



# LANIOTURDUS

VOL. 42 (3) 2009

[www.namibiabirdclub.pbwiki.com](http://www.namibiabirdclub.pbwiki.com)

## CONTENTS

THOMSON, N. Editorial

DEMASIUS, E. Diary of a Successful (?) Breeding Attempt of Gray's Larks

KOLBERG, H. Narrative of a Journey into the Hinterland of Etosha in Search of the Elusive Blue Crane

CUNNINGHAM P. & J. Red-billed Firefinch *Lagonosticla senegala* Observed in a Windhoek Garden

THOMSON, N. Red-billed Firefinches in and around Windhoek

FRIEDERICH G. & T. Sunday Lunchtime Raptors

KOMEN, E. Steel Jaw

KOLBERG, H. Report on the Summer Wetland Bird Counts January/February 2009

THOMSON, N. The Saga of the Vanishing Pelican Rings

RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS

### Editorial

The winter bird count at Walvis Bay has come and gone and it was extremely gratifying to see the number of Namibia Bird Club members participating in the count many of whom had traveled long distances at their own expense to be there. It is my belief that the bird club can make a real contribution to projects such as this.

Presumably everyone knows by now of the oiled penguins which were rescued at Lüderitz some months ago. What is possibly less well known is that the Namibia Bird Club committee made the decision immediately after the news broke to donate N\$ 5 000 from club funds towards the

rehabilitation of the oiled birds and following this Gudrun Middendorff was interviewed on the German radio service and was able to raise a further N\$ 10 000 as a result of this interview.

Holger Kolberg has put together an index of all the articles that appeared in *Ornithologische Beilage* (a supplement to the Scientific Society's newsletter) and *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe*, the forerunner of *Lanioturdus*, for the period 1963-1984. This index lists the articles published in chronological order and also by author and is a very useful tool for anyone writing articles and seeking references. The index can be obtained from the Namibia Bird Club at N\$ 40.00 per copy and all issues of *Ornithologische Beilage* and *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe* are to be found in the library of the Scientific Society.

In this issue we feature two articles on red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek, one written by Peter and Janke Cunningham who had seen a firefinch in Windhoek for the first time and the other by myself who had been aware of their presence for some time. Both come to the conclusion that these birds most probably did not arrive in Windhoek unassisted.

In an earlier issue of *Lanioturdus* I asked for readers' comments on the new electronic format of this journal. To date the comment received has been overwhelmingly favourable with only one member saying that he preferred the printed booklet format.

### Diary of a Successful (?) Breeding Attempt of Gray's Larks

*Eckart Demasius*

*P. O. Box 1413, Swakopmund, Namibia  
e-b.de@iway.na*

**Saturday, 28 February 2009**

- On the afternoon of 28 February 2009 my wife found the nest of a Gray's Lark, *Ammomanopsis grayi* containing two eggs, east of Kramersdorf, whilst walking the dogs.
- The cup-shaped nest was located on the southern side of an *Arthraerua leubnitziae* bush.
- The nest was not constructed in typical fashion but with lots of pieces of cotton string.
- No adult bird was in the vicinity.

## Red-Billed Firefinches in and around Windhoek

Neil Thomson  
batqs@mweb.com.na

The first indication I had of the presence of red-billed firefinches in Windhoek was when Eckart Demasius sent me pictures taken at the house of his parents-in-law in Lessing Street, Eros, at about Christmas time 2005. It was not until March 2007 that one appeared in my Klein Windhoek garden although I found out from Dirk Heinrich that he had ringed the first of 21 in his garden, also in Klein Windhoek, in February 2005.

The birds are generally to be seen in pairs although they are sometimes to be found individually or in small groups. Roberts VII describes them as being monogamous often retaining the same mate in successive breeding attempts and between years. When I have captured a male and female together I have recorded them as a "possible pair". However, on recapturing some of these birds I have found one male with a different "partner" and also two females with different "partners". Perhaps they are not quite so monogamous – or perhaps there is a bit of swinging in red-billed firefinch society. They are apparently solitary nesters with the nests widely spread. In the Caprivi breeding has been recorded from September to March. Fledglings (easily identified as such by the small white gape tubercles) I caught on 19.03.2009 and 22.03.2009 confirm summer breeding in the local population as does the sighting of a pair of adults at a nest at Monte Christo on 01.02.2009. However, I caught another two fledglings on 16.05.2009 which indicates that some birds are breeding later, more in line with Botswana and South Africa where laying has been recorded through to June and July respectively.

But where have these beautiful little birds come from? And how has their range expanded in and around Windhoek?

The species is not recorded anywhere near Windhoek in the Atlas of Southern African Birds, data collection for which ended in 1993. The first sightings in Windhoek as reflected below seem to be from about this time so perhaps they were indeed "atlated" but were regarded as es-

caped cage birds which would have disqualified them from inclusion in the publication.

Holger Kolberg advised that he had noticed these birds at his home in Windhoek West (where he has ringed 10 of them) when he moved there about 15 years ago and that both Chris Brown and John Mendelsohn were aware of the presence of red-billed firefinches in Windhoek at that time. Further enquiries revealed that Hanjo Böhme estimated that they had been frequenting his garden in Eros for about 10 years; Rob Simmons estimated that he first saw them circa the year 2000 at his home close to the Klein Windhoek River while Jutta Surén revealed that they had been present for six or seven years in her Pionierspark garden. There have been recent reports of red-billed firefinches from such diverse locations as Olympus Village, Suiderhof, Hochland Park, the Gammams Sewerage Works and Avis Dam. The birds have also been observed on Namibia Bird Club outings at both Monte Christo and Otjiseva some 25 km or more to the north west of the city. Recently there seems to have been an irruption of these birds in Klein Windhoek and between April 2008 and May 2009 I have captured, ringed and released 40 of them in my Klein Windhoek garden.

One can only speculate as to the origin of these birds. In the Atlas of Southern African Birds the nearest record to the south (on the Orange River) is some 610 km from Windhoek while the nearest records to the north west and north east are approximately 470 km and 540 km from the capital respectively. Under "Movements" Roberts VII describes the species as "Resident and sedentary with localized seasonal movements and nomadism." There is one record however of a bird ringed in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, and recovered 480 km away at Roedtan, Limpopo Province, RSA but the validity of this record is considered questionable. Perusal of the SAFRING data base shows that only 13 of 154 red-billed firefinches recaptured or recovered have been found at a location other than the ringing site and all of these were found between 2.48 and 10.14 km from where they were ringed.

Roberts VII describes the habitat of red-billed firefinches as "Rank grass and thickets near patches of bare ground especially in Acacia savanna and moist woodland. Also cultivated fields and thickets near water e.g. along Orange River in Northern Cape. Marginal habitats include grassland and tree lined rivers in open habitat." The habitat at Monte Christo and Otjiseva certainly fits the above descriptions and the artificial habitat of suburban gardens obviously also provides suitable habitat for the species.

It is my hypothesis that the Windhoek population originates from escaped or released aviary birds. The colourful little birds are just the sort of creatures that some individuals like to keep in captivity. While not conclusive the chronology of the sightings above suggests that the birds were released on the western side of Windhoek and spread into their natural habitat down the Gammams and Otjiseva Rivers while simultaneously spreading into the artificial habitat of suburban gardens, southwards towards Pionierspark and eastward to Eros and then again southward through Klein Windhoek to the south eastern suburbs.



Male red-billed firefinch

Photo: Neil Thomson

Further to the fact that there seem to be no records of red-billed firefinches between the areas where they were atlasted and the Windhoek area another reason to believe that the species did not naturally expand its range to the Windhoek area is the absence, around Windhoek, of its brood parasite, the village indigobird. Natural range expansion of host species is often followed by a similar range extension of their brood parasites. An example of this is the range extension of both the acacia pied barbet and the lesser honeyguide into the Western Cape. I am certainly not aware of any sightings of village indigobirds anywhere near Windhoek. The absence of the brood parasite has also no doubt improved the breeding success rate of the firefinches.

Irrespective of where they may have originated the population in central Namibia must number hundreds, if not thousands, and it remains to be seen how much further this species will spread from this established base.

References

Harrison JA, Allen DG, Underhill LG, Herremans M, Tree AJ, Parker V & Brown CJ. *The Atlas of Southern African Birds*.  
 Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ & Ryan PG. *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa (VII Edition)*



Female red-billed firefinch

Photo: Neil Thomson

**Sunday Lunchtime Raptors**

Günther & Tineke Friederich  
 P.O. Box 207, Grootfontein, Namibia  
 bateleur@iway.na

Having finished lunch on Sunday 20th January 2008 we went outside to see where the next shower of rain would come from. We saw a big raptor, possibly Wahlberg's Eagle or Yellow-billed Kite passing low and close by but it flew behind some trees, out of sight. We went outside the garden fence to scan the trees. We detected some movement high up in a Makalani Palm *Hyphaene petersiana*. The raptor was perched on a Red-billed Buffalo-weaver *Bubalornis*

*niger* nest. The binoculars came out and we watched. The bird was trying to plunder the contents of the nest colony, plucking at the twigs, trying to get at the chicks. This was not so easy, considering the material the Buffalo-weavers use to build their nests. During its efforts the Buffalo-weavers tried their best to scare it off. The raptor moved around the trunk, trying at another spot without success. It then flew off into another Makalani, some 300 paces further, to try its luck there.

Its luck was out. The Buffalo-weavers there were already being kept in panic by another, smaller raptor, a Wahlberg's Eagle *Aquila wahlbergi*. This Wahlberg's Eagle chased the bigger bird off and it perched still further away on a dead tree.

We had a look at the books; when we came out again we could no longer find the birds.

Wahlberg's Eagles are breeding migrants on our farm in Quarter Degree Square 1818 CC. They have a nest a short distance away from our home in a Marula tree *Sclerocarya birrea* which has been occupied for the third or fourth time this year. Their chick must be close to fledging by this time of year. This is the first time we have observed Wahlberg's Eagle trying to plunder a Buffalo-weaver nest.

We came to the conclusion that the first raptor had been a Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*. We did not get a good look at the bird as it was scurrying around the Makalani. The bird appeared brown in colour but not like Wahlberg's eagle. Bill greyish, underwing secondaries barred, base of the primaries whitish, the outer part of underwing primaries were blackish-brown, darker than the rest of the underbody. When taking off its rounded tail was conspicuous. It also showed a somewhat whitish bar or spot on the base of the upper tail.

In the books consulted it is mentioned that Wahlberg's Eagle robs nests of herons, weavers, cuckoo-hawk and other species. Lesser Spotted Eagle also eats recently fledged Red-billed Queleas. Robbing nests of Red-billed Buffalo-weavers is not specifically mentioned for either species but we presume this must be hard work, considering the thorny twigs of which these nests are built.

References:

Ginn, P.J.; Mc Illeron, W.G. & Milstein, P. le S.:  
*The Complete Book of Southern African Birds*, fourth impression 1004, published by *Struik & Winchester*.

Hockey, P.A.R.; Dean, W.R.J.; Ryan, P.G.:  
*Roberts - Birds of Southern Africa*, VII th Edition 2005, published by the trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund.

*(I can't help wondering whether the conclusion that the first raptor was a lesser spotted eagle is correct. The nest raiding behaviour seems more commensurate with that of an African Harrier-hawk Polybaroides typus (Gymnogone). A juvenile Harrier-hawk could also fit the description and as we all know, juvenile raptors can be notoriously difficult to identify. - Ed)*