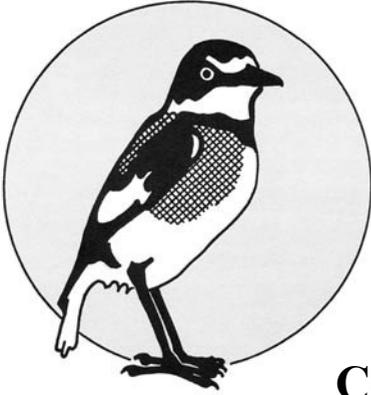


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Some Highlights of a Birding/Ringing Trip to the Kunene

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The Southern African Birdfinder lists the top ten special species for the Ruacana and Kunene River area as cinderella waxbill, rufous-tailed palm-thrush, Hartlaub's spurfowl, Monteiro's hornbill, Madagascar bee-eater, Rüppell's parrot, grey kestrel, white-tailed shrike, bare-cheeked babbler and chestnut weaver. For those of us resident in central Namibia some of these species are quite common but this area is also host to a number of other species such as swamp boubou and yellow-bellied greenbul which are also to be found further to the east in the Kavango and Caprivi Regions.

On 16 August 2008 Gudrun and I set off from Windhoek on a two week birding and ringing trip to the Kunene. Our first stop was at Gudrun's family's farm,



Rufous-tailed palm-thrush

Photo: Neil Thomson

Kakuse, north west of Tsumeb where we spent the afternoon ringing. Undoubtedly the highpoint of that afternoon's ringing was catching two red-billed spur-fowl. The next morning we set off for Hippo Pools near Ruacana where we were to meet up with Mark and Hartmut. We did a raptor road count along the way and it was immediately noticeable how few raptors were present with only three birds (two black-shouldered kites and a tawny eagle) seen over a distance of more than 400 km. The return journey later also produced only three raptor sightings, this time in the form of two black-shouldered kites and a southern pale chanting goshawk. Diurnal raptors were generally scarce with sightings of about four white-backed vultures, a martial eagle, a black-shouldered kite and a rock kestrel at Hippo Pools. African fish-eagles were seen and heard at various locations along the river and a pair of black-chested snake-eagles was seen at Ehomba while a solitary bateleur was observed near Olushandja Dam. Two unidentified medium to large sized raptors were also seen, one at Ehomba and the other near Swartbooisdrif. A small grey raptor caused some excitement as we thought that we might have found the elusive grey kestrel but it flew off before it could be positively identified. On reflection though it was probably not a grey kestrel as it was seen some distance from the river and what appears to be its preferred habitat, the palm groves along the river.

Ringling began in earnest at Hippo Pools with some interesting species such as Hartlaub's babbler, swamp boubou and yellow-bellied greenbul being caught. Two African scops-owls were also caught here and we discovered to our surprise that the large flocks of birds roosting in the reedbeds were not red-billed queleas but chestnut weavers. Good sightings of goliath heron, giant kingfisher, spectacled weaver, little bee-eater and black crane were had here. After spending two nights at Hippo Pools we moved to the palm groves along the river a few kilometers to the west where we set up camp. Here we were able to catch the first of the Kunene specials, rufous-tailed palm-thrush. An interesting mix of birds was ringed at this location and we had our first sighting of the local subspecies of Bennett's woodpecker – a very different bird from the speckle fronted bird found elsewhere in the country. Our first white-browed scrub-robins were ringed here as were two green wood-hoopoes. The distinctive smell of the wood-hoopoes which sends out a strong "I am not good the eat" message

seemed to linger on everything with which these birds had come into contact for some time afterwards. The white browed coucal unfortunately managed to escape from the mistnet.

On leaving the palm groves we headed back to Ruacana and then drove 30 km further east to Olushandja Dam. We did not set up nets in the vicinity of the dam but saw a number of interesting species including purple heron, squacco heron, African jacana, Temminck's courser, red breasted swallow, wire-tailed swallow, lesser striped swallow and yellow billed oxpecker. It seems that there is a healthy population of these oxpeckers in all the areas we visited with far more individuals seen than on a previous trip I made to the area about two years earlier. This dam and its surrounding areas seem to have a lot of birding potential and it may be well worthwhile considering birding by boat on the dam.

We spent another night at Hippo Pools before moving to another location along a stream to the south of the road and a few kilometers west of Hippo Pools. Here Mark caught and ringed a Carp's tit. While there was a lot of bird activity at this



Cinderella waxbill

Photo: Neil Thomson

place we did not manage to catch that many birds and after one night there we moved on westwards along the river to Kunene River Lodge where we spent two nights. En route we saw an earth bank with the nesting burrows of Madagascar bee-eaters but we were there too early in the season to see these migratory birds. The camping area at the lodge was packed so we did not try to catch birds there but tried our luck at Swartbooisdrif and at a location along the river where we caught a few birds including two more rufous-tailed palm-thrushes. Some of the highlights of birding in this area were excellent sightings of a pair of Bennett's woodpeckers and a group of red-necked spurfowl of the distinctive *Cuneneensis* subspecies. Other interesting sightings included African pied wagtail, ashy flycatcher, African mourning dove and a party of village indigo birds with the males moulting into breeding plumage. This is the subspecies of the village indigo bird found west of Victoria Falls and the breeding male has a white bill and red legs.

From here we moved south of the river to Ehomba where we stayed for three nights. This would be the last chance to catch that other Kunene special, the Cinderella waxbill. These waxbills were top of our wishlist and nets were set up at what appeared to be the most likely locations. The next morning two Cinderella waxbills were caught and ringed but that was the last success until the last morning when we caught two more. A number of interesting birds were caught at Ehomba. A single male Jameson's firefinch of the subspecies *ansorgei* was caught. This is a rather different looking bird from the Jameson's firefinches found further to the east and illustrated in the field guides. Two other interesting birds that were caught in the mistnets were a black-collared barbet and a black-backed puffback. Although both these species have very distinctive calls, the first indication we had of their presence was when we found them in our nets. This serves to illustrate that although the data collected from atlasing has produced the most accurate distribution maps available, the coverage is by no means complete. The chances of an atlaser finding these species in a few hours spent in the area would not be great. Some of the other species seen at Ehomba were bare-cheeked babbler and Rüppell's parrot and we also had further sightings of red-necked spurfowl and ashy flycatcher. After suffering substantial damage to the mistnets from various types of domestic livestock we split up on

28 August with Mark and Hartmut heading back to Swakopmund via Hobatere and Gudrun and I heading for Kakuse via Okapupa Camp on the river.

At Okapupa Camp we set up our nets and I was amazed to recapture a Meves's starling I had ringed three days previously at Ehomba some 17 km away. Under "movements" Roberts VII states for this species "Apparently resident, no large scale movements recorded". Perusal of the SAFRING website reveals that 253 birds of this species have been ringed with seven recaptured and two recovered. All those recaptured were recaptured at the ringing site as was one of the recoveries. The other recovery was found some seven kilometres from where it had been ringed nearly five years earlier. That the bird I recaptured had moved about 17 kilometres in three days is quite remarkable and I can only imagine that the strong winds we experienced at Ehomba in the afternoons and evenings of 26 and 27 August must have assisted this bird in covering that distance.

We left Okapupa Camp to the sound of Verreaux's eagle-owls calling on the other side of the river. The final count for the trip (Kakuse excluded) was 138 species seen or heard and a total of 427 birds of 41 species ringed. As a recently qualified ringer I was able to add a number of species to my ringing list. The Kunene area really is a rewarding birding destination with a number of specials not to be seen elsewhere in Namibia. I had been there before so there were no lifers for me but both Gudrun and Hartmut added some lifers to their lists. The grey kestrel however still eludes me so I think that we will have to undertake another trip to the area at some time in the future.

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