

Namibia Bird Club



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CONTENTS

THOMSON N	Editorial	1
THOMSON N, STEHN H AND BRIDGEFORD P	The Dordabis Vultures Eat Poisonous Plants!	2
BROWN C	Huge Assemblage of African Openbills in Caprivi, Namibia	5
KEMPER J	Kelp Gull <i>Larus dominicanus</i> drowns Sandwich Tern <i>Stella sandvicensis</i>	7
THOMSON N	Ringling at Blue Hill Escape	9
DEMASIUS E	Owling or Finding Owls	11
KOLBERG H	Trends in Namibian Waterbird Populations 7 : Ducks and Geese (Part 2)	15
THOMSON N	More Short Notes and Interesting Observations	19
DEMASIUS E	A Different Kind of Birding – Birds on the Stamps of Namibia : Namibia's 5 th Definitive Series	22
BARTLEWSKI S	A Visit to the Austin Roberts and Barberspan Bird Sanctuaries	26

THOMSON N	Vulture Ringing at Farm Frauenstein	29
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RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS	32
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Editorial

The symposium and dinner to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Namibia Bird Club have come and gone. I am very pleased to be able to say that our members attended these events in numbers and that we had over seventy people there (including the invited speakers). The symposium went off without any real problems – none of the speakers overran his allotted time slot and on the technological front the laptops and the beamers communicated with each other.

There will be a special edition of *Lanioturdus* incorporating the papers presented so I will not go into detail here. Suffice to say that all the talks were at layman's level, all the feedback we have had has been positive and that we have had a number of people enquiring when we will be presenting another symposium – the answer to that one is simple – not before we have again accumulated sufficient funds.

Many people were able to obtain the software necessary to commence atlasing thanks to Arnold van der Westhuizen's efforts. SABAP2

in Namibia was officially launched at the symposium by Chris Brown. An immediate spinoff from the symposium seems to be a renewed interest in the activities of the Bird Club – twenty six people attended the outing to Monte Christo on 13/05/2012 – I hope that this sort of attendance will continue.

On to atlassing. Thanks to the visit by Les Underhill and Michael Brooks in March and the workshops conducted by Arnold van der Westhuizen many of us have had a grounding in the requirements of SABAP2. We have a vast country to cover and the help of every available birder will be required if we are to obtain meaningful coverage. This means YOU!! If you do not already have the software it can be obtained from Holger Kolberg. Holger is also providing backup should you have problems. Please don't ask me computer and software related questions – I grew up before this era.

As a spinoff from the atlassing we should be getting a lot more reports of rarities and off range birds for publication in *Lanioturdus*. If your atlas list contains an off range bird or a rarity you will receive an Out of Range Form which must be filled in and sent to Holger Kolberg for vetting. Hopefully Holger will pass these records on to me for inclusion in *Lanioturdus* as he has done with the Black Harrier record included in this issue. I trust that Bird Club members will not have any issues with the publication in *Lanioturdus* of any photographs they send in with these forms. This, however, does not mean that you should stop sending your rarity and interesting sighting records and pictures directly to *Lanioturdus*.

The Dordabis Vultures Eat Poisonous Plants!

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In the course of a visit to family Stehn on Farm Smalhoek some 30 km south east of Dordabis for a few days after Christmas in 2010, HS mentioned to NT that he had

observed a group of White-backed Vultures eating plant material.

The incident had occurred probably in late 2005 or early 2006 when HS had seen a group of about twenty to thirty White-backed Vultures on the ground eating the leaves one of the “slangkop” species. These birds thereafter regurgitated what appeared to be largely hair. HS identified the plant as *Pseudogaltonia clavata* (previously *Lindneria clavata*). There was no carcass to be seen anywhere in the immediate vicinity. Some sources maintain that *P clavata* is a poisonous plant causing, inter alia, diarrhoea, dehydration, hind quarter lameness, bloat and heart attack in livestock while other sources report that especially the leaves are eaten by game and livestock without negative effects. HS advised that the latter was also his personal observation having observed cattle eating small quantities of the green leaves and also dry leaves after the first frost in some years. HS as a “non-birder” had thought little of the incident assuming that this was well known vulture behaviour.



Photo: Helmuth Stehn

NT was intrigued as he had never heard of vultures eating plant material and, as White-backed Vultures eat primarily soft body parts and do not eat hides, the presence of hair in the disgorged material was also something of a mystery. Enquiries and further reading unearthed references to White-backed Vultures accidentally ingesting small amounts of hair in the course of feeding frenzies and according to Mundy *et al* (1992) this hair is occasionally regurgitated in the form of pellets. It also seemed possible that the birds could have ingested hair while feeding on the carcass of a pregnant animal and eaten the soft hide of the foetus.



Photo: Helmuth Stehn

On enquiry PB indicated that he had heard of a similar incidence of White-backed Vultures eating a “slangkop” plant species which was growing on a pan on a farm east of Keetmanshoop after the rains some years ago. In this case the plant concerned was not positively identified at the time but by elimination PB deduced that in all probability it was *Lindneria clavata* (now *P clavata*). Further indirect enquiries to various experts in the fields of ornithology and conservation through a friend whom NT had told of these incidents generally brought the response that none had ever heard of vultures eating plant material.

A paper by botanist Tania Anderson was published in Vulture News 36 in 1997 wherein she investigated a report/paper which dealt with vultures eating a poisonous plant in the

northern Cape. Here the plant concerned was *Boophane districha* (gifbol). Anderson went on to discuss Sir Andrew Smith’s writings on vultures eating plant material in the Drakensberg area of South Africa. It is not clear whether Smith actually witnessed this behavior himself in the course of his expeditions to the interior or whether he was told about it by indigenous people in the area. It is also not known which vulture species was involved here as Cape, Egyptian and Bearded Vultures would all have occurred in the area at that time. Anderson speculated that the most likely candidate would have been the Egyptian Vulture given its rather unsavoury diet which is known to include refuse and human excrement but with the Namibian reports of White-backed Vultures exhibiting this behavior it is possibly more likely that it was the Cape Vulture which has a diet more similar to that of the White-backed Vulture.



Regurgitated material – Photo : Helmuth Stehn

Anderson was skeptical of the reports of vultures eating plant material and wondered whether these were not just old wives’ tales or legends and suggested that the matter required further investigation and research.

And then further evidence was found! On 01/02/2011 HS and his family, after being informed by workers on a neighbouring farm of a large number of vultures in the area, came upon a site where White-backed Vultures had eaten leaves of *P clavata* and vomited up what appeared to be largely hair and *P clavata* fibre. This time HS was

prepared and picked up a sample of the regurgitated material and took photographs of the partially eaten plants, some of which had fairly large portions of the leaves eaten. This time the chewed plants and disgorged material were all within about 10 m of the carcass of a heifer or young ox (definitely not a pregnant animal). HS advised that although *P clavata* is fairly common on Farm Smalhoek it does not occur everywhere on the farm which suggests that in the first incident the vultures had flown in from elsewhere to eat this plant.

Inspection of a (dry) sample of the material vomited up by the vultures revealed that it consisted of both compressed material in the form of a “pellet” (size 68 x 27 x 17 mm) and looser material. Examination of the pellet and the loose material under a magnifying glass revealed what appeared to be both animal hair and plant fibre. A small sample was burnt and the burning material smelled distinctly of burning hair. The pellet contained some material which appeared to be partially digested fibrous leaf probably from *P clavata*. This particular piece of material was approximately 82 mm long. There was a small amount of what was obviously plant material with the sample but this was possibly loose plant material accidentally picked up in the collection of the sample. Likewise there was a small amount of fine red sand which was most probably also picked up from the ground with the sample. A more detailed analysis of the sample is needed to determine how much plant and animal material is present and to determine their origins.



The “pellet” – Photo : Neil Thomson

HS made enquiries amongst other farmers in the Dordabis area and many were familiar with this phenomenon indicating that White-backed Vultures in this area quite regularly eat this plant.

In March 2012 there was another incident. On 26/03/2012 the carcass of a bull was found on Farm Smalhoek (probably struck by lightning on 21/03/2012) and one vulture was observed in the vicinity. HS advised that it is common knowledge amongst farmers that scavengers, including vultures, will rarely feed on the carcass of an animal that has been killed by lightning. On 29/03/2012 HS saw between thirty and forty White-backed Vultures on a dune close to this carcass. These birds duly left on their own accord without being disturbed and HS then inspected the site and found the carcass to be virtually untouched but that on the sparsely vegetated dune about 50 m away there were a number of fairly large *P clavata* plants. At the spot where the vultures had been all had been chewed upon, some down to about 50 mm above the ground. No sign of regurgitated material (plant material or animal hair) was found at the site. These birds had presumably been attracted by the carcass but when they found it to be a lightning kill they had left it alone and fed on the *P clavata* instead.

Now with four relatively recently recorded observations of this behaviour in Namibia it would appear that vultures do sometimes deliberately eat plant material (other than the contents of the rumen that they presumably ingest when feeding on entrails) and interestingly in all known cases that material has been from plants often considered to be poisonous to humans and livestock. One can only speculate as to why they do this but the obvious inference is that the plant material must have some medicinal value even if it is only as a means of inducing vomiting to rid the birds of indigestible material. The fact that in the last reported incident the birds ate the plant material without feeding on the carcass is inexplicable as the lack of regurgitated matter also suggests that they had not fed elsewhere.

The two areas where this has been observed in Namibia are nearly 500 km apart but from HS's personal observations together with the reported observations of other farmers in the Dordabis area it would appear that the vultures in that area at least are ingesting plant material on a relatively regular basis. Domestic cats and dogs regularly eat plant material which may or may not induce vomiting but the reasons for this are poorly understood. Dr Peter Mundy (pers. comm.) suggests that swallowing grass/plants is to provide the vultures' stomachs with indigestible fibre to aid digestion by giving the muscular contractions of the stomachs something to work against as has been observed in Lappet-faced and White-headed Vultures which "never" eat grass but whose stomachs are full of hair (same function) from their diet.

If the ingestion of plant material by vultures happens on a regular basis why has it been observed so seldom? Or has it occurred more frequently but gone unrecorded? Are the Dordabis vultures in some way unique? Have they discovered the medicinal value of certain plants which other vultures have not? Have these birds perhaps started to eat hides as well as soft body parts thus requiring them to rid themselves of indigestible material?

Further close observation of these birds may reveal more in this regard.

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Huge Assemblage of African Openbills in Caprivi, Namibia

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All photographs in this article are by Chris Brown

On 29 September 2011 I visited the Impalila conservancy, traveling by boat on the Chobe River from Kasane in Botswana. As we approached the Impalila-Kasane rapids large numbers of storks and other wetland birds came into view. So dramatic was the concentration of birds, mainly African Openbills that, after completing our work on Impalila Island, I hired a boat to get closer to the birds. There were birds perched in the trees and on nests, standing on the banks of the river and circling and thermalling overhead. Large numbers of birds were coming and going, presumably to feeding grounds on the eastern Caprivi floodplains.



I spend about two hours counting the birds from Impalila Island, and about one hour from the boat, moving slowly across the rapids to try and cover the whole area. I divided the area into sections and counted and photographed each section. There were sections behind the trees downstream that we could not reach but I would estimate that we covered about 70% of the area. We could not get close to the trees where most of the birds were nesting because of the rocks in the rapids, so the count of Openbill nests is way too low.

My visual count of African Openbills in the air, in the trees and on the ground was 3 080. When I reconciled the visual counts with the photographs the number increased to 3 435