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Editorial

Once again in this issue we are able to report on species new to Namibia. Er, well, perhaps one of them is not really new to Namibia, but none of the previous records was accepted.

The species concerned is the Black Skimmer, a species native to the Americas and for which, as far as I can determine, there were no confirmed records on this side of the Atlantic Ocean.

A single bird suddenly appeared at Rietvlei near Cape Town in October 2012, stayed a few days and then disappeared. A couple of days later a single bird (believed to be the same individual) appeared in Walvis Bay, stayed for a short period and again disappeared.

There have been two previous unconfirmed records of this species in Namibia of which I am aware. The first is Joris Komen's record from the Rundu Sewage Works in the mid 1980's which was not accepted by the then rarities committee on the grounds that it was just too unlikely that this species had found its way there - I don't think that Joris has forgiven that committee to this day.

The second record is Tony Tree's sighting of a single bird at Walvis Bay in February 1998, which, as far as I am aware, was also shot down by the rarities committee.

For more on the Walvis Bay Black Skimmer see Otto Schmidt's article and John Paterson's stunning action picture in the "Rarities and Interesting Observations" section of this issue.

A Trip to Al Ain, Abu Dhabi Part 1 – Desert Camp

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The second new species is Burchell's Coucal which was included in an atlas list for a pentad just north of Gochas.

As far as I can determine, what is now Burchell's Coucal, is also new to Namibia since the White-browed and Burchell's Coucals were split some time ago. I am somewhat concerned though that this might be a misidentification although the atlaser was adamant that she was well acquainted with this species and that there was no mistake. We have, in recent years, had wandering Senegal Coucals with one being seen at Sonnleiten near the international airport. Could this be another of these wanderers rather than a Burchell's Coucal?

And then for a short while I thought that we had a third. A well known birder from South Africa informed us of a Common Redstart that had flown across the road in front of his vehicle near Karibib.

In the course of correspondence with this person I mentioned that a "non birder" had claimed to have seen a Common Redstart in Windhoek about a year previously which, without photographic evidence, I had dismissed as most likely being a misidentified Short-toed Rock-Thrush. The South African birder then very apologetically withdrew his sighting having realized that it was almost definitely a Short-toed Rock-Thrush that he too had seen.

In this day and age of digital cameras it is so much easier to obtain the "proof" required to have these records validated. If you see something unusual, get the camera out and get it in the box. This could save you a lot of heartbreak later when someone decides that your field notes, description and sketch don't quite add up to what you know you have seen.

In this edition we feature an article dealing with falconry in the Middle East. Falconry is a very controversial topic and I would like to stress here that any views expressed in the article are not necessarily the views of the Namibia Bird Club or any of its office bearers.

All photographs in this article are © Dawid van der Merwe

As a keen birder with a special interest in falconry I had the opportunity to travel to the United Arab Emirates at the end of 2011 to observe firsthand how falconry is practiced in the Middle East and to observe the breeding programme for the Houbara Bustard which is one of the target species for falconers and other hunters in that part of the world...

In the early morning before sunrise a thick cloud cover lies like a blanket over the desert and we can barely see the camel stables 100 m ahead of us; just the blurred spotlight gives us direction through the thick sand. After being greeted at the stables with a hot cup of spicy local tea, the camels are brought out and on a loud "Gue" made by the Arab handlers the 2.5 m tall beasts bend their knees and lie down on the sand, roaring in protest. The traditional blanket saddles are secured by ropes and only a rolled up blanket at the back of the hump prevents one from sliding off. It takes a while to find the least uncomfortable position and then one is able to start looking around at the other people trying to stay on.





ARABIAN HORSEMAN

An Arab horseman leads the way, followed by the local falconer with his black Gyr x Saker hybrid falcon on his “mangala”, the traditional glove. After a few kilometres the fresh tracks of a desert hare lead us deeper into the desert. When the hare breaks cover from a bush 150 m ahead of us the falconer releases the bird and the chase is on. The gap is closed quickly but some nifty footwork from the hare leaves the falcon sitting on the sand. The falcon is not ready to give up and follows in hot pursuit. Both the hare and the falcon disappear over a dune and everyone gapes in silence. Suddenly a gazelle comes bolting out beside the next dune and the falcon is not far behind. Constant swoops at the gazelle’s head are all for nothing as the falcon soon realizes there are no salukis (traditional hunting dogs) to back her up today and she lands on the dune.



ARABIAN FALCONER WITH GYR FALCON ON “MANGALA”

By now the mist has cleared and we set off in the hope of finding another hare. After about thirty minutes of bumpy riding we find some tracks that have broken the wet crust made by the fog on the sand and we know that the hare has to be close. The falcon bobs its head as it stares at a few desert shrubs about 200 m straight ahead of the caravan. “Yes” is all the horseman says and the falconer casts off the falcon. Far ahead between the desert shrubs we spot the hare still unaware of our presence. The falcon pumps its wings closing in fast. Suddenly the hare shoots out of the blocks at the speed of lighting and the chase is on. After a few quick turns and unbelievable maneuvers by the two athletes, both the hare and the falcon disappear over the ridge of the dune.



COOKING SHELTER

On the other side we find the falcon sitting on top of the hare plucking its fur and pausing occasionally to catch its breath. It has caught the hare behind the head and killed it with a bite behind the neck, obviously not the first time it has caught a hare. The kill needs to be quick as the falcon can easily get kicked off or even injured by a hare. With all the excitement over and photographs taken we commence the long ride back to camp. A large crowd of people who have just arrived in the buses from the city awaits us.

After some photographs have been taken we head for the cooking shelter where Arab ladies dressed from head to toe in black have prepared traditional meals. The rest of the morning we hang around the camp talking about the excitement of the hunt and checking out some falcons being trained to a helium balloon 200 m above the ground.

Lunch is an easy choice between western food and camel curry and rice. Hard to imagine it but camel is really delicious!

Right after lunch we head off to the falcon racing. This is a 400 m sprint and today it is the turn of the Gyr x Sakers show their strength. All around the start are brand new Land Cruisers with engines idling to run the



air conditioners to keep the falcons cool inside. Each falcon's rings are checked and marked off by the official just before it is unhooded and cast off to a lure swung at the other end of the track. The race is slightly



into the wind and two laser beams record the time which is displayed on a screen in the stylish tent with Persian carpets where all the contestants eagerly await the results. The winner will drive away with a brand new

luxurious Land Cruiser... well actually another one, as everyone already owns one.



All the times are between 16 and 20 seconds. That is except for the few falcons that got disqualified for losing focus and pursuing a wild dove crossing the track. In level flight the falcon will never catch the dove but it is entertaining to see the owner run for his vehicle and give chase to retrieve his prized bird.

In the evening back in the desert camp we kick off our shoes, (one always takes one's shoes off before entering a tent or sitting around the fire), and join the Arabs sitting on the sand at the camp fire. Only one of the Arabs at the fire can speak English and another some broken sentences. We share stories and tales late into the night while enjoying freshly made spicy tea from the fire.



The next morning after some pancakes made by the ladies in the palm frond shelter we get onto one of the buses from the city which takes us to the National Avian Research Centre. On arrival we are greeted with some drinks and snacks in a five star lounge that looks out into an aviary containing some Houbara Bustards. Our first thoughts are that they will have a few birds in cages that will lay eggs and raise the young. After a short welcoming speech and short introduction to the programme we split up in two groups. We set off over a piece of bare land to some buildings shimmering in the heat in the distance.

At these buildings we are greeted by a small man in a white overall. These buildings are where they breed the food for the Houbaras and the inside looks more like a laboratory than what we expect to see. First he shows us the cricket production area where they produce crickets by the millions from pin head size for the Houbara chicks up to fully grown adults for the breeding birds. All are arranged by size in different containers. From the



contaminating it. The surplus mince are packed and frozen for backup or sold. The next room is for the mealworms. Here 15 boxes of apples and 300 kg potatoes and carrots are sent through the electric vegetable slicer daily to feed the hungry worms and produce the daily harvest of between 50 and 60 kg of worms. For 2012 they plan to increase the production to between 120 and 130 kg per day.



crickets we move to the next room again with a shiny floor, well lighted and spotless. Here they produce 4 000 mice per day from pinkies to half grown. There are rows and rows of specially designed white trays with a thick layer of wood shavings, each of which houses fifteen females and one male. Fresh food and water are supplied from the top through the mesh lid of the tray to prevent the mice from



From the food production building we cross the piece of bare land again and stop outside the hatchery. On our right are large industrial type buildings where the breeding birds are kept but these buildings are off limits to visitors. Even a stranger feeding the birds can influence the breeding cycle. The environment inside these buildings where the Houbaras are kept is controlled in respect of the lighting,

temperature and humidity. This allows the breeder to extend the breeding season by making it start earlier and last longer than it would in nature. One thousand male and two thousand female birds are kept in individual enclosures which are all closely monitored.

In the hatchery we are greeted by a French doctor. His father was a chicken farmer which is where his interest in bird production started. He later did his doctorate on chicken production in France and now he works in the UAE and uses that knowledge to breed these rare birds. Semen is harvested from the male birds and all the DNA data is fed into a computer. A special programme arranges and matches the semen to the best suited female to produce the widest possible gene pool. The male birds can injure or even kill the females during mating by biting and pecking them behind the head and neck. Therefore all insemination is done by hand and also to make sure each egg is fertilized. As soon as the eggs are laid they are numbered and weighed and placed in an incubator with 30% humidity. Each egg is the subject of an A4 page which contains all the information relating to that specific egg. The page also has space to fill in weights and comments each

correct weight loss graph. If necessary an egg is punctured to make it lose more weight. Each egg is checked and weighed daily to ensure it stays as close as possible to the graph. On the last day the eggs are moved to a hatching incubator. As soon as the chick hatches it is ringed and receives a new A4 sheet. The chicks are placed in enclosures in groups of five and are hand fed until they are big enough to feed themselves. As soon as they are big enough they receive the larger permanent rings. In 2011 this facility produced 2 700 birds. The centre in Morocco produces 15 000 birds annually. The aim is to release 50 000 Houbaras per year into the wild across its range.



On our way back the buses stop at the Saluki racing. The Saluki (*sometimes also called Gazelle Hound - Ed*) is the Arabs' traditional hunting dog and looks a lot like a greyhound but has a longer tail and hairy ears. They look



day until it hatches. After three days the eggs are weighed and they should have lost 15% of their original mass. If not they are moved to other incubators with 10%, 40%, 50% or 65% humidity to get them back in line with the

as if they are a bit uncomfortable walking around on their toes with their tails between their legs, but when these dogs get up to

speed one sees exactly what they are bred for. The sun is low and it is the last race of the day. Everyone is eager to see this age old form of racing. Each dog is held back by its owner and a dummy gazelle hanging from a pole attached to a Land Cruiser a few of metres in front of them is making them crazy. At the starting signal the salukis sprint down the track at lightning speed and the owners head twice as fast straight for their vehicles. Then it is just one big dust cloud with the roar of V8 engines as cruisers pull away to beat the dogs to the finish line. One must stand well out of the way in order not to be run over. It all seems chaos but all focus is quickly back on the racing dogs. It feels as if everything is over just as quickly as it had started. When the last dog crosses the finish line and the dust settles together with the excitement we return to the desert camp.



Early in the morning the falcons are put out on their blocks and the last training sessions are worked in. We help to feed some of the falcons while others start packing for the move to Al Ain. The Sheik's falcons are only handled by his personal falconers. Some of the birds are from the Al Ain Zoo, others from breeding centres or privately owned. All the falcons had been tamed and trained over the last two weeks for the third International Falconry Festival that would be held over the next couple of days at Jahili Fort, Al Ain. But that is a story for another day.

The "Real" Difference between Swallows and Swifts

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In my old copy of Newman's Birds of Southern Africa there is a two page spread explaining the differences between swallows/martins and swifts. Generally these differences are in the wing shape, colour, tail shape, flight pattern and the ability/inability to perch. I find it very easy to distinguish between swallows and swifts (some of the individual species are a bit trickier though) and I am always surprised to find that there are people who cannot distinguish them, but, if you are one of those, you are in good company.

The Common Swift was described by Linnaeus himself in 1758 and he named the species *Hirundo apus* (*Hirundo* (Latin) = a swallow, *apus* (Greek) = without feet – on account of the very short legs). It was only later that it was realized that this bird was not a swallow at all but of an entirely different genus and it was renamed *Apus apus*. Even though the describing of species was in its infancy at that time I am quite surprised that Linnaeus made this mistake. In the hand swallows and swifts are such different birds that it should be glaringly obvious that they have to be of different genera. Even a count of the primary flight feathers would reveal this as swallows have nine and swifts ten.

It is when one has the live bird in the hand that, in my opinion, one discovers the "real" difference between swallows and swifts and this, of course, is something that none of the field guides and other books mention. Swallows are laidback, gentle little birds which are very easy to handle (although they do have sharp claws) while swifts are the exact opposite. Most of my experience with swifts has been with Little Swifts and I find them particularly nasty little customers - in fact I prefer handling birds such as Acacia Pied Barbets and Rosy-faced Lovebirds because with those species, if one is careful, one can avoid being bitten. With Little Swifts it is almost guaranteed that one will be painfully