CONTENTS

VOLUME 37 (1) 2004

OSBORNE, T. O. Editorial .............................................................. 1
OSBORNE, T.O. Interesting ringing recoveries .................................... 2
CHILDRESS, B. Remarkable Lesser Flamingo recovery ......................... 3
KOLBERG, H. Summary of the 2002 ringing year in Namibia ................. 4
BLANE, S. The happy wanderer ....................................................... 10
RODWELL, L. SCOTT, A. & M. SCOTT. Water, wetlands,
Wattled Cranes and people .......................................................... 13
LENSSEN, J. Adaptive behaviour of the Namaqua Sandgrouse ............... 15
CANTRELL, M. Red-billed Firefinch and Waxbills of Windhoek .......... 17
OSBORNE, T. O. A Zambian adventure .......................................... 18
ERARD, J. Observation of two Openbilled Stork Anastomus
lamelligerus along the Namibian coast ......................................... 22

Editorial

Tim Osborne

Here we are starting the New Year with the first issue of the bird club journal out
early. I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to make the Lanioturdus
a success. I would like to specially thank Ellen Gudde for all the work she has
done proofing the printer's drafts. Willie Peter and staff from Typoprint have
been very understanding in trying to print the journal remotely from Outjo District.

There is a variety of articles in this issue, so there should be something for
everyone. The editor would like to see a few more articles in German. None
have appeared since Micki Ludwig published In Volume 35-1.

The country has finally had some rain over most parts so birding should be good
for the remainder of the season. I have a nest of Carp's Black Tit in one of my
nest boxes and the Chestnut Weavers are in breeding plumage. It looks as if the
birds also like the rain.
the farm an artificial watering point, supplied on a weekly basis by truck and trailer, was created in the western section of the farm. The potential evaporative rate in the Namib Desert is 3 m per year. To conserve water a narrow cement drinking trough with a small surface area was constructed. Water for the trough is stored in two plastic tanks hidden on a side of a rock outcrop and regulated by a float valve. The small raised water trough was adapted for small wildlife by building, at one end, a sloping ramp on the inside and outside. The most frequent animals using the waterhole are springbok and oryx but many birds, including Namaqua Sandgrouse *Pterocles namaqua*, drink at the artificial oasis.

On 4 November 2002 I witnessed the flocks of Namaqua Sandgrouse flying in for their normal early morning drink. The birds usually land some distance from the water’s edge, walk swiftly to the water, drink fast and then some males wade into the water to do belly wetting by bobbing up and down. This behaviour is documented in the species (Maclean 1993. Roberts’ Birds of Southern Africa). The belly wetting is done to carry water to their chicks using the specially adapted and highly absorbent feathers of the belly.

What I observed that morning was very different. In small groups the sandgrouse would walk to the ramp at the end of the trough. Being narrow only 4-5 can drink at once. The others would jump onto the edge of the 30 cm high trough. From the edge they could drink the water, which was about 4 cm below the edge. But they could not get their belly feathers wet from the edge. I observed that about one third of the birds would jump into the water and splash around for a few seconds and jump out again. The water is only about 12 cm deep in the centre of the trough so it is possible that their feet might have been able to touch the bottom when they were in the water. Unfortunately I was too far away to see whether it was only the males that were jumping into the water. From the edge of the trough the birds would jump back to the ground, pause and then fly away.

Sandgrouse are vulnerable to attacks by falcons and goshawks, when at the water’s edge and they are understandably nervous. I have never observed sandgrouse bathing and have not come across this observation in the literature. The birds at the trough were faced with a dilemma of waiting their turn on the narrow ramp, flying to another water-point many kilometres away or adapting an alternative method of getting a drink and wetting their belly feathers. They adapted their normal behaviour by jumping onto the trough edge and went one step further by even jumping into the shallow water. Thus a greater number of birds could finish what they came for along the length of the trough.

**RED-BILLED FIREFINCH AND WAXBILLS OF WINDHOEK**

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Living, as I do, amongst the birds (Flaminkweg, off Kingfisher, Hochland Park), I thought it time for someone on the western side of the city to continue the saga of waxbills in their gardens (Butcher *Lanioturdus* 35 (4) and Cummingham in the notes of 35 (2), both 2002).

I have seen four species of waxbill (Family Estrildidae) so far in my small garden with a fifth certain to be found on the other side of the wall. They seem to be attracted to a small water feature with reeds and running water in one corner. To date the most unusual sighting has been a pair of Red-billed Firefinches *Lagonosticta senegalica* on one occasion, with single individuals on others. According to Nuttal(1997. Redbilled Firefinch. In: The Atlas of Southern African Birds. Vol. 2: Passerines. Harrison, J.A., Allan, D.G., Underhill, L.G., Herremans, M., Tree, A.J., Parker, V. & Brown, C.J. (eds), BirdLife South Africa, Johannesberg) the firefinch has only been recorded from the northern and southern borders of Namibia along the rivers. This is the first record of the bird from central Namibia.

Second on the list comes an infrequent visitor, the Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis* which, while common in Klein Windhoek, has not been reported on
the western side of town. My most regular visitor is the Common Waxbill Estrilda australis found singly or in pairs. Add to the list the Black-cheeked Waxbill Estrilda erythronotus and the Violet-eared Waxbill Uraeginthus granatinus which often forage together (though I must confess the latter has yet to put in an appearance over the wall) and you have a varied and interesting collection of waxbills.

Previous articles raise the question of distribution since Blue Waxbills in Windhoek (and also firefinches) are outside their recorded range. Two hypotheses are advanced - escapes from captive flocks or a possible expansion of range in years of good rain. Enquiries I have made with some of the local birders favour the former idea, but unless there is clear historical evidence for the escape of captive birds, I side with the latter. While man obviously does affect the ranges of many organisms, changes over time through natural causes are the norm rather than the exception. Imagine for instance corridors of good forage being formed after several years of good rain down which seed eating populations can expand, only to contract again in pockets of relative plenty (i.e. Windhoek) in less favourable times. This is how House Sparrows are thought to have expanded to most of southern Africa from their release point of Durban by using a corridor of roads and railroads.

I wonder if other birders can top my list of waxbills in their gardens – don’t cheat now!

A Zambian Adventure
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As you may recall from Lanioturdus 34(2) Peter Leonard, from Zambia, visited Namibia and wrote an account of his travels here. I recently returned from Zambia and thought the more adventurous club members might consider a trip up there.

Laurel and I were traveling from 12 October to 4 November 2003, but were only in Zambia from 16 October to 2 November. On our last night in Namibia we stayed at Kalizo Lodge where the Carmine Bee-eaters were busy breeding at their colony. We inquired about road conditions driving from Sesheke to Livingstone but no one knew any fresh information except Dick Sharpe who heard that someone had made it in 3 hours. That 200-km stretch of road has the reputation, even in Zambia, of being horrendous. We crossed the border at Katima Mulilo and found the immigration officials efficient since we had the required US$40 each for a 3 year multiple entry visa. We crossed by ferry to Sesheke and made it to Livingstone in 2.5 hours on a road where 60 km was under construction but most was new tar. From Livingstone (after buying third party insurance for Kwacha 60,000 (US$20) we drove to Muckle Neuk Farm outside Choma. The Bruce-Millers run a guest lodge there and it is one of the best places to find the endemic Chaplin’s Barbet. Lodging is US$50 with full board and the farm is a combination of cattle and game farming. New birds to Namibians will start coming as soon as you arrive at the lodge. They have recorded over 470 species from the farm with specialties like African Broadbill, Narina Trogon, African Finfoot, Slatey Egret, nesting Crowned Eagle, Emerald Cuckoo, and Souza’s Shrike. There is plenty of good miombo habitat and it is not uncommon to run into bird parties with 35 species. They also have 2 large dams and during November get up to one million Barn Swallows roosting.

From Choma we drove to the Copperbelt and stayed at Greystone Farm just outside Kitwe. Mike and Jan Fisher who are cousins of Bruce-Millers own it. The farm has game and excellent miombo habitat. We saw Chestnut-mantled Sparrow-weaver, African Goshawk, and miombo specialties like Laura’s Woodland Warbler, Black-necked Eremomela, both Hyliotas, Böhm’s Flycatcher and Black-faced Canary.

Driving in Zambia is quite nice these days as the roads are mostly new tar with wide shoulders. The Zambian police are quite vigilant in their roadblocks however. The police are a “for-profit” organization and the roadblocks are not just to keep vehicles unfit for driving off the road. If your vehicle is not carrying 2 breakdown triangles you can get fined and it just so happens that an off-duty policeman is selling triangles at the roadblocks. We got fined kwacha 108,000 for not having two front white reflectors. Needless to say, at the next town I