abundance and species richness of birds from east to west in the two desert rivers, contrary to what might be expected as these rivers enter the Namib Desert.

Of the cranes. 45 Wattled Cranes were present in the Nyae Nyae pans in February but only 6 Crowned Cranes were seen in the grasslands north of

Etosha in January. Blue Cranes continue to breed in Etosha National Park.

Finally in an effort to encourage continuation of wetland counting, the Wetlands Working group of Namibia's Biodiversity Task Force, has set aside travelling money for wetland counters. This is enough to cover petrol costs for those not using government transport. Strangely it has been poorly utilised to date.

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CARP'S BLACK TIT NESTING OBSERVATIONS

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During the past 18 months I have been watching a resident pair of Carp's Black Tits *Parus carpi* at our farm, Windpoort, in the Outjo District. At our house, 19° 21.489' S 15° 29.028' E, I imported a 2.5 m mopane stump with several nice nest holes, and erected it just off our stoep. I thought it might attract one of the hole-nesting local birds who might breed. The habitat for Carp's tits appears to be wooded rocky hillsides and hill tops.

A few days after I installed the stump a tit flew into one of the holes near sundown with a green caterpillar and roosted for the night. Over the next two months whenever I was having a sundowner on my stoep, I recorded the behaviour and time the bird roosted (Table 1). The tit would arrive and start calling from low bushes near the roost from 1-5 minutes before it flew into the hole. Once the bird flew onto the stump it would call a couple of times