



LANIOTURDUS

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Editorial

We rely heavily on books such as Roberts VII, (often referred to as the “birders’ bible”), for distribution maps, biometric measurements etc. - but is the information in these reference books always correct? And, possibly more importantly, do we read it correctly? Mark Paxton’s observations on the tail length of the green/violet wood-hoopoes he measured at Shamvura (Lanioturdus 43-2) got me interested. My own records of the measurements of the southern masked-weavers occurring in Namibia which can be seen in this issue further stimulated this interest. While there are some very obvious mistakes in even the best of publications (the distribution map for malachite sunbird in Roberts VII is a case in point as is the distribution map for red-billed quelea in Roberts Field Guide – Chittenden 2007), some of these can probably be put down to editorial oversight and printers’ gremlins, but the

Trivial pursuit or environmental catastrophe?

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Grey-backed Sparrowlarks *Eremopterix verticalis* and Lark-like Buntings *Emberiza impetuani* are well distributed over the western half of Namibia. Both these nomadic species are irruptive after rains and then appear in their thousands.

In 1997, from January to March, the pro-Namib, from the Gaub River towards the southern end of the NamibRand Nature Reserve, received its best rainfall for many years. In this area, on the grass covered plains of the Namib, Grey-backed Sparrowlarks and Lark-like Buntings filled the air with their happy songs. Both species bred prolifically and young birds were everywhere.

Anyone driving in the area would have noticed that many of these birds were feeding or sitting on the roads and tracks and getting killed by motor vehicles. Driving from Zais, near Solitaire, to Sesriem, (both in the Namib-Naukluft Park), on a regular basis, I too caused the death of many Grey-backed Sparrowlarks and Lark-like Buntings. I did a few mental calculations (and then had to get a calculator) and came to the conclusion that every day, hundreds of these birds were being killed.

Travelling at 100 km/hour, an average of five birds was killed per 100 kilometres. The Roads Department in Maltahöhe, in 1996, counted 27 vehicles a day in the tourist off-season on these roads. Allowing for an increase in tourism and an average of 30 vehicles per day in 1997, over a distance of 100 km for one month, there was an unnatural mortality of 4,500 birds. This is without taking into account the many hundreds of kilometres of tracks and roads on farms. Although the traffic is less on these roads, mortalities are still high because of grass growing right up to the tracks. During

the heat of the day these small birds sit in the shade of the tall grasses growing along the edge of these tracks. When a vehicle is travelling faster than 100 km/hour, the kill-rate increases dramatically.

In the area mentioned above, there are at least 1000 km of main roads. Taken at their peak abundance, over a three-month period, the number of birds killed increases dramatically to 135,000. That is without the losses on farm roads and tracks. From my observations, after subsequent periods of high rainfall in this area, many birds were killed on these farm tracks and roads, as people did not consider it necessary to slow down for "little birds". So the number of birds killed could be as high as 200,000.

Now the question arises; is this of any environmental importance or just bird-brained musings? Are these "avian locusts" there merely to feed other birds and reptiles, so that they in turn can "go forth and multiply"?

Wetland Bird Counts in Namibia 3: Inland Wetlands

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This is the third article in a series describing the results of regular wetland bird counts in Namibia and groups together inland sites where water is seasonally present as well as three sewage treatment plants. The article gives details for ten sites for which ten or more counts are available up to the end of 2008.

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

3.1 Ekuma River



This is one of the main rivers feeding the Etosha Pan, entering the pan at its north-western corner. The river's catchment stretches into Angola and consists of a network of shallow channels called *oshanas* which flow into a series of lakes known as the Omadhiya lakes (the most well known of these is Lake Oponono). The lakes drain into a single channel, the Ekuma river, that flows southwards, eventually reaching Etosha Pan. Only in seasons of exceptional rainfall does the river reach the pan. The section of river that is counted lies within the Etosha National Park and is approximately 5km in length. The area forms part of Namibia's Etosha Pan Ramsar site.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 34

Last counted on: 25 July 2008¹

Average number of birds: 3441

Average number of species: 9

Maximum number of birds: 33753

Maximum number of species: 22

Species past 1% population level: Black-necked Grebe (1)², Chestnut-banded Plover (1), Great White Pelican (1), Greater Flamingo (3), Lesser Flamingo (1), Pied Avocet (1).

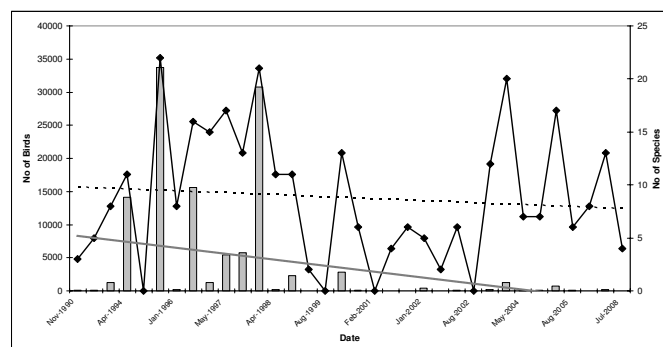


Figure 1: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at the Ekuma River and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

3.2 Fischer's Pan



This is a smaller pan joined to the east of Etosha Pan through a narrow channel. Its main feeder is the Omuramba Owambo which enters the pan on its eastern side. The pan and the grasslands around it are one of the most important habitats for Namibia's small population of Blue Cranes and it is part of the Etosha Pan Ramsar site.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 37

Last counted on: 26 July 2008³

Average number of birds: 1341

Average number of species: 15

Maximum number of birds: 9585

Maximum number of species: 36

Species past 1% population level: Black-necked Grebe (1), Black-winged Stilt (1), Blue Crane (15), Greater Flamingo (3), Lesser Flamingo (5), Pied Avocet (1).

¹ The counts are ongoing, with a further three counts completed up to January 2010.

² Numbers in brackets denote the number of times the 1% level was passed.

³ The counts are ongoing, with a further three counts completed up to January 2010.

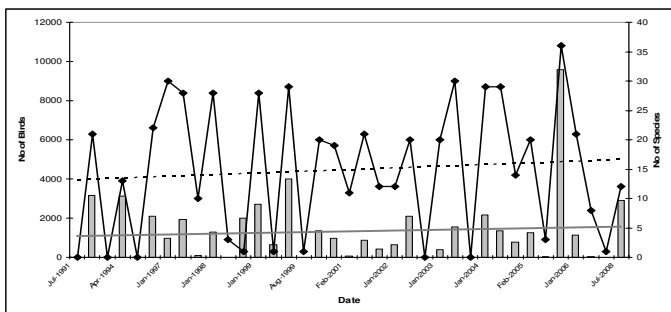


Figure 2: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Fischer's Pan and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

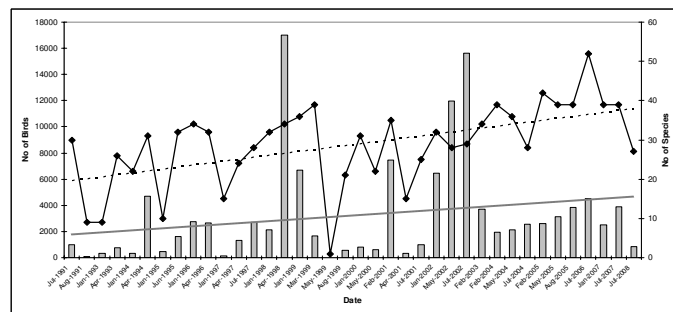


Figure 3: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Lake Oponono and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

3.3 Lake Oponono

Lake Oponono is the largest of a series of shallow, rain-fed lakes collectively known as the Omadhiya lakes in the communal area north of Etosha National Park. The lakes only fill up during the rainy season when flood waters from Angola flow southwards in the Cuvelai drainage into the lakes. The lakes are a seasonal source of fish for the human population of north-central Namibia and are an important habitat for thousands of waterbirds. The entire complex of lakes is counted, so Lake Oponono is a misnomer here.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 38

Last counted on: 23 July 2008⁴

Average number of birds: 3238

Average number of species: 29

Maximum number of birds: 17014

Maximum number of species: 52

Species past 1% population level: Black-winged Stilt (6), Blue Crane (7), Chestnut-banded Plover (10), Great White Pelican (1), Greater Flamingo (1), Lesser Flamingo (2), Pied Avocet (6), Whiskered Tern (1), White Stork (5).

3.4 Monte Christo

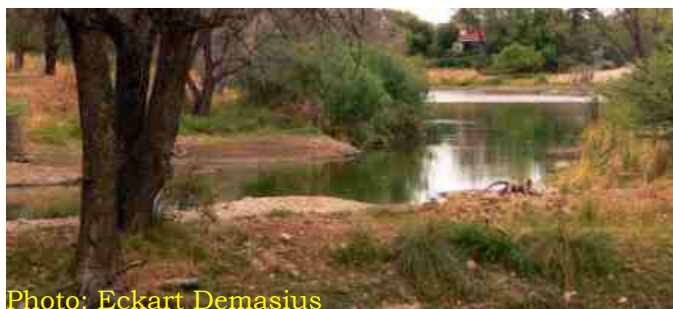


Photo: Eckart Demasius

This site consists of a series of small ponds created by runoff from the Gammams sewage works near Windhoek. Large trees, dense reeds and some islands create an ideal mixture of habitats which is reflected in the high number of species counted.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 25

Last counted on: 17 December 2006⁵

Average number of birds: 521

Average number of species: 29

Maximum number of birds: 1107

Maximum number of species: 38

Species past 1% population level: None.

⁴ The counts are ongoing, with a further three counts completed up to January 2010.

⁵ The Namibia Bird Club has since resumed the counts with counts in 2009 and 2010.

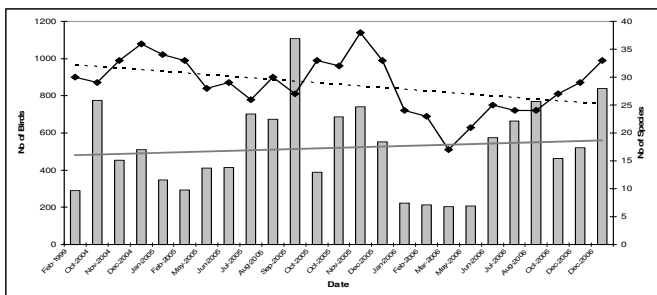


Figure 4: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Monte Cristo and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

3.5 Nonidas



This wetland is in the Swakop River about 10km east of Swakopmund and is entirely dependent on flows in the river.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 10

Last counted on: 18 July 1996

Average number of birds: 91

Average number of species: 12

Maximum number of birds: 259

Maximum number of species: 19

Species past 1% population level: None.

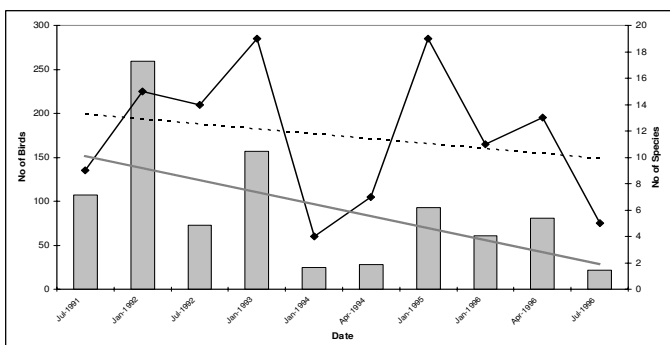


Figure 5: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Nonidas and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

3.6 Okondeka



Photo: Eckart Demasius

Okondeka is a spring on the western rim of the Etosha Pan and sometimes hosts large numbers of Chestnut-banded Plovers. The spring falls within the Etosha Pan Ramsar site.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 32

Last counted on: 25 July 2008⁶

Average number of birds: 64

Average number of species: 3

Maximum number of birds: 441

Maximum number of species: 7

Species past 1% population level: Blue Crane (1), Chestnut-banded Plover (5).

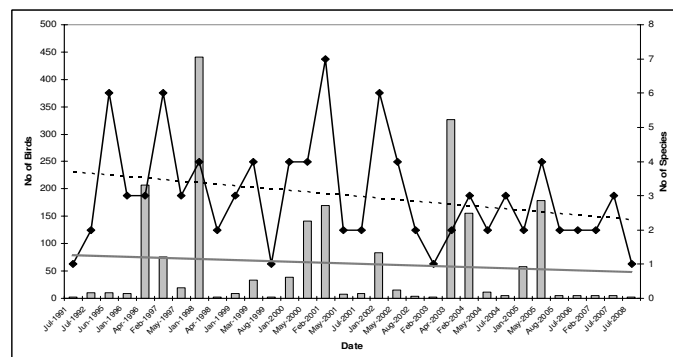


Figure 6: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at Okondeka and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

⁶ The counts are ongoing, with a further three counts completed up to January 2010.

3.7 Swakopmund Sewage Works



Photo: Eckart Demasius

The Swakopmund Sewage Works have been counted on a monthly basis since 1995. This site consists of a series of settling/oxidation ponds, some fringed by reeds. Peaks in the counts are mainly due to large numbers of Hartlaub's Gulls that breed at the ponds.

Area counted: Unknown.
 Number of counts: 153
 Last counted on: 28 December 2008⁷
 Average number of birds: 585
 Average number of species: 16
 Maximum number of birds: 3957
 Maximum number of species: 26
 Species past 1% population level: Hartlaub's Gull (70), Kelp Gull (1).

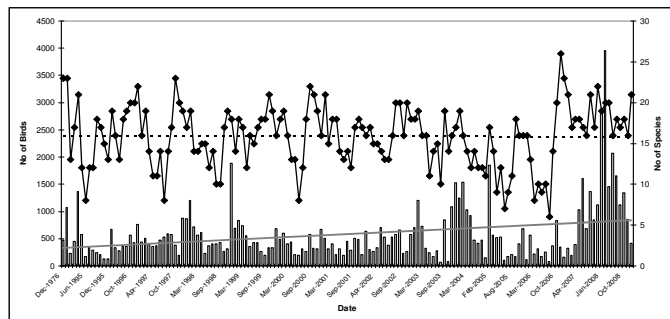


Figure 7: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at the Swakopmund Sewage Works and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

⁷ The counts are ongoing on a monthly basis

3.8 Tsumkwe Pans



Photo: Eckart Demasius

In the vicinity of Tsumkwe there are eleven seasonally filled pans that can hold a surprisingly high number and variety of birds at times.

Area counted: Unknown.
 Number of counts: 31
 Last counted on: 11 March 2003
 Average number of birds: 2096
 Average number of species: 23
 Maximum number of birds: 11591
 Maximum number of species: 59
 Species past 1% population level: Black-necked Grebe (3), Greater Flamingo (2), Lesser Flamingo (3), Wattled Crane (2), Black-winged Stilt (7), Whiskered Tern (6).

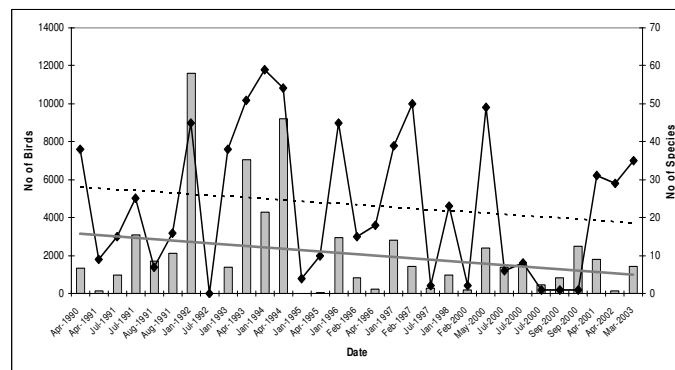


Figure 8: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at the Tsumkwe Pans and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

3.9 Walvis Bay Sewage Works



Photo: Eckart Demasius

The Walvis sewage works are on the eastern outskirts of Walvis Bay. The site consisted of a number of reed fringed ponds known as “Bird Paradise” which held a large variety of fresh-water and seabirds. An alleged mosquito problem resulted in the re-location of the ponds a bit further east in 2006. This is clearly seen in the number of species counted, which suddenly dropped but is now slowly increasing again as the new ponds become vegetated, offering a greater variety of habitats.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 66

Last counted on: 21 July 2008⁸

Average number of birds: 1227

Average number of species: 26

Maximum number of birds: 5156

Maximum number of species: 41

Species past 1% population level: Black-necked Grebe (1), Greater Flamingo (1), Hartlaub’s Gull (36), Lesser Flamingo (4), Maccoa Duck (7).

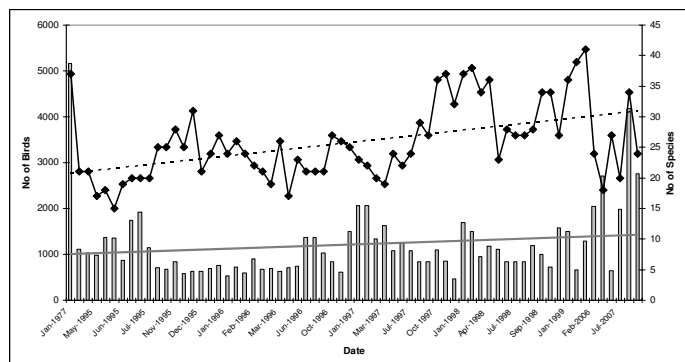


Figure 9: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at the Walvis Bay Sewage Works and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

3.10 Windhoek Sewage Works



Photo: Neil Thomson

The Windhoek sewage works are in the western suburbs of the city and are a good birding locality.

Area counted: Unknown.

Number of counts: 13

Last counted on: 1 January 1999⁹

Average number of birds: 352

Average number of species: 19

Maximum number of birds: 677

Maximum number of species: 31

Species past 1% population level: None.

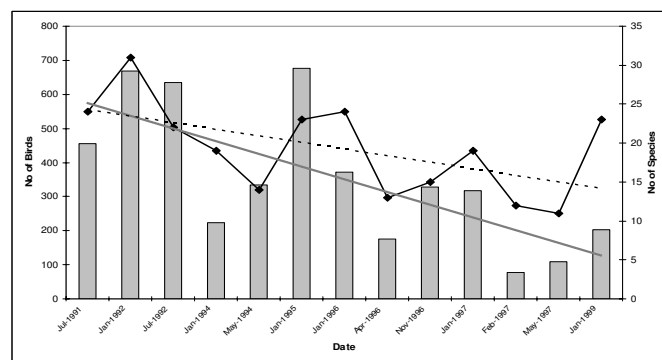


Figure 10: Number of birds (bars, left-hand y-axis) and species (diamonds, right-hand y-axis) counted at the Windhoek Sewage Works and the trend over the counting period (dashed line = species trend, solid line = bird numbers trend).

⁸ The counts are ongoing, with a further three counts completed up to January 2010.

⁹ The Namibia Bird Club has since resumed the counts with counts in 2009 and 2010.