

Trip Report Okavango, October 2007

Eckart Demasius

P.O. Box 1413 Swakopmund

e-b.de@iway.na or edemasius@swkmun.com.na

In mid October we left for an urgently needed pre-Christmas break at Shamvura and Mahangu Safari Lodge in the Kavango Region in the north of Namibia. For my friend Richard and me birding was high on the agenda, especially after the reports on the net of sightings of Souza's Shrike and other "hotties" at Shamvura.

En route we tried our luck at the radio mast some twenty kilometres south of Rundu but to no avail and so we left the birding for the next day and instead, on arrival at Shamvura, settled down to some welcome drinks with Mark Paxton and a sumptuous meal prepared by his wife, Charlie.

On the morning of Sunday, 14 October Richard, my wife and two other birding enthusiasts, one being seven years old, together with Mark and his dog, Sukela, crammed into my bakkie and set off on our first birding outing. As it is with birding, there is often not much driving done between stops and we soon all climbed out of the bakkie to wait and see what would happen at a spot Mark rates highly for bird activity. It did not take long before a Long-billed Crombec made its appearance, followed by a Tinkling Cisticola and then a Wood Pipit, a lifer for all of us. The excitement grew even more when a Green-backed Honeybird was spotted!! Two lifers within a couple of minutes!!!

We then left to spend some time at what Mark refers to as "corridors" where a lot of birding activity takes place. We saw Meyer's Parrot, African Grey Hornbill, Violet-backed Starling and many others. En route to the next stop a pair of African Cuckoos was observed and duly photographed. We moved on - it was getting warmer and we had Souza's in our minds. Mark suddenly shouted to stop and literally jumped out of the still moving bakkie in excitement. A pair of Ayre's Hawk-eagles was flying low over us, one perching not far from us in a tree. I just followed my camera to record this exceptional sighting. Lifer number three and a pair of them on top of it all - and that without yet even having attempted to look for Souza's Shrike and Rufous-bellied Tit.

Mark was getting anxious that our expectations were possibly too high but I just thought to myself, “when it is your day, it is your day”. We pushed on to the area where Souza’s Shrike had been observed. Mark gave some very clear instructions on behavior and how to proceed to try and find this elusive bird. He advised that it could take anything between eight minutes and two hours and a sighting was obviously not guaranteed. We commenced our search intermittently calling for the Rufuous-bellied Tit when a wave of Mark’s hand indicated that something was sighted. We followed Mark’s instructions to the tee - good old discipline still has its value!! And there they were, yes they, because we had a pair of Souza’s in our view. The camera started to work and as cameras have the tendency to try and get closer and closer to the subject, Mark skillfully guided me to obtain some super shots of this shrike. The adrenalin was pumping so much that, on our way back home, we could not agree how close I really got to the bird. Estimates ranged from three to five metres but I believe my guess of ten metres was more realistic.

Being on the roll we moved on to locate the Rufuous-bellied Tit. The 38 degrees Celsius heat at eleven o’clock went unnoticed as a Racket-tailed Roller afforded us some splendid views. A bird party made its appearance and then it was time to call up the Rufuous-bellied Tit. A pair responded after a couple of minutes and an extraordinary birding outing came to an end with five lifers for me in less than three hours of birding.

I am satisfied and convinced that it is always worthwhile to make use of local guides as they know their patch, you learn so much from them and it helps the local economy on top of it. The additional costs incurred for such an outing are small in relation to the total cost of the tour.

The next day while the rest of the group was on its way to the next destination Richard and I went on an early morning boat trip with Mark where we spotted what we believed to be a Dunlin. The photographs were sent to Trevor Hardaker for assistance with the identification but according to him the bird was a Little Stint, which opinion was met with skepticism by Mark. The suggestion (in a subsequent telephone conversation with Mark) to follow a more scientific approach and to collect the bird by shooting it, as was done by the early ornithologists, was not met with approval. At least then we would really have known what it was! The highlight of the morning was two sightings of a European Honey Buzzard, another lifer.

In the afternoon we met the group at Mahangu Safari Lodge and proceeded with a boat tour, but here, as at Shamvura, the sandbanks were empty and very few birds were seen. Only one Rock Pratincole was seen on their favoured rocks. According to Mark the water levels of the Okavango River dropped very late preventing the sandbank nesting birds from breeding this season.

The next day was reserved for morning and afternoon drives through Mahangu Game Reserve. The normal array of water birds and bushveld birds was observed along with three Wattled Cranes while a Saddle-billed Stork made a welcome appearance.

On Wednesday we visited Buffalo Park and were rewarded with splendid views of Tawny Eagle, juvenile Martial Eagle and an African Fish Eagle sharing a shady tree with two juvenile African Harrier-hawks. Some exited visitors told us that they had just seen 20 African Wild Dogs!! Lunch was taken at the Popa Falls view point as the temperature in Buffalo rose to above 40 degrees and there is only so much relieve a good cold beer can provide. Here we spotted two Rock Pratincoles on the rocks but we could not determine whether they were breeding.

A final afternoon drive through Mahangu Game Reserve afforded us our first sighting of lion in the park. Apparently two prides are currently resident in Mahangu. Then it was time to move homewards with a final overnight stop at Kaisosi River Lodge where, on a sundowner cruise, we were able to confirm an earlier sighting of a Lesser Jacana seen at the Sewerage Works in Rundu.

All in all the trip ended with six lifers for me, eight for Richard and a total tally of 185 bird species seen during this short visit.



Souza's shrike

Photo: Eckart Demasius