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Editorial

In a past editorial (Lanioturdus 42-4) I mentioned the changing distributions of certain species. One species which seems to be a lot more common around Windhoek these days is the pin-tailed whydah. When I first moved to Windhoek some 28 years ago this was a species which one saw perhaps twice in five years. Now it is regularly seen at Avis Dam and we are getting more and more reports of these birds from suburban gardens all around Windhoek. Its host species, the common waxbill, is not a terribly common species around Windhoek and I certainly have not noticed any great increase in the numbers of these birds. However, both Roberts VII and Trevor Carnaby (Beat about the Bush *Birds* – Jacana Media 2008), indicate that it is suspected that the red-billed firefinch may be a secondary host although this is not proven. Come on you citizen scientists out there – this is a chance to make a name for yourself in the world of ornithology. We have a burgeoning population of red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek and if they are indeed secondary hosts to pin-tailed whydahs this might just be the time and place to prove it.

Wetland Bird Counts in Namibia 2: Perennial Rivers and Dams

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Larger scale replications of the graphs in this article are attached to the end of this edition

This is the second article in a series describing the results of regular wetland bird counts in Namibia and groups together inland sites where water is present most of the time. The article gives details for two perennial river sites and nine dams for which ten or more counts are available up to the end of 2008.

2.1 Mahango Game Reserve



Photo: Eckart Demasius

The Mahango Game Reserve is the area with the greatest bird diversity in Namibia and thus one would expect the wetland counts to consistently deliver a high number of species. The area counted is a stretch of the Okavango River just before it enters the panhandle of the Okavango swamps. At this site both the number of birds and the number of species is increasing. The reasons for this are probably two-fold: The site falls within the Bwabwata National Park and is thus fairly well protected which in turn will have led to birds breeding and hence increasing in number. However, further upstream the boom in the Namibian tourism industry as well as the end of the Angolan civil war has led to increased disturbance and traffic on and along the Okavango River. This in turn may have resulted in birds moving out of those areas and re-settling in the Mahango, boosting the numbers and species diversity there.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 26

Last counted on: 7 February 2007

Average number of birds: 1431

Average number of species: 45

Maximum number of birds: 3258

Maximum number of species: 62

Species past 1% population level: African Skimmer (7)³, Spur-winged Goose (1), White Stork (1).

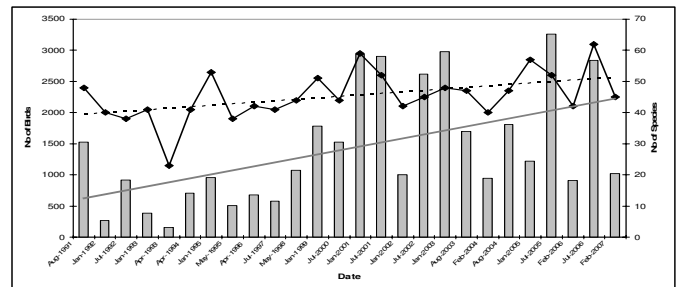


Figure 1: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Mahango Game Reserve and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

2.2 Shamvura, Okavango River



Photo: Eckart Demasius

This site is a 10km stretch of the Okavango River approximately 120km east of Rundu. The number of birds counted varies greatly, probably reflecting fluctuations in the river level. When the river is high there are fewer islands and sandbanks for the birds to utilise thus resulting in reduced numbers. Apart from the first two counts, the number of species seen remains fairly constant though.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 18

Last counted on: 1 August 2008

³ Figures in brackets denote the number of times the 1% population level was passed.

Average number of birds: 799
 Average number of species: 41
 Maximum number of birds: 2425
 Maximum number of species: 51
 Species past 1% population level: None.

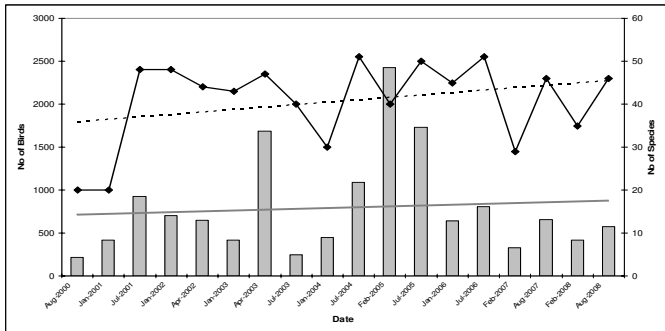


Figure 2: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Shamvura and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

2.3 Avis Dam



Photo: Eckart Demasius

This small dam on the eastern outskirts of Windhoek is a popular destination for birders. Counts were conducted on a monthly basis for seven years (1994 to 2000) but unfortunately had to be discontinued for safety reasons. Although the numbers, both in terms of birds and species diversity, are not spectacular, the dam's close proximity to Windhoek makes it an ideal destination for extension and education work as well as to teach inexperienced birders. The fluctuations in the dam's water level are clearly reflected in the counts with high numbers being counted in the wet season (October to February) and thereafter dropping for the dry season. During the period of the counts (1992 to 2000), Namibia went through a cycle of decreasing rainfall and this obviously resulted

in the dam not filling up as much and hence the apparent reduction in the numbers of birds.

Area counted: Approximately 0.4km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 89
Last counted on: 21 April 2001⁴
Average number of birds: 267
Average number of species: 14
Maximum number of birds: 809
Maximum number of species: 23
Species past 1% population level: None.

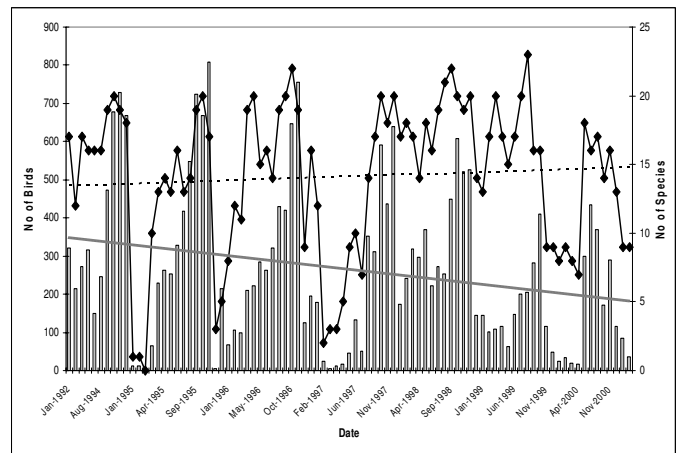


Figure 3: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Avis Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

2.4 Friedenau Dam

This dam lies about 50km west of Windhoek in the Khomas Hochland. The dam water is very clear which favours diving feeders, hence the presence of large numbers of Maccoa Duck. The huge fluctuation in bird numbers between January and April is due to the absence of large numbers of Red-knobbed Coot and, to a lesser extent, Red-billed Teal and Southern Pochard.

Area counted: Approximately 0.5km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 13
Last counted on: 19 December 2002⁵

⁴ The Namibia Bird Club has since resumed the counts with one count done in 2009 and one in January 2010.

Average number of birds: 843
 Average number of species: 22
 Maximum number of birds: 2586
 Maximum number of species: 34
 Species past 1% population level: Maccoa Duck (3).

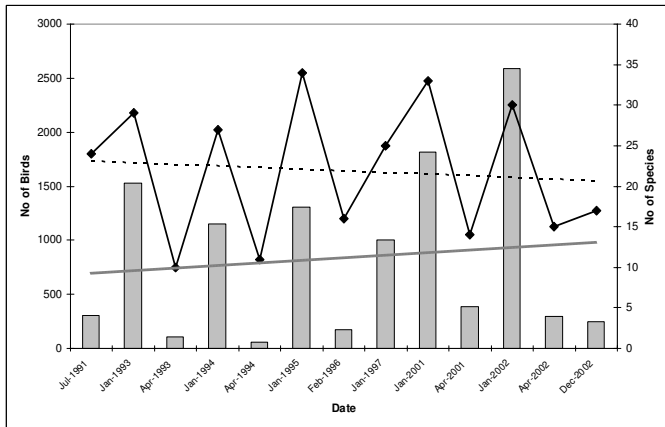


Figure 4: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Friedenau Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

2.5 Hardap Dam



Photo: Eckart Demasius

This is Namibia's largest dam and is situated about 10km north of Mariental. There are a couple of large islands in the dam of which, oddly, only two are regularly used by a variety of waterbirds to breed. Hardap Dam is one of only a few places in southern Africa where Great White Pelican regularly breed, the colony often surpassing 250 breeding pairs. The number of species counted appears to be relatively constant but the apparent decline in numbers of birds needs further investigation. Perhaps the decrease is due to the availability of water bodies elsewhere (e.g. Oanob Dam) which are now being used by birds that in the

past frequented Hardap Dam or the level of disturbance at the dam has increased as more Namibians can afford to make use of the recreational facilities at Hardap. The count of April 1999 is an incomplete count, with only pelicans and flamingos counted. This is the only inland site in Namibia where Caspian Terns are regularly seen.

Area counted: Approximately 22km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 22

Last counted on: 24 July 2008⁶

Average number of birds: 1155

Average number of species: 20

Maximum number of birds: 2189

Maximum number of species: 29

Species past 1% population level: Caspian Tern (2), Great White Pelican (13), White-breasted Cormorant (6).

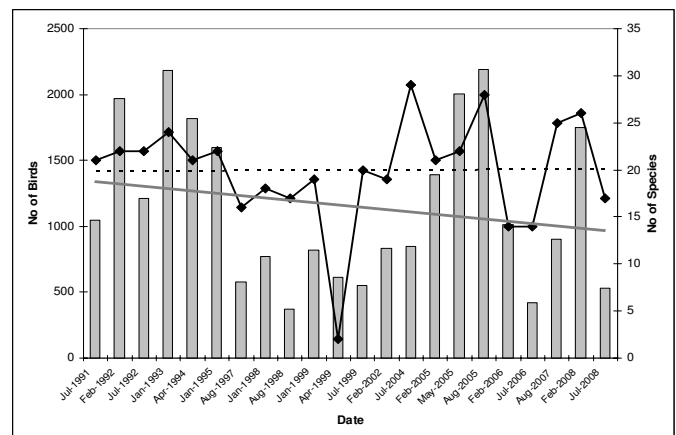


Figure 5: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Hardap Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

2.6 Naute Dam



Photo: Eckart Demasius

⁵ The Namibia Bird Club has since resumed the counts with a count done in January 2010.

⁶ These counts are ongoing, three more counts were done up to January 2010.

Naute Dam is about 50km south-west of Keetmanshoop. There are several small islands in the dam which are used mainly by cormorants and ibises to breed whilst extensive reed beds at the dam's inflow are used by herons and darters as breeding habitat.

The increasing trend in both the numbers of birds and species counted is most likely attributable to improved counting methods. In the past the dam was counted from various vantage points on land but lately a boat has been used for the count, resulting in better coverage. The extremely high numbers counted in 2005 are due to the presence of large numbers of Egyptian Geese and South African Shelduck feeding on lucerne planted at the irrigation project below the dam wall.

Area counted: Approximately 12km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 14

Last counted on: 25 July 2008⁷

Average number of birds: 1227

Average number of species: 19

Maximum number of birds: 4564

Maximum number of species: 33

Species past 1% population level: South African Shelduck (2), White-breasted Cormorant (5).

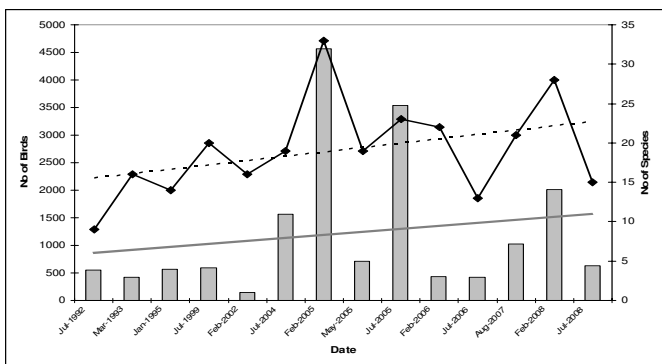


Figure 6: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Naute Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

⁷ These counts are ongoing with a further three counts done up to January 2010.

2.7 Olushandja Dam



Photo: Eckart Demasius

This dam is in northern Namibia about 30km east of Ruacana. Water is pumped into the dam from the Kunene river and there are several vegetated islands in the dam that are used by birds to roost and nest.

Area counted: Approximately 20km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 11

Last counted on: 24 January 2003

Average number of birds: 480

Average number of species: 21

Maximum number of birds: 1218

Maximum number of species: 30

Species past 1% population level: None.

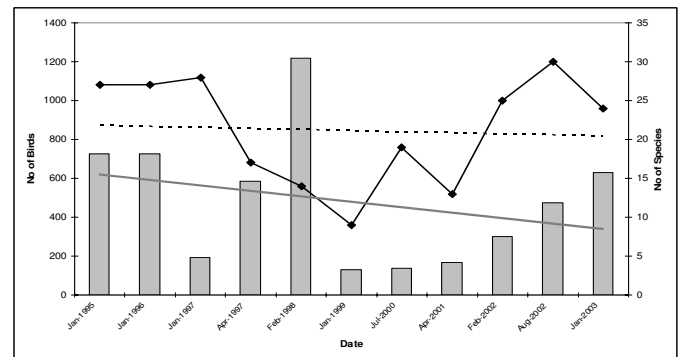


Figure 7: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Olushandja Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

2.8 Omatako Dam

The Omatako Dam is 100km north-east of Okahandja and the water level in the dam fluctuates greatly because water is pumped

out of the dam to Von Bach Dam to supply Windhoek with drinking water. These fluctuations are also reflected in the counts.

Area counted: Approximately 10km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 14

Last counted on: 24 January 1999

Average number of birds: 1848

Average number of species: 23

Maximum number of birds: 5589

Maximum number of species: 38

Species past 1% population level: Great White Pelican (2), White Stork (3), White-breasted Cormorant (2).

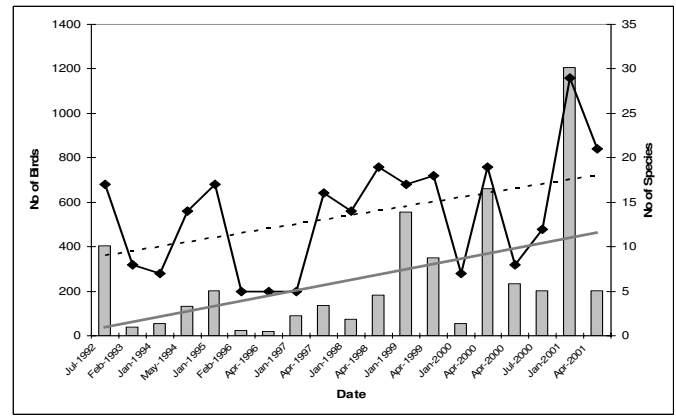


Figure 9: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Otjivero Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

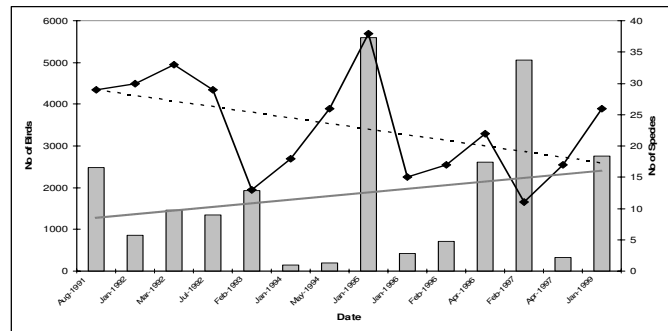


Figure 8: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Omatako Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

2.9 Otjivero Dam

This dam is 90km east of Windhoek near the small village of Omitara.

Area counted: Approximately 1km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 19

Last counted on: 22 April 2001

Average number of birds: 254

Average number of species: 14

Maximum number of birds: 1205

Maximum number of species: 29

Species past 1% population level: None.

2.10 Swakoppoort Dam

This dam is about 50km south-west of Okahandja. Access to this dam is controlled and this is reflected in the counts with the average number of birds being four times higher than at Von Bach dam where there is a lot of disturbance.

Area counted: Approximately 7km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 24

Last counted on: 14 October 2008

Average number of birds: 1575

Average number of species: 24

Maximum number of birds: 3222

Maximum number of species: 34

Species past 1% population level: Great White Pelican (6), Maccos Duck (1), White-breasted Cormorant (21).

Kavango/Caprivi Trip 2009

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All photographs in this article are by Eckart Demasius

The birds of the north-east were calling so Richard and I responded by traveling to the Kavango and Caprivi Regions to repeat a previous well-proven itinerary.

Our first stop was Shamvura Camp, some 120 kilometres east of Rundu. Over dinner we discussed various options with Mark Paxton and early the next day we set off to find, amongst others, Souza's shrike.

As I had seen Souza's shrike before, for me it was not so much about finding the bird but to experience Mark's unbelievable birding technique. He is a truly superb birder and really knows his patch very well. Having him as a guide makes any bird outing worth the while. We stopped numerous times and were rewarded with sightings of, amongst others, Meyer's parrot and copper sunbird. Then suddenly Mark jumped out of the still moving vehicle shouting "Sharp-tailed Starling". That caused an immediate stop from me and armed with binoculars and camera we followed Mark, who was already some hundred metres away, into the bush. We managed to get good sightings of about fifteen sharp-tailed starlings but unfortunately it was a rainy day and not good for photography. The call and behavior of this starling is completely different from any starling I have seen before.

Before we reached the place where one usually finds Souza's shrike we had a good sighting of an African hobby and of green-capped eremomela. Our first attempt at finding Souza's did not deliver anything – or so we thought, when Mark stopped and pointed out to us a Souza's some 100 metres away. It seemed smaller than a sunbird at that distance and I was totally amazed at the wonderful eyesight of this man. At another location we saw a pair and this time with lots

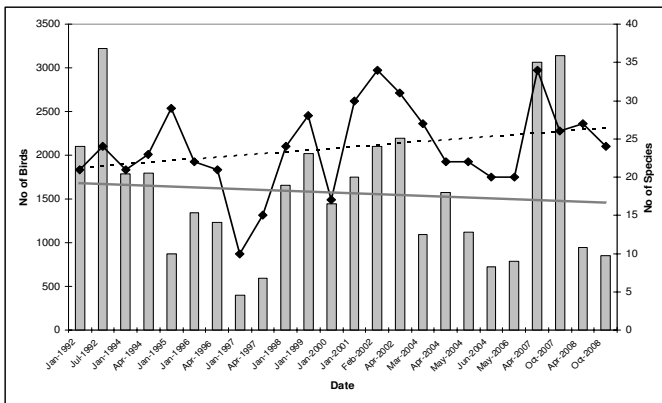


Figure 10: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Swakoppoort Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

2.11 Von Bach Dam

Von Bach Dam is the main supply dam for Windhoek and lies just south of Okahandja. The counts here are consistently low and are perhaps an indication of the disturbance caused at the dam by recreational activities.

Area counted: Approximately 4.5km² when the dam is full.

Number of counts: 14

Last counted on: 1 June 2004

Average number of birds: 387

Average number of species: 16

Maximum number of birds: 724

Maximum number of species: 22

Species past 1% population level: White-breasted Cormorant (1).

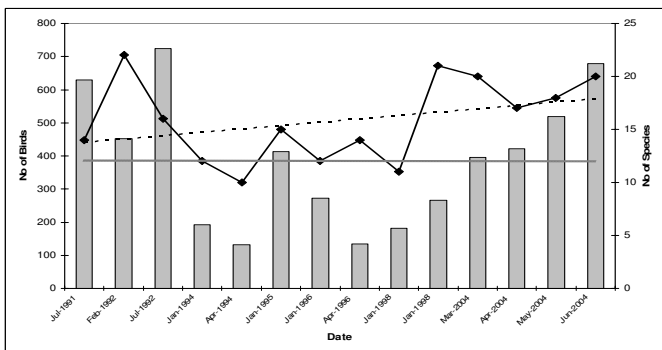


Figure 11: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Von Bach Dam and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).