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Editorial

With funding for research projects becoming ever more difficult to secure more and more reliance is placed on the citizen scientist to help collect the data required for research. You and I who participate in atlassing, ringing, wetland counts, raptor road counts etc. are the citizen scientists, the amateurs, who provide much of the data from which the professionals are able to conduct their research.

In a way the wheel has turned a full circle. Some years ago (as far as I am aware around the mid 1970's) the school of thought was that research was purely the domain of the professionals and amateurs or citizen scientists were actively discouraged from data collection. A case in point is bird ringing where a policy was introduced whereby amateur ringing was only permitted if a project was registered. The immediate result of this was that many amateur ringers lost interest and threw in the towel. One cannot help wondering how much valuable data was lost through this short sighted approach. How many birds, that might have been ringed by

one of the goats home (in the form of suitably sized cuts of meat) as compensation was not well received.

A visit to Farm Wiese to catch Sociable Weavers resulted in what I believe must have been a close encounter with a horse. Sociable Weavers are best caught by setting up nets around their nests in the late afternoon, then furling the nets and raising them to a level where passing animals cannot snag them. The nets are opened before first light the next morning and the birds are caught when leaving the nest. At least that is the theory. On arriving at our nest before sunrise we found one net lying on the ground with one of the poles badly bent and looking as if it had been involved in a collision with a large animal moving at speed. As there were horses in that particular camp I must assume that one of them was the culprit.

Then after more encounters with net eating trees of various species we went to Farm Kakuse. Here I set up a net adjacent to a “pond” where a flamboyant tree was being watered with the overflow from the house reservoir. Some time later, on checking the net, I saw to my absolute horror one of Gudrun’s mother’s domestic geese lying on its back with its feet in the air and its neck twisted under its body. My first thought was that it had broken its neck and that we should surreptitiously pack all our stuff and leave the farm immediately as I was quite sure we would no longer be welcome there. Closer inspection revealed, however, that the bird was still very much alive and I was able to roll it out of the net surprisingly easily without too much further damage to the net and without actually being attacked in spite of a lot of hissing on the part of the goose.

So – my nets had now encountered goats, cattle, pigs, horses and a goose – what more could they possibly attract? Surely nothing else? Wrong again! Gudrun’s mother’s fox terrier was behaving in a maniacal manner charging up and down next to a fence and inciting her brother’s ridgeback to do the same on the other side of the fence. Unfortunately

we had a net at right angles to this fence and yes – you guessed it – the ridgeback went straight through this net without even checking her stride.

And just to make our time at Kakuse even more interesting we had to extract three bats (all of different species) from the nets. Bats must be handled with extreme caution as one does not want to be bitten by these animals which are potential carriers of rabies. Two of these bats managed to chew large holes in the nets while the third screamed like a banshee all the time we were trying to free it.

One side of me is thinking that the time has come to invest in some new nets while the other side says that I should continue to use my current nets for as long as possible because, as sure as hell, if I invest in new nets the cycle of net eating trees, goats, cattle, pigs, horses, geese, dogs and bats will start all over again and who knows – there may even be some interesting new additions to this list.

Some Interesting Observations of Gray’s Lark Behaviour

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All photographs in this article are by Eckart Demasius

At the beginning of May 2011 I was driving in the Namib north of Swakopmund in search of Gray’s Lark. The aim was to get some good photographs of these birds.

I was following a track well-known to me when suddenly a Gray’s Lark flew up from right in front of the vehicle. I had not seen it as it was too well camouflaged.

It pretended to be hurt by dragging its wing and it looked around to draw my attention.

How lucky can you get I thought and reversed the bakkie to get where it flew off to search for the inevitable nest.

As I looked out of the side window I saw the nest complete with pebble apron around it and two eggs in it directly next to the track.



Now that really left me wondering whether Gray's Larks also make use of roads and/or tracks to enable them to readily find their nests, similar to the known habit of Damara Terns.



This is the fourth Gray's Lark nest that I found and three of them have been either in the road (Lanioturdus Vol 36(4), 2003) or next to the track (Lanioturdus Vol 36(4), 2003). Unfortunately Warwick Tarboton's guide to the Nests and Eggs of Southern African Birds makes no mention of this phenomenon.

I then decided to move the vehicle a safe distance from the nest and wait for the lark to sit and incubate the eggs. No luck. During the next three hours the bird returned but only walked about in a radius of between 30 and

50 metres around the nest, sitting down on the ground from time to time.



I have never seen Gray's lark sit before, except when incubating eggs on a nest - never anywhere on the plains.

I had to leave for home but returned the next day and for the next four hours the same behaviour was displayed. At first I thought I was too close to the nest, but moving away a greater distance made no difference at all.

I could only return to the nest a week later and hoped that by now the chicks would have hatched. Again no luck!! Only the painful sight of the nest with only one egg left in it.



A possible culprit was not far off - a big and robust Namaqua Chameleon!!!



I again waited in the vehicle and shortly afterwards I heard the welcome call of Gray's Lark. One bird came close but displayed the same rather strange behavior of circling around the nest and sitting down on the ground from time to time.



On more occasions, and this time for longer periods, the bird pretended to incubate, sitting in a deep depression for a very long time making me start to think that it had made a new nest!!



As my time was running out again I decided to make a scientific approach to the whole matter and I walked up to the bird, which obviously gave way and I saw to my utter amazement that the bird had only been sitting in an empty depression.



A couple of days later I came back again, but by then the nest was deserted and was already falling apart. The remaining egg was still in place.

I happened to be out there on Sunday 14 August 2011 and I was most surprised to find in what relatively good condition the nest still was after all that time and considering the exposure to some very strong east winds!!



The nest on 14 August 2011.

Trends in Namibian Waterbird Populations 7: Ducks and Geese (1)

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This article continues the series on trends in Namibian waterbird populations and summarizes count data for ducks and geese for the period 1977 to December 2008. For each species the Red Data Book (RDB) status, both global and Namibian, is given, the population trend as per Wetlands International, the number of times the species was counted, the number of times it has passed the 1% population criterion, the maximum count and the sites where it has passed the 1% population criterion.

The local trend is calculated for the period 1991 to 2008 only because continuous data is