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EDITORIAL

Several people have asked me why I continue to attend Bird Club weekends and outings – "Wouldn't you prefer to go birding on your own?" In answer to this I can quite honestly say, "No".

How you go birding is an entirely personal choice, but I believe that combining both social and independent (single) birding you can get the most out of it. There are almost certainly some birders who are either entirely social birders (never venturing far without being on an organised outing) or entirely single birders (entirely independent and not making use of the social, informational and club contacts available to them).

Why do I continue going out with the Bird Club? – the answer is I enjoy it. For several reasons – probably the most important of which is that I am continually reminded of my own fallability as a so-called "expert" birder. On outings I am often stumped by questions from "beginners" which make me re-evaluate my approach to birding, makes me develop new solutions to tricky groups and generally hones my skills as a birder. At the same time the "beginner" is learning something new and perhaps useful to develop their birding skills.

When you go birding with others you learn their skills too – some people are aces at listening to and identifying birds largely by call, others are visual experts, identifying birds by "jizz", teaching field characters which can only improve skills as a birder. But at the same time you learn from others not to become dependent on them for all your id's and birding experiences. Go out and try to apply some of the learnt skills, study your bird books and develop your own suite of birding tools. But remember, you can only achieve so much on your own – as with almost everything else in life you have to share experiences to grow. This is the value of the Club for me and hopefully for others as well. I appeal to you, the members, to make more use of the Club outings and functions, encourage others (especially kids) to join and to push some personal birding frontiers by learning from others.

WALVIS BAY – BIRDS FOR EVERYONE

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Walvis Bay contains a plethora of attractions for all kinds of birders. The varied pleasures of Walvis Bay are described, some ID tips are presented (terns, plovers, sandpipers, flamingos), and details of recent rarities sighted (Bulwer's Petrel, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Sabine's Gull, Franklin Gull and Black Skimmer) are given.

As they say, "Different strokes for different folks". Reflecting the marvellous diversity that is humankind, no two birders are alike. It follows, therefore, that different birding locations hold as many different attractions for birders as there are birders. One of the wonders of Walvis Bay is that all birders can find what they want. Most impressive have been the string of excellent birds sighted at Walvis Bay this season.

Beginners

Novice birders can find huge numbers of flamingos, pelicans and scores of other easily identifiable species. Not only are there many species, there are also many individuals, which makes it all the easier to gain familiarity with the species. Even though there are several tough groups, such as sandpipers, terns and cormorants, they can be sorted out because they occur together, allowing for easy study. It is not uncommon to see both the pinker Lesser (with their all-dark bills) and paler Greater (with their bi-coloured bills) Flamingoes in mixed flocks. Also, I once saw three cormorants, Whitebreasted, Cape and Crowned sitting in a row on a cross member of a piling as if set out for an identification seminar. Finally, the last reason why Walvis Bay is good for new birders is the ease with which the birds can be studied. Flamingos prance in front of the observer at close range, staring at you with their wild eyes. As the tide rises, birds are pushed up towards land and the birders there, affording excellent views. You can even have a "cool one" on the Raft Restaurant while feasting one's eyes on the masses of shorebirds under the building.

Photographers

While I am not a photographer myself, the photographic potential of the place is based on the same characteristics that make it good for beginners – lots of interesting and colourful birds close at hand. Of course, because of the need to be aware of the light, the areas where you can photograph vary because of the time of day. When the sun is factored with the ever-changing tides, it makes for a complex situation.

Experts

The last category of people who love Walvis Bay are the experts. The "twitchers", ornithologists and other hard-core birders who like to find rare species and expand the knowledge base of the natural world. Because of its location along a desolate coast and its richness, Walvis Bay is a magnet for unusual species. Walvis Bay is the most reliable place in Southern Africa to see Eurasian Oystercatchers and the only place in Africa where one can see a Franklin's Gull regularly. Other globally threatened species, such as Damara Tern and Chestnutbanded Plover are regular birds on the lagoon. In the past several months, however, even these excellent birds have been overshadowed: by a spectacular run of pelagic species, including scores of Sabine's Gulls, a Bulwer's Petrel, and a possible vagrant from the Americas, a Black Skimmer! If one is tired of looking for outstanding water birds, you could always look for Namibia's only true endemic species, the Dune Lark, or some of the other Namib specialities such as Gray's Lark or Ruppell's Korhaan. All are easy from Walvis Bay.

Where to Bird

The esplanade and "Raft"

One of the great things about Walvis Bay is the accessibility of the birds. One day I took some visiting officials to the lagoon to show them its wonders. All we had to do was park next to the "Raft" in the morning and we were presented with one of the true spectacles of the avian world. Tens of thousands of terns, sandpipers, flamingos, cormorants and pelicans were feeding in a wild frenzy of activity that stretched over the mud to the horizon. On the other hand, I have been at the same spot and not seen anything but water. The key is the tide. The lagoon can be observed best

from the esplanade at low tide, when the mud is exposed. Of course, the Raft Restaurant is perfectly positioned to see the birds in comfort at low tide. The esplanade area is best viewed in the morning, when the sun is at one's back. While the evening sunsets are spectacular, silhouette views are not the best to distinguishing birds. While the diversity of species here can be staggering, one bird that seems to be commoner along this northern edge of the lagoon is the (Red) Knot.

"Millionaires Row"

The road that runs south out of Walvis Bay (Tenth Street) passes a small group of dutch-style cottages before coming out along the lagoon. This part of the road is called "Millionaires Row" for the luxurious homes that line the east side of the street. On the west (lagoon) side, a series of parking spots afford excellent views of the mud flats, lagoon and its myriad birds. Continuing south, you will pass the municipal bungalows and then you leave the town and the habitat suddenly is visible on both sides of the road. Where the road leaves the town is a favoured haunt of the Terek Sandpiper, an uncommon, but surprisingly regular species here. Another bird that seems to like this and the next stretch of road is the Cape Teal. Damara Terns also are usually easy to see here, when they are breeding from October to April. (When they're done, they migrate north to Zaire, Gabon, and Cameroon.)

The Yacht Club

Though it is private property, the Walvis Bay Yacht Club has access to a marvellous vantage just south of the main quay of the container port. Be sure to ask permission during business hours to enter the Yacht Club's property. One of the advantages of this spot is that it allows excellent views of birds as they move from roosts farther north to the lagoon on a falling tide. One morning, Chris Hines, Christian Boix and I watched thousands of terns, hundreds of storm petrels, and dozens of skuas flying in the middle of the port basin, remarkably close to land.

Pelican Point

While on the subject of pelagic species, Pelican Point is tops in my book.

It takes a little effort, but the birds are worth it. To get there, take the road south from town towards the Salt Works. At the Sandwich Harbour turnoff, bear right on the road that winds through the salt pans. As you come out the other side (west) towards *Paaltjies* you will see a large sign on the right side of the road, just past the last dyke. Take the right turning at the sign (at this point you are about 400 metres before the *Paaltjies* parking area) and follow your nose north. The track traverses about 15 kilometres of sand to the point, including some pretty soft stuff, so 4x4 is essential. About half way up, you will see a pump house on the right-hand side, on the north side of the salt impoundments. If you can walk over towards that spot, you may have a chance for a Eurasian Oystercatcher in the "summer" months. The oyster beds just south of the pump house are traditionally the most reliable area for the "Euro Oyk".

As you continue north on the track to Pelican Point, the road becomes harder to follow. Since you are heading down a narrowing point of land, you cannot go too wrong. The biggest problem is not getting lost, but getting bogged down. Eventually, you will see the lighthouse that marks the end of the land. Stop just before the NAMPORT signs warning of trespassing. The birding is excellent on either side of the spit of land.

On the lagoon side, early morning can yield just about anything. Pelagic species such as Cape Gannet, Sabine's Gull, Arctic Tern, Whitechinned Petrel, three skuas, and two storm petrels have all recently been seen in the lagoon at Pelican Point! When the krill are running, the mobs of gulls and terns along the shore must be seen to be believed. The water on the lagoon side is clear and calm in the morning, and my children love to swim there among the birds and seals.

The ocean side is completely different. Where the lagoon is placid in the morning, the huge breakers on the ocean beach (only 400 metres across the spit of land) are truly menacing. It is here, however, that land-based "pelagic" birding really takes off. In the early mornings, when the light is good, a constant stream of birds can be seen offshore. While many are tantalizingly far away, occasionally they are close enough to identify with certainty. On a good morning, I might see 200 birds in a hour, 40 Gannets,

50 Whitechinned Petrels, 20 Sooty Shearwaters, 25 Storm Petrels (mostly European, with an occasional Wilson's), 20 skuas (mostly Arctic), 40 terns (mostly Common), and the odd Jackass Penguin. As if these were not enough, there is always the possibility of a rarity, such as Leach's Storm-Petrel, Sabine's Gull, or a rare shearwater. Needless to say, a good 'scope is essential.

The salt works

To get to Pelican Point, you traverse the salt works. This area is especially good for the local Chestnutbanded Plover, which has an important portion of its population in Walvis Bay. The salt pans also seem to be good for a couple of uncommon species, such as Ruff, Greenshank and the rarer Redshank. Phalaropes, especially Rednecked Phalarope also tend to hang out in the impoundments of the salt works. To explore the works well, you need permission and a key to open an obvious gate that blocks a road that goes north to the pump house from the main road that goes from the salt factory to *Paaltjies*. Local birders in Walvis may be able to help you gain access to this area. One word of caution. Do not go up the road if you see the gate open – you may get locked in inadvertently. If you do get permission to enter, follow the road to its terminus at the pump house. The oyster beds on the west side of the road at the end are excellent for terns, and for finding the elusive Eurasian Oystercatcher among the scores of African Black Oystercatchers.

The sewerage works

Like all sewerage works, the Walvis Bay effluent ponds (Bird Paradise in some literature) are an excellent place to bird. They are found just south-east of the roundabout intersection of the main road from Swakopmund and the road to the Walvis Bay Airport (C14). If you take the airport road east for about 500 metres, you will see the ponds and reed beds on the right-hand (south) side of the road. The furthest east pond is a favoured resting place for gulls at high tide, especially in the afternoon. This has been the traditional stake-out for the Franklin's Gull that has been seen for the last several years. The Franklin's Gull is also found in the lagoon (I saw it once from the "Raft"), but the small pond concentrates the gulls, making picking

out the Franklin's that much easier. If you follow a dirt track south from the main road, you will find much more habitat with an observation tower from which you can watch the waterfowl. Waterfowl are especially common here, with all three grebes present and Maccoa, Cape Shoveler and Egyptian Goose likely. This is the best place to find Great Crested Grebe in Namibia – probably fewer than ten pairs occur in the country, at least two of which breed in these ponds. Look carefully at the Blacksmith Plovers as Wattled Plovers are sometimes seen in the fresh water here.

Finally, one of the wonders of Walvis Bay is that there are still things to discover. Explore the area and see what you can find.

Some ID tips

Many beginners are put off by wetland birds because they are notoriously hard to identify. While this article cannot substitute for going out in the field with an experienced birder, I want to give a few hints that may make the job a bit easier. Because of the nature of this article, I have not tried to be comprehensive. For example, I have not tried to tackle the sandpipers, that give so many people difficulty. One bit of advice: always try to have a telescope when you go to Walvis Bay, it just makes life a lot easier.

Storm petrels

There are two species (European and Wilson's) that have been seen recently inside of the lagoon. Another (Leach's) is commonly seen offshore and could be spotted from Pelican Point. Differentiating European from Wilson's is only possible with a good view. While the flight patterns are subtly different, the diagnostic feature is the presence or lack of a whitish bar on the top or underside of the wing. The European Storm Petrel has a white bar along the underside of the wing, approximately at the base of the flight feathers. It is often not as obvious as shown in many books, but is diagnostic when seen well. The Wilson's Storm Petrel has a light bar on the top of the wing, not the bottom. In flight, both Wilson's and European Storm Petrels stay low to the water, but Wilson's has less deliberate, and more hesitant flight. Often Wilson's will patter along on the surface, dangling its legs in the water. The European Storm Petrel usually fly

straighter and does not dabble around. The European Storm Petrel seems to have more stubby, rounded wings, but the two are pretty close in general aspect.

If you are lucky enough to see a Leach's Storm Petrel, it should be fairly distinctive. Leach's have distinctly longer wings than the other two, and has a much more graceful, arching flight. It rises and falls over the sea more like a true petrel. The pattern of the white rump is slightly different in Leach's, but I have rarely been able to see that distinction in the field.

"Commic" Terns

Conventional wisdom is that Common and Arctic Terns are impossible to tell apart in their non-breeding plumage. Therefore, even knowledgeable birders have solved the dilemma by calling the unidentified birds "Commic" terns. As it turns out, the thousands of "Commic" birds in the lagoon are Common Terns. Just that simple. Arctic Terns do occur in the Lagoon (I saw one in November on the Lagoon side at Pelican Point) but they are rarities. They are much more common offshore. When an Arctic Tern is sitting near a Common, you will quickly notice its shorter legs and stumpier bill. When they are flying, the immature Arctics show a distinctly paler wing, especially the secondary feathers and rump. The underside of the wing also shows a narrower dark trailing edge on the primary feathers than on a Common Tern.

"Marsh" Terns

Black, Whitewinged and Whiskered Terns are notoriously hard to tell apart in non-breeding plumages. At Walvis Bay, Black are generally the commoner (occasionally numbering in their tens of thousands), Whitewinged less common (up to a couple of hundred at most), with Whiskered Terns being almost unknown (they are occasionally found over the freshwater ponds at the sewerage works). The clearest difference between winter-plumage Black and Whitewinged Terns is the dark "shoulder" smudge on the Black. Black Terns are often seen offshore, while Whitewinged are almost never seen outside the lagoon.

Gulls

The three common gulls in the Lagoon are Greyheaded, Hartlaub's and Kelp. Leaving aside the huge and distinctive Kelp Gull, the other two are often surprisingly difficult to tell apart. For one thing, Hartlaub's Gull often shows a hood. Look for the dark eye and thinner bill of Hartlaub's (and pale eye of Greyheaded). Immature Greyheads, can look like a range of extralimital birds, with their bi-coloured bills and dark "ear" spots. The Franklin's Gull that has been seen for the past several years at Walvis Bay is a remarkably dumpy bird that is shaped entirely different from the other two small gulls. It also exhibits most of a black hood, and contrastingly white eye lids.

Skuas

Four species of skua can be found around Walvis Bay, though one (Long-tailed) has not to my knowledge been seen inside of the harbour. It should be looked for from Pelican Point. The vast majority of skuas in the lagoon are Arctic Skuas. They come in every imaginable plumage and colour pattern and can be confusing – they are, however, all the same species. Pomarine Skuas are much rarer, and are very hard to tell from their smaller congeners. I find that I am rarely 100 per cent sure unless I see both species together. At that time I notice the heavier, more barrel-chested look of the Pomarine, its heavier bill, larger size, and more prominent white flash in the wing. Sub-Antarctic (Brown) Skuas are magnificent birds, is a significantly more massive bird than Pomarine, with clear white patches in the primaries, and a powerful flight. They are, however, scarce and should be looked for in our winter, whereas the other three species are commoner in the summer months.

Rarities

Walvis Bay is well known as a site for rarities and over the past few months several great birds have been recorded from the area. These include several pelagic species and wader species

While birding in the Pelican Point area, I saw one Bulwer's Petrel flying past on the morning of January 11, 1998. The bird was distinguished by its

size, smaller than a Sooty Shearwater, and larger than a Storm Petrel, its stumpy head, long, wedge-shaped tail, and overall chocolate brown colouration. The top of the wing had an indistinct pale bar, reminiscent of a Wilson's Storm-Petrel. This might be the first documented record for the region.

Franklin's Gull (a North American species) can almost be considered a regular at Walvis Bay. It has been seen for several years in a row particularly at the sewerage works and may be resident. It is easily told from the other gulls by its dumpy shape, with thick wings and short tail. It usually shows at least some trace of its black hood and white eyelids.

I saw one adult, winter plumaged Sabine's Gull on the lagoon side of Pelican Point on January 11. In the month that followed, as many as 20 Sabine's were seen from Pelican Point by a number of birders. By March they had apparently moved off, but they should be looked for from Pelican Point in the summer. Their bold plumage and tern-like flight make them easy to identify.

In the last week of February this year, Tony Tree saw a skimmer one evening along "Millionaire's Row". The bird was an immature, and Tony could not put it to species, though he suspected that it was a Black Skimmer an American bird never before seen in Africa. He called me and that weekend, February 28, Chris Hines, Christian Boix and I drove down to Walvis to try to get a look at the bird. After searching all afternoon, we retired to the outdoor deck of the "Raft", and maintained our vigil (while refreshing ourselves). A few minutes after sunset, a skimmer came in over the Yacht Club, flew down the Esplanade, turned at the walkway to the Raft, and flew right past us! Even though we had been waiting all day for it to come past, the poor light and brief view conspired against us.

From the overall shape ("jizz") the bird appeared to have the sleek form of the African Skimmer. Its dark-tipped bill, with a orange-reddish base, however, reminded me of a Black Skimmer. Its tail had the centre feathers dark and all the outer feathers pale. Oddly enough, distinguishing the immature forms is a very inexact science, since I am not aware of any

skimmer finding its way to another continent and thereby entering the range of another species. Will this bird be proven to be a Black Skimmer? At this point, it's hard to tell. Oddly enough, African Skimmers are equally improbable at Walvis Bay, and some actually argue that the Black Skimmer is more likely at Walvis Bay in that plumage at that time!

There have been several reports of rare waders this past summer season. These include the likes of Blacktailed Godwit, Whiterumped Sandpiper, Redshank, Mongolian Sandplover, Great Sandplover and Kentish Plover. Virtually any of the rare waders listed for southern African have been recorded in Walvis Bay and surrounds.

Conservation

From a conservation perspective, there are few more important wild areas in Africa. The huge numbers of birds that depend of the lagoon are an internationally recognized resource. Most of Walvis Bay's birds are only visitors – they wander off to breed in Etosha, Europe or even Asia. One of the mysteries of these movements was recently uncovered when Tony Tree caught and released a Black Oystercatcher that had been ringed in Eastern Cape, some 2000 kilometres away! This peripatetic individual extended by almost *ten times* the farthest recorded movement for this usually sedentary species. In recent times, the international conservation value of the Walvis Bay lagoon has been recognized. The Government of Namibia has designated it as a Ramsar site, which acknowledges, through international convention, that Walvis Bay is one of the most important wetland sites in the world. One of the basic tenets of the Ramsar Convention is realization that wetlands and people often co-exist (historically usually to the detriment of the wetland). Walvis Bay is an excellent example of a peaceful co-existence – one in which the essential nature of the wetland can be preserved while humans benefit from it.

One of the key benefits from a wetland – one of its most sustainable uses – is tourism. Walvis Bay has traditionally been less of a tourist destination than its sister city to the north, Swakopmund. That is changing, as new hotels open in Walvis Bay, and people come to look at the lagoon and its marvellous birds. One hotelier told me recently that his clientele has shifted

in the past year, from business people to tourists. On a brief visit in February, I encountered several groups of people, including a dozen from England, who were eagerly enjoying Namibia's most recently recognized tourist attraction. While things look good in Walvis Bay, it has not always been that way. Decades of unenlightened exploitation of the lagoon has presented challenges. Those challenges, and the extraordinary potential of the future are being addressed by a model partnership of committed people in Walvis Bay, that includes the local, regional, and national governments, business, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Much of the recent recognition of the value of the Walvis Bay lagoon and the energy behind the move to ensure that its essential qualities are not forever changed is Keith Wearne. His NGO, *Save the Lagoon*, has been instrumental in the conservation of the lagoon. Keith can be contacted on (064) 205057 for further information on the lagoon and his conservation efforts. He is always looking for birders to assist with the biannual censuses of the birds in the lagoon.

As you can see, Walvis Bay does have something for everyone. Go and enjoy it!



"What happened to all my raptor road counts ...?"

THE NAMIBIAN AVIFAUNAL DATABASE PROJECT: PROGRESS AND PRODUCTS

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The considerable public interest in birds in Namibia has been put to good use over the last 20 years or so, in the form of large-scale public-participation data collection programmes. The recent publication of *The*

Atlas of Southern African Birds illustrates how valuable data collected in this way can be, providing an unparalleled overview of bird distribution and abundance in the whole sub-region. Namibia also has a number of other bird monitoring programmes, some of which have been running since the 1970s, with large numbers of people contributing and huge amounts of information being collected. Many members of the Bird Club have been particularly active contributors to these programmes.

Up until last year, most of the Namibian information collected was stored in paper form in large files and filing cabinets, making it a laborious process to extract data of particular interest and, as a result, comparatively little use was made of it. Since last year, this has started to change!

The Avifaunal Database project began in January 1997 with the aim of making Namibia's bird data accessible and usable. The project, funded under Namibia's National Biodiversity Programme, is based within the Directorate of Environmental Affairs and works closely with the MET's Ornithology section. Several data sets have now been incorporated into the database and data entry is ongoing for other data. All the data are spatially referenced (i.e. given latitude and longitude co-ordinates, or a QDS), making it possible to look at what's happening in different parts of the country, as well as over time. Data on monthly rainfall are also contained in the database, allowing trends to be assessed in the light of rainfall variation. When completed, the database will become a 'public' resource, available for use by anyone concerned with conservation or land management issues and anyone else with an interest in any aspect of Namibia's birds. The huge amount of data allows many possible avenues to be explored and ultimately it will be possible for someone with little or no computer knowledge to extract the data they require simply by selecting options from a menu. We are currently busy with some aspects of data analysis, and present some preliminary results here for interest.

Raptor road count data

The raptor road count project was launched in 1977 and data collection has continued ever since, though in recent years interest has tailed off. The amount of data collected by this project is impressive: over 300 people have