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Editorial

Tim Osborne

I must apologize to the members for the delay in Vol. 37 (1). It was at the printers in late January but due to unforeseen circumstances it was delayed until April. It also had a distortion error and a double entry of the map accompanying Holger Kolberg's ringing report, which was my fault. Not having a printer, I only work on my laptop and sometimes I cannot see what the final page will look like.

The rains are past and those birds dependent on insects have bred. The seed-eaters are enjoying the harvest and the large raptors are prospecting their nests as they also have lots of prey in the form of young birds. The Monotonous Larks are still singing their hearts out day and night on our farm. The African Scops Owls are also calling throughout the night. From our place we can hear 5 pairs, one of which is right outside our window. Funny how one gets used to natural sounds in the bush. When we come to Windhoek we cannot sleep with the car alarms, dogs barking and traffic, but here with a Scops calling all night we sleep right through.

From the Chairman's Report you will be able to see that the club membership is declining. If you want to keep the club viable you must also do your part and try and get new members to join.

There are a lot more sightings reported in this issue, which is a welcome change. Keep sending those in. So far this year we have added three new species to the Namibian list: Gull-billed Tern, Streaky-breasted Flufftail and European Blackcap (more on this species in the next volume).

third sighting (Nov) was between Nebrownii and Gemsbokvlakte (east of Okaukuejo).

All three sightings happened between 14h30 and 15h00, whilst birding with clients, when the sun was still high and blazing down.

The observations were made from the car, whilst driving slowly in search of Sandgrouse, Coursers and other larks. In all three instances the give away was the distinct upright silhouette of a Spike-heeled Lark, sentrying at the edge of a Ground Squirrel burrow. Anyone acquainted with Spike-heels, knows that finding a solitary bird is virtually impossible and where there is one, there are usually a few more nearby. The first time I met this single lark dilemma with no sign of its family mob around, I just had to stop (especially as I had already told the clients what darling, gregarious and co-operative breeders, these group-loving birds are!). The search was proving futile, having endlessly scanned the empty plains, until suddenly a soft chirp could be heard emanating from the Ground Squirrel burrow. Much to my surprise, a look into it, revealed the rest of the mob. There they all were, some standing, some lying down, others preening, all but one (the sentry) enjoying the soothing coolness of this shaded, abandoned burrow. It was evidently clear that the group was cooling off whilst the sun beat down on the surface of the plain, raising the air temperature to over 36°C, as indicated by the car's built-in thermometer!

Initially I thought this to be unique behaviour, only shared with the impressive Greater Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* – a species I have previously seen going underground when the sands are hottest, in the Moroccan desert. Some literary research, has revealed that there are a few other larks that have been seen avoiding heat in a similar fashion, namely Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunnii*, Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cincturus* and Black-crowned Finchlark *Eremopterix nigriceps* all, well-adapted desert species and all of them from North Africa.

'Going down under' is not just shade-seeking behaviour; it truly is worth it! When you are hot (or cold!) in mid-winter or mid-summer. Temperatures below ground (ca. 30 cm) can be ingeniously stable and remain at 34°C throughout summer whilst surface temperatures sizzle away to above 60°C and plummet below 20°C at night. Similarly in mid-winter, below-ground temperatures remain stable at 20°C whilst surface temperatures fluctuate from 28°C during the day to

near freezing temperatures at night. Burrows should not be viewed as summer cooling realms alone, as they are in fact remarkably stable, thermal refuges on cold winter nights, offering a buffer zone, with a fairly constant temperature to those species wise enough to venture into the underworld; something the vast majority of Namibia's desert rodents are well aware of.

Thinking about it, it would be interesting, to find out if Spike-heels know about the full-scale thermoregulatory advantages of burrows and if, perhaps, they utilize them as underground roosts during cold winter nights. I have certainly not seen this yet! But I am looking and would love to hear if anyone observes such behaviour. I have the feeling it's a matter of time before I catch a bunch of Gray's Larks behaving similarly. I just hope I find them in winter as they head to roost, that would be really cool; pardon the pun!

Ever since I became aware of this behaviour I have been finding Spike-heels in all sorts of shaded, dark places. Under sprawling *Commiphoras* in Spitzkoppe, underneath an old rusty and abandoned vehicle between Uis and Omaruru, and deep under the calcrete ledge formations at the edge of the Etosha Pan near Sueda.

I am convinced North Africa must have records of species using burrows because there are many British birders walking their sands, who know what they are looking for. Namibia should be no different; we just need to look a little bit deeper under the surface!

Happy birding!!!

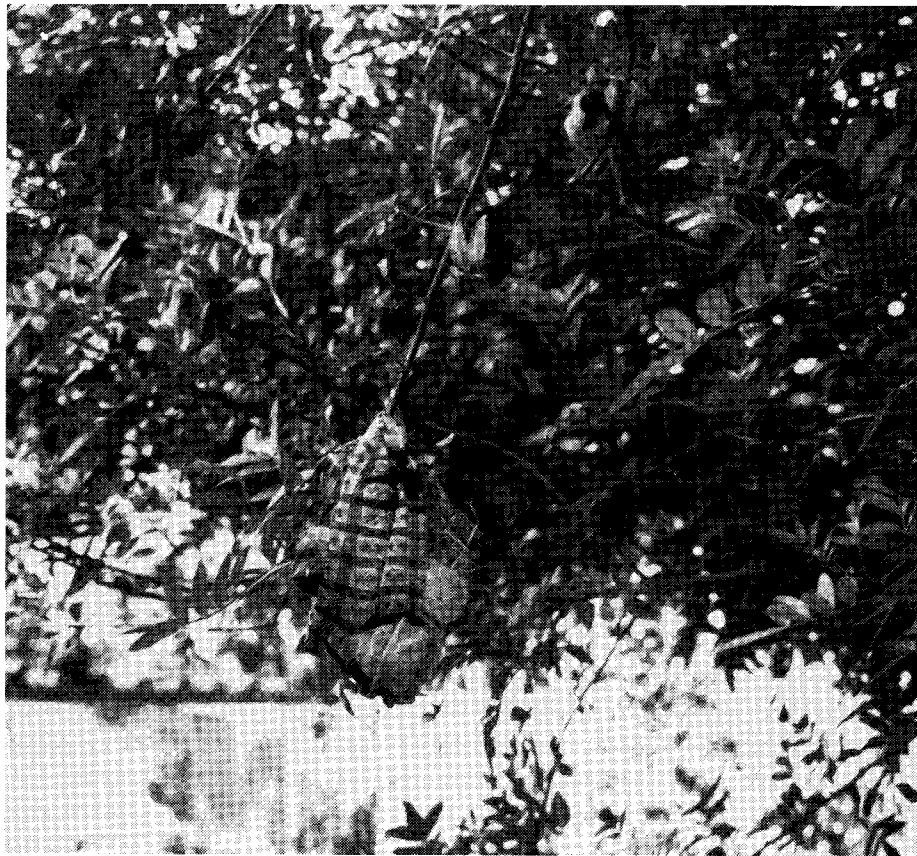
Nest rescue

Trudy Stols and Mrs M. Foerster
P.O. Box 1252, Tsumeb

On 2 January 2004, on a farm in the Otavi District, M. Foerster saw a male Southern Masked Weaver *Ploceus velatus* rip open a weaver's nest. One of the young chicks inside the nest fell to the ground. Mrs Foerster picked up the bird and returned it to the nest which had a hole in it. The male bird again tried to destroy the nest and even attacked the female bird, which was hovering nearby

with a caterpillar. The male would not let the female get near the nest. After watching this antagonistic behaviour for a while, with no let up on the part of the male weaver, my son shot the bird.

We then realized that this was not the first incident. Dead young birds had been found on the ground during the preceding days. On 3 January we found a whole nest on the ground with three chicks in different stages of development. The damaged nest was reinforced with a sock (see photo) and the female accepted the sock as part of the nest and continued to feed the chicks. The female was able to successfully raise her brood to the fledging stage.



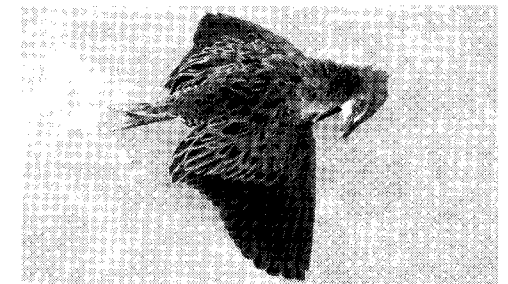
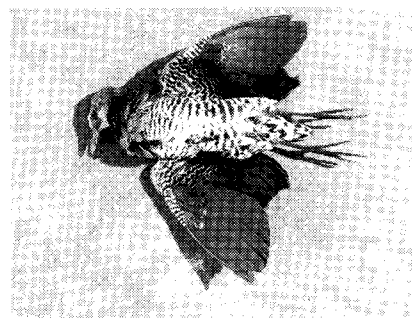
African Crake found at Swakopmund

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Miss Bonnie, birdwatcher of another kind, did it again. After finding the Gray's Lark chick east of Kramersdorf at Swakopmund last year (see *Lanioturdus* 36(4) 2003), she now found an African Crake *Crex egregia* that had just died in very much the same area.



Photo 1: Miss Bonnie east of Kramersdorf where she found the African Crake.



Photos 2 + 3: African Crake