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EDITORIAL

This summer has seen the most remarkable influx of huge numbers of birds of a variety of species and a surfeit of rarities from the North to the coast and places in the South – or is it that we are getting more birders out into the field finding more birds and reporting their observations. I think it is probably a combination of both.

This year, some of the biggest numbers of Abdim's Storks I have ever seen, arrived and stayed even though there was a general lack of rain and *Koringkrieks!* Around Etosha, through the central parts of the country to south of Windhoek there were storks everywhere. Huge numbers of coastal terns, skuas, waders and pelagic seabirds were reported from the Walvis Bay and Sandwich Harbour areas. Large numbers of Western Redfooted Kestrels were reported from the central part of the country for most of the summer and huge numbers of European Swifts were reported at the same time. But for me the interesting thing has been the number of reports we have received of other species of interest (see *SHORT NOTES*) and the number of people reporting these. I can only hope that people's interest has again been stimulated to get out birding and that, although local, *Lanioturdus* is starting to provide the medium for pricking people's interest. This is what it is there for, and I cannot stress enough to you all that without your support and contributions the magazine (and the club) will fail.

Thanks for all your support and keep on birding.

IDENTIFYING IMMATURE PLOVERS ON THE COAST: DO KENTISH PLOVERS OCCUR IN NAMIBIA?

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On November 20, 1997, I was eating lunch at the Esplanade of Walvis Bay with some colleagues from the American Embassy and crew of the visiting USS Whidbey Island. With the tide half out, there was a nice mud flat below us that was teeming with shorebirds. As I was checking them out, I noticed a small, immature plover that was greyer and more elongated than the nearby Whitefronted Plovers (*Charadrius marginatus*). Retrieving my scope from the car, I found the bird again and started studying it in earnest. I was immediately reminded of a Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), a bird that I had seen hundreds of times (in other countries). Unfortunately, I also realized that the bird was very rare in Namibia and very similar to the Whitefronted. It was clear that I would have to find a reliable way of distinguishing the two species if I were to be able to prove that I had seen this rare vagrant. The overall colour of the bird was clearer gray than the nearby Whitefronted Plovers, but not as silvery as the Chestnutbanded Sandplovers (*Charadrius pallidus*) that we had studied earlier that morning. The bird's grey back was separated from the concolourous crown by a neat white collar. The bird's forehead and lores were also white. The legs were dark greyish, not black. Looking closely at the scapulars and flight feathers, I noticed that the feathers were worn, indicating that it had not recently molted.

In reviewing my SASOL guide, I was disappointed to read that the two species are considered "virtually impossible to distinguish", though the book did mention the more slender, attenuated body that I had noticed in the first place. Unfazed, I got my copy of *Shorebirds* from the car (I assume everyone drives around with a spotting scope and reference books in their car!) and looked to see if the exquisitely accurate plates by Peter Hayman could help me. In reading up on the Kentish, I found the difference: the wing tips of the Kentish extend to the end of the tail or beyond, while the Whitefronted wing tips fall well short of the end of the tail. (This makes

sense since the Kentish is migratory and the Whitefronted is not.) Armed with a solid, objective identification criterion, I went back to the mudflat full of confidence. A friend, Rob Batchelder, and I started looking hard to locate the bird again to prove the identification. In the process, I started to examine critically the tail/wing relations of known Whitefronted Plovers. In each case, the wings of the Whitefronted Plovers fell distinctly short of the tail tip, and I became more and more confident that we were going to relocate the Kentish Plover.

Unfortunately, the tide was changing and the birds were moving. After about 30 minutes (we were, after all, on our lunch hour, and could not stay all afternoon) we gave up trying to relocate the Kentish Plover. I was disappointed that I could not definitively state that we had one, since I was never able to find the bird that we had seen earlier and see its long wings. I am about 75% sure that I had seen the Kentish based solely on the "jizz" and the elongated body shape that made it stand out in a crowd.

This episode underlines the importance of studying before you go out into the field. If I had known about the wing length before I had seen the potential Kentish, I could have positively identified it immediately. The next time I see such a bird, I will know, and so will you!

WORLD RECORD TERNS AT SANDWICH?

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On Namibia's central coast lies two of the subcontinent's most outstanding wetlands: Sandwich Harbour and Walvis Bay. These wetlands are well known centres of concentration for migratory shorebirds such as waders and flamingos, and at times they hold over 200 000 birds between them. Walvis Bay is the best known of these with research on its birds stretching back into the mid-1970s. But what of Sandwich? Rumour has it that Sandwich is dying, a shadow of its former self. For seven years now, I have been monitoring the changes at this, Namibia's most dynamic and

changeable wetland, and can report that reports of its death are premature! This article gives one reason why.

Sandwich lies about 50 km south of Walvis Bay and it was once the only natural deep water harbour with fresh water in this part of the world. Shell middens and other artefacts there indicate an occupation for at least 10 000 years by the curious *strandloper* people. Present day, its changeability brings constant surprises; and even field trips down there are hazardous and 4WD vehicles have to be left short, or even sometimes left permanently for the sea to claim. Bird numbers are much more changeable than at Walvis Bay, but it makes a natural control for Namibia's main harbour town whose wetland is facing increasing pollution and threat (see article by Tarboton in December 1997 issue of *Africa Birds and Birding*).

The variability at Sandwich is reflected in the fact that it boasts more birds than Walvis Bay at peak times with 170 000 birds recorded there in 1991, some 20 000 higher than the maximum for Walvis Bay. More generally it holds 20–60 000 birds in summer against Walvis Bay's 60–110 000 shorebirds. Because of the methods used to count the 20 km² of mudflats at Sandwich's southern end, I also record the densities of migrant waders each time I go. They prove to be as high, and possibly higher than any where else in world at 7 000–10 000 birds/km². But why such high densities and what of these rumours of dying?

The natural changes in sandspit morphology within the last 20 years has resulted in the northern wetland, the "freshwater" end, being closed off to tidal influence and reduced in size from a wetland one kilometre across, to one less than 200 m today. In a comparison with Hu and Conny Berry's (1975) work on the northern section of this wetland with present day monitoring, we see a ten-fold decrease in virtually all freshwater birds such as Cape Shoveller, Redknobbed Coot and Greatcrested Grebe over a 25-year period, together with a decrease in species diversity. In terms of abundance, peak numbers of 7000 "inland waterbirds" are reduced to less than 1000 today. This is the section that most people know as Sandwich, hence the rumours. Yet, the southern end of the system comprises about 11 km² of highly productive mudflats, and has always held the greatest

number of birds. In theory this may change if the same sandspit that has cut off the northern wetland cuts off the tidal influence over the southern flats. This I have monitored by concurrently assessing the changes in sandspit shape using GPS technology. I can report that this is unlikely to happen given the narrow nature of the spit and its constant breaching by spring tides and winter storms. From a historical perspective this is also unlikely since the larger lagoon (the harbour part of old) has always had a mouth dividing any sandspit that has formed in the last 200 years.

The picnic at Sandwich began when I invited Drs Phil Hockey and Claudio Velasquez of the University of Cape Town to join our team of counters to assess the numbers and diversity of invertebrates found on the southern mudflats. In this way I hoped to determine why so many birds occur in such high densities. Long-time wader man, Tony Tree also joined us for some twitching and counting. While we found relatively low numbers of shorebirds and our mud sampling revealed a low diversity and abundance of invertebrates during this January 1998 trip, we were staggered by the enormous flocks of terns present. While the invertebrate samplers went to work, Tree estimated no fewer than 150 000 Common Terns and 30 000 Black Terns. The counting of such massive numbers was made more interesting by amoeba-like wheeling of the flocks as a Peregrine cruised through their ranks and Arctic Skuas enjoyed their own picnic. Nevertheless, using different methods based on random sampling and total counting in other areas, I arrived at 157 500 Common Terns, within 5% of Tree's previous estimates. At 187 000 terns in total, we believe this may be the biggest concentration of terns found in any one place at a time in the world, and challenge anyone to report larger numbers to beat it! These numbers are about three times higher than previously recorded on the Sandwich Harbour mudflats, and appeared to be in response to a very large concentration of small *Euphasids* – krill-like invertebrates that may have been pushed near shore by the north and south-west winds.

The numbers game doesn't stop there – if we add in the waders, gulls and other shorebirds simultaneously present (49 100 birds) we arrive at southern Africa's largest single concentration of coastal shorebirds of 236 100. To put that number in perspective, the total count of wetlands

birds in the southern African part of African Waterfowl census (which includes counts from Botswana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe) for January 1996 was about 586 000 birds; the same figure for January 1997 was 654 000 birds. The wetland birds from Sandwich therefore represented 36% of the total birds counted in southern Africa on this occasion!

Needless to say, this is no Sandwich short of a picnic, and this particular wetland is alive and well!



SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS IN VIOLET WOODHOOPES

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Last year, whilst collecting material (i.e. blood and feathers) for genetic studies on Redbilled and Violet Woodhoopoes, in Damaraland, I had the opportunity to witness a male-male mounting event between an adult breeding male and a fledgling male Woodhoopoe.

While following a mixed group of Redbilled and Violet Woodhoopoes (two males and three females), I noticed that a young male (>1yr) was consistently falling behind the group and forcing a considerable delay on the group's progress. The first delay came about during the early morning, when the group was dispersing away from their roosting cavity. Post roost dispersion flights probably play a key role in woodhoopoe survival, since any unnecessary advertising of their roosting cavity may attract the undesirable attraction of potential predators. So it is crucial to leave the roost in relative haste and silence.

The group took off from a mopane tree in the vicinity of their roost, but left behind a young male bird. As the group disappeared downstream, alarm calls were uttered by individuals in the group and once the group gathered they cackled vigorously. This, I assumed, was probably an attempt to entice the missing chick to join them. However it had no apparent effect on the lone immature bird, which remained perched on an exposed branch.

Seconds later, I heard the soft cuckling notes of the breeding male retracing its flight path back to the dead mopane tree, to join and fetch the delayed youngster. I had yet not seen the male arrive when my eye caught a glimpse of the scurrying young male as it scrambled hurriedly into the dense foliage of the tree, narrowly missed by the reach of sharp talons of a swooping Little Banded Goshawk (*Accipiter badius*). Witnessing this, the arriving male sounded some ear-piercing alarm notes and rushed in close mobbing pursuit of the goshawk. The rest of the group arrived seconds later and teased out from the depths of the canopy a rather wary and nerve shattered looking youngster.

The breeding male returned seconds later and wound up the whole group into a series of cackling crescendos. Once the cackling settled, the group flew into some nearby mopane bush clumps. I observed the entire group as they foraged on the ground, rock-hopping, bounding and probing their bills under rocks and tossing and tearing at the base of grass clumps, a terrestrial foraging behaviour one seldom observes in South African Redbilled Woodhoopoes and which is more typically observed in Namibian woodhoopoes. Eventually the group approached another mopane clump and engaged into their more familiar bark inspecting foraging behaviour.

One by one, the group trickled out of the clump and proceeded downstream, with the exception of the young male, who once more decided to remain behind, and (much to my dismay) had chosen (*again!*) a dead and exposed branch to perch for the day. The group cackled from further downstream, but failed once more to call its lost member. Two scouting woodhoopoes returned to fetch the youngster. Their flight was direct, fast and lacked the characteristic shallow wing beat displayed by woodhoopoes in reconnaissance and inter-territorial disputes with other woodhoopoe