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## EDITORIAL

I write this editorial having just arrived back from a month in the USA, mainly Alaska and I have to marvel at the bird life here compared to the winter in the cold north. One may think that April is spring in the Northern Hemisphere but if you get far enough north, spring comes much later. Geese and ducks were arriving as the snow was melting but they met temperatures of  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the northwest of Alaska. Before we left the cranes were arriving and redpolls nesting but both the birds and humans were shocked to wake up May first to a blanket of 10–50 cm of snow which ranged from the coast to the interior.

Back in Namibia the late rains were well received by the birds and nesting continued. The first bird I caught in my mist net on 15 May was a recently fledged Yellow-breasted Bunting, the second a young Red-billed Quelea. The nest box I left with four tiny Carp's Black Tits was occupied by a dormouse. Another nest box had 3 small Grey Hornbills which is rather late for this species. In my absence, Pete Leonard visited the country from neighboring Zambia and he has written an account of his visit. He sends his apologies to Steve Braine and Keith Wearne for not having the time to visit. I would encourage everyone to ask their visitors to drop me a page-long account of their observations and memories.

This journal used to have more recent sightings published but I have not been receiving any from the members and I appeal to all to send in their observations directly to me via e-mail at [korie@iafrica.com.na](mailto:korie@iafrica.com.na). For those of you in the dark, snail mail also works at PO Box 22, Okaukuejo.

*Table 1. Mahango Game Park waterfowl census, Jan 2001*

Roberts' No.	Species	Total
7	Black-necked Grebe	1
8	Dabchick	1
58	Reed Cormorant	84
60	African Darter	37
64	Goliath Heron	16
65	Purple Heron	2
66	Great White Egret	12
67	Little Egret	10
68	Yellow-billed Egret	4
70	Slaty Egret	2
71	Cattle Egret	95
72	Squacco Heron	30
74	Green-backed Heron	24
75	Rufous-bellied Heron	6
76	Black-crowned Night-heron	26
77	White-backed Night-heron	2
79	African Dwarf Bittern	1
81	Hammerkop	6
85	Abdim's Stork	30
87	Openbill Stork	385
88	Saddlebill Stork	1
99	Whitefaced Whistling Duck	38
102	Egyptian Goose	2
107	Hottentot Teal	21
108	Red-billed Teal	15
114	African Pygmy Goose	5
115	Knob-bill Duck	52
116	Spurwing Goose	36
117	Maccoa Duck	15
148	African Fish Eagle	9
164	European Marsh Harrier	1
165	African Marsh Harrier	3
167	Pallid Harrier	2
170	Osprey	1
207	Wattled Crane	7
213	Black Crake	4
215	Baillons Crake	2
227	Lesser Moorhen	3
240	African Jacana	53
242	Painted Snipe	8
246	White-fronted Plover	2
249	Three-banded Plover	11
255	Crowned Plover	3
258	Blacksmith Plover	290
260	Wattled Plover	30
261	Long-toed Plover	31
264	Common Sandpiper	18

Roberts' No.	Species	Total
266	Wood Sandpiper	20
269	Marsh Sandpiper	3
270	Greenshank	20
272	Curlew Sandpiper	7
274	Little Stint	12
284	Ruff	191
295	Black-winged Stilt	11
298	Water Dikkop	46
304	Red-winged Pratincole	1186
338	Whiskered Tern	3
339	White-winged Tern	4
395	Marsh Owl	1
428	Pied Kingfisher	8
429	Giant Kingfisher	2
431	Malachite Kingfisher	2
	<b>62 Species</b>	<b>2953</b>



## A SHORT INTRA-AFRICAN MIGRATION

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We eased our way into Namibia gently. We have been living and birding in Zambia for several years but rarely have Kate and I ventured beyond our swampy wetlands or sprawling miombo. So our first night was spent on the banks of the Zambezi, from where we could still see home and still recognise all the local birds. Thanks to the Sharpes (and their cool box) things got off to a good start and as the sun sank we watched a fluffy Finfoot chick ride past on its mother's back and a pair of White-backed Night Herons wake themselves up.

We had been told so many different things about the security situation in the Caprivi that we decided the only way to get to the bottom of things was to go there. Most Namibian friends had told us it was fine, though a handful were cautious and the British Foreign Office website effectively told us not to visit

Namibia. So it was with slight apprehension that we joined the queue for the convoy, but as is often the case with these 'unsafe zones', for the passing traveller they appear quite normal and trouble free. In fact, our only worry turned out to be trying to keep up with the column of vehicles whilst being chivvied by the military escort and their enormous mounted weapon. I think it was the first time our hilux had ever hit 130 kph.

Once past Rundu and heading south, we felt that at last we had left anything resembling home behind. Tall teak woodland was replaced by acacia scrub. Dark Chanting Goshawks became Pale and potholes became beautiful tarmac. Soon we were at Roy's Camp, near Grootfontein, where we were greeted by a very obliging family group of Black-faced Babblers. However, we were also met by the news that Etosha was full of water and long grass and there were very few animals to be seen. So as we continued the next day, we prepared ourselves for 4 days car-bound birding.

On entering the park, our only reaction was one of wonder. If this was poor game viewing, what on earth was it like when it was good? The 10 km between the gate and Namutoni took us about an hour as we stopped to look at Zebra, Kudu, Giraffe, Steenbok, Warthog and some Black-faced Impala. Even in camp we had Banded Mongooses rolling in the dust beside our tents and a handsome Black-backed Jackal eyeing us from the shade of a small *Terminalia*. Out in the park again we crawled along in first gear with eyes wide, surrounded by game and empty film canisters. But the birds were not going to be ignored for long and the first excitement was provided by a pair of Blue Cranes with two small chicks. A few yards further on was another ball of fluff, but this one more camouflaged and nearby stood one of its parents, an exquisite Double-banded Courser. We soon realised that procreation was the order of the day and throughout our holiday, wherever we went, birds were busy displaying, mating, nest-building, incubating or caring for youngsters. Although this was only logical after the good rain, in Zambia, where rainfall is more predictable, many birds breed before the rains and by April most have had enough.

The grass was another surprise. In Zambia we tend not to go game viewing in the early dry season partly due to roads being impassable and also because

the grass comfortably hides elephants, let alone antelope. It soon became clear that tall Namibian grass might hide a Steenbok lying on its side, but otherwise we need not worry too much about visibility problems. And the lifers kept coming. Great Sparrow, South African Shelduck and Maccoa Duck are all unknown from Zambia and were new ones for us.

At Halali, the two special resident families could not have performed better and both seemed to do circuits of the campsite. The Bare-cheeked Babblers were particularly excitable in the morning around the waterhole floodlights where a feast of disorientated insects was clearly the standard breakfast. The Violet Woodhoopoes were sometimes elusive, but at one point we had the whole gang of about twenty bobbing and cackling above our pitch.

The next morning, after seeing our first Ground Squirrels, a herd of Red Hartebeest and some mating lion we were still more than satisfied with our mammal count, but things got even better when we found a solitary Black Rhino snoozing in the shade of a small thorn tree. Zambia was once the headquarters of this species and only 15 years ago there were still several thousand in the Luangwa Valley. However, it is now effectively extinct. So as exhilarating as our first sighting was, it was sad that we'd had to come to Namibia for it.

Moving further west and into drier country, we started bumping into inquisitive bands of Spike-heeled Larks, a bird I had long wanted to see. Sociable Weavers were hard to miss with the occasional Pygmy Falcon a bonus. Slightly more difficult, but also high on my wishlist was Rufous-eared Warbler. Having just encountered three more lions, we needed no reminding to stay close to the car, but a short burst of song from a tape brought 3 different males onto prominent perches.

The drive on into Damaraland is one I shall never forget. Throughout the journey, Monarch butterflies flew north across our path and the stretches of mopane were filled with the song of unfairly named Monotonous Larks. Then we left the trees behind and the hills became covered with a beautiful carpet of very fine golden grass. We began flushing small birds from the roadside and soon there were so many we stopped to have a better look. It was the

hottest hour of the day and yet the air was alive with song and thousands of birds carrying nesting material or food and breeding as fast as they could. I had heard that this could happen in the desert but I never thought I'd experience it as a passing tourist. Most of the birds were Lark-like Buntings, but amongst them were many Grey-backed Finchlarks and Stark's Larks. Careful inspection also revealed an amazing variety of small flowers.

We arrived at the very smart Damaraland Camp rather late that day, but we had reached an area which had virtually no birds in common with Zambia. As a result there were a couple of those moments which you always get on bird trips to new areas where you simply don't know where to look first. In a cove surrounded by red sandstone cliffs I had one of these fits of elated panic. Suddenly the sky was full of Bradfield's and Alpine Swifts and Rock Martins, the cliff face was dotted with babbling Pale-winged Starlings, booming Rock Pigeons and screeching Rosy-faced Lovebirds, on the boulders were Mountain Chats and Cape Buntings, in the bushes were Dusky Sunbirds and a pair of Layard's Titbblers. As we drove around the spectacular Huab Valley we continued to see birds thriving in this harsh environment. Long-billed Larks whistled in the background, and Namaqua Sandgrouse bubbled overhead. Ludwig's Bustards and Rüppell's Korhaans paced about carefully and Tractrac Chats perched on the salt bushes. Along the Huab itself we found Rüppell's Parrot and after the sun had sunk a lone Cape Fox.

Up in the mountains the next day we watched both light and dark phase Booted Eagles as well as White-throated Canaries and White-backed Mousebirds. However, our main quarry was the desert elephants and after a bit of searching we found several. Then, our attention was drawn away by some strange calls and soon we were watching our first White-tailed Shrikes. What bizarre but captivating creatures! Then as we followed one, it led us straight to its nest where the first of three eggs had just hatched.

After Damaraland we headed for the highly original Erongo Wilderness Lodge near Omaruru. Everyone we had spoken to had told us to expect good birding and we were not disappointed. As well as waking to a cacophony of Hartlaub's Francolins, birds such as Monteiro's Hornbill, Rockrunner and Carp's Black Tit were all within a few paces of our chalet. Rock Dassies and Dassie Rats

scuttled around, but the best mammal we located was Rob Simmons, who happened to be there studying the local White-tailed Shrikes. Having been in email contact for several years, mainly to do with waterfowl counting, it was good to put a face to the name and Rob invited us to join him on a count a few days later.

But first we had to finish our tourist schedule and next we drove to Sossusvlei via a handful of Karoo Chats and a smattering of rain. Having already scrutinised innumerable Temminck's Coursers on the trip I was very pleased to find several Burchell's Coursers on the gravel plains in this area and I couldn't quite believe how easily we found Dune Larks, though I don't suppose you could find a better place for dunes. Here I was pleased to catch up with a bird that is known in Zambia from one vagrant record, the Yellow Canary. I was also amazed to find a very common Zambian woodland bird quite at home in small scrubby bushes in the middle of the desert. The Yellow-bellied Eremomela is a hardy little blighter.

We'd earned a brief pause in the itinerary at this point and so we descended on Chris Hines in Windhoek. Here, as well as thanking Chris for all the help he'd given us in the planning stages of our trip, we discussed and digested all the things we had seen and of course those things we hadn't. Chris answered all our queries and told us what to do and where to go next. Top of our wishlist, naturally, was Herero Chat. So after a Short-toed Rock Thrush, some Grey-backed Cisticolas and a pair of Black Eagles in Chris's back garden, we aimed for the Spreetshoogte Pass.

Rather than attempting this hurriedly in fading light, we stopped at the Namibgrens Rest Camp first where we met some other travelling birders, Nancy Robson and Sally King. Together we investigated the sizeable dam near the farmhouse, stopping for some Karoo Robins along the way. The dam was covered in waterfowl and soon I was celebrating my first Cape Shovelers. Shortly afterwards we found an adult female Garganey with some Cape Teal and suspecting this was not particularly common in Namibia we made sure we all inspected it carefully. A quick call to Chris informed us that it was only Namibia's second.

At the top of the Spreetshoogte, we stopped to look for Cinnamon-breasted Warblers, but the wind had got up and after Chris had told us about the secretive habits of this bird and seeing the black clouds approaching, we thought we'd do better having a go at Hereros further down. A few hairpin bends later we stopped and scanned the shrubs on the mountainside that were by now bending over in the wind. As I got out to look more carefully, the first raindrops arrived and so began a downpour that stretched along the escarpment for as far as we could see. As there was no end in sight, we decided that it was only fair that we 'dipped' on something and so we accepted defeat and began winding our way down the pass.

Earlier in the trip we had negotiated the Kuiseb Pass on a moonless night and it wasn't a relaxing experience, but that's another story. So as we left the escarpment and the rain behind us we began looking forward to seeing the Kuiseb in daylight. However, it turned out that the rain was chasing us and as we embarked on this hazardous leg, it caught us and we had another unrelaxing experience. But we reached the other side in one piece, avoided flash floods and were treated to a marvellous rainbow stretched across the desert.

Walvis Bay provided a suitably soothing destination that day and a dramatic change from anything else we had experienced so far. The sounds of seagulls and waves were almost unearthly after the silent gravel plains of the Namib. We scanned the waders, terns and the flamingos and settled ourselves into a restaurant for a seafood binge. (Something we don't experience very often in Zambia.)

But if we thought that the drama was over, we were wrong. The following day we met up with Rob and fellow counter Mark Boorman and headed off for Sandwich Harbour. As we followed in their tracks, Kate began reading out extracts from the guidebooks about vehicles getting stuck in the sand and being washed away by the sea. As we climbed dunes and slogged through deep sand, we agreed that we might not have got this far had we been on our own. As we reached the beach it seemed that Rob wanted to drive into the sea, but after our hesitant approach he explained that the best place to drive was on the wettest sand near the surf. Just to add a bit a flavour, the fog was rolling in, the temperature was dropping and the wind was whipping the spray

onto our windscreen. Naturally, we began to compare our waterfowl count sites. We are accustomed to mosquitoes, heat, swamps and getting stuck in black cotton clay. I was beginning to like the sand as it was definitely easier to extract yourself when stuck.. But I will happily stick to clay to avoid a tide. We didn't get badly stuck, but having a crashing and roaring time limit was somewhat unnerving.

Needless to say, such a journey brings its rewards and we were treated to a waterbird spectacle on arrival. I won't list the impressive numbers but some of the treats amongst the crowds of flamingos, pelicans, ducks and waders included Red Knots and Curlew Sandpipers in full breeding plumage, flock-feeding Avocets, 45 Black Oystercatchers and a single European Oystercatcher.

Back on the non-tidal roads we started making our way up the coast. Stopping for cormorants and Welwitschias we heard strange high pitched whistles on several occasions. Eventually we tried whistling back and before we knew it a Gray's Lark had landed beside us on the road. Presumably the good rain had got them excited too and we heard this tiny call in a number of spots and often in the heat of the day.

At Cape Cross, watching the seals became a soap opera with never a dull moment. The same was true over the sea where Cape Gannets and terns plunged and gulls scavenged. In amongst all this I was overjoyed to find a Yellow-nosed Albatross gliding up and down. I had always imagined such birds to be so marine as to rarely venture near the coast, so this, my first albatross, was a real bonus. We also saw a White-chinned Petrel, an Arctic Skua harassing the terns and amongst these was a single Arctic Tern.

Time was running out and we had only one more night to spare. There were only three birds on our wishlist that we hadn't seen. We'd written off Cinnamon-breasted Warbler. The second was a real bogey bird now. On such trips there is always at least one bird that is said to be easy and yet you struggle to find it. Ours was Chestnut Weaver. As Chris had said, they could be anywhere... The third was Herero Chat and so that dictated that our final port of call would be Spitzkoppe.

We reached this magnificent location at sunset and went to bed with high hopes. We had had a fantastic holiday and the birding had been rewarding without being difficult. At dawn we began to walk around the base of the main kopje, but after two hours of careful searching, we were three-quarters of the way around and there was still no sign of the chat. Then it all happened at once. We hit a loose bird party, heard a short flutey whistle and then a bird flew up to a scruffy nest in front of us – a beautiful male Chestnut Weaver. At the same time we heard the whistle again and another bird disappeared around a rock. It had to be the chat. After a bit of careful stalking and some quiet whistling a pair of Herero Chats appeared and gave us marvellous views. In the final stretch we found them in four more places, the last only a stone's throw from our tent. We couldn't have asked for a better end to the holiday.

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## A SURVEY OF AFRICAN BLACK OYSTERCATCHERS ON NAMIBIA'S DIAMOND COAST

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The African Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* is South Africa's second rarest coastal breeding bird and among the rarest on Namibia's coast. Recent ringing data have suggested that a large proportion of birds from South Africa make their way to Namibia, for 2–3 years before returning to their natal areas to breed (P.Hockey 1983, A. Leseberg pers. comm.). The world population of this southern African endemic is estimated at 4800 individuals,

most of which occur in South Africa (Hockey & Douie 1995). However, hotspots of density occur on the rocky shores around Lüderitz where breeding occurs and the bird ranges in ever decreasing numbers from there north through the southern Namib-Naukluft Park through Walvis Bay up to Angola where 35 birds were recently seen in Iona National Park, south-west Angola (A. Sakko pers. comm.). Breeding has been noted as far north as the Hoanib River mouth (Braine 1987), but this is unusual.

No systematic survey of the Namibian shoreline or population size has been published except from the Lüderitz peninsula and islands (Hockey 1983). Since information on population is important to the well-being of the species, we were asked by Phil Hockey of the University of Cape Town to search for African Black Oystercatchers (ABOs) in the rocky coastal regions near Ichaboe Island (55 km north of Lüderitz) and Dolphin Head in the Spencer Bay area (102 km north of Lüderitz). Our November 2000 trip through the northern Diamond Area extended from Lüderitz up to and beyond these sites and was undertaken by a 4WD bakkie and two four-wheel bikes. Since we encountered many more oystercatchers than had been predicted for these areas we considered it important to record our findings.

### Aims and methods

Our aims were to:

- (i) count all birds found with exact locations
- (ii) age all birds based on eye-ring colour, primary moult and plumage wear

We travelled the northern Diamond Area (and southern Namib-Naukluft Park) by motorbike allowing us to get to places inaccessible to four-wheel drive vehicles. All rocky shores were given special attention and all areas between Saddle Hill North, through Spencer Bay to the Arkona ship wreck (about 35 km) were visited as was the entire shoreline between Saddle Hill South to Hottentot's Bay south to Douglas Point (about 40 km). Rocky shores between Chameis and Baker's Bay (only 6 km surveyed of about 28 km) were less completely surveyed and only two (Flamingo and Halifax) of the four main islands in the Lüderitz Bay (Flamingo, Seal, Penguin and Halifax) were visited. We found flocks of ABOs extremely wary and liable to take flight on our