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EDITORIAL

This copy of *Lanioturdus* is made up almost entirely of trip reports and observations made during trips around the country. This is encouraging in that it is clear that people are getting out and watching birds – and much of the country is getting covered. The information given in these articles is non-scientific for the most part, but important none-the-less. In Peter Kaestner's article on the North of the country, he reports the first record of Blackfaced Lovebird from the Caprivi for close on ten years. Tony Tree's article gives a brief account of an American Black Skimmer seen in Walvis Bay in February – a first record for Africa. Mark Paxton's account of breeding pelicans in the Chobe area is the first in many years. These articles are largely reports of observations given in a generalised way, but their value in putting important information into print cannot be stressed enough. The point I want to make here is that *anyone* can do it. You don't need scientific training, a degree in journalism or any birding credentials. In this sense I would like to encourage people to join the Club's outings and activities, write them up and contribute to the process of developing the Club.

With regard to outings and activities, the Club Committee as a whole would like to thank Daphne McGivern for acting as our activities co-ordinator over the past couple of years. Daphne put in a tremendous amount of work, and the success of our programme was in a large part due to her inputs. We wish the McGivern family well in Cape Town. We are now looking for a new co-ordinator – anyone interested?

I would also like to thank Carole Roberts for her inputs into *Lanioturdus* over the past year and for volunteering to put the December edition together. I will be away in Australia and the Netherlands until January 1999 and Carole will be handling the magazine. Please submit all contributions directly to her via e-mail at carole@dea.met.gov.na or through the Club's postal address.

A WEEKEND EXCURSION TO THE CHOBE RIVER: SALAMBALA CONSERVANCY AREA, EASTERN CAPRIVI

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After an extremely good rain season in the upper catchment of the Zambezi, the Chobe/Linyanti river system experienced exceptionally high water levels, overflowing from the main stream into the adjoining marshy areas or floodplains not normally covered. This vast input of water persisted so that the normally dry river course to the south of the Salambala Conservancy was inundated with water. The fish populations went into a breeding frenzy and a normally uninteresting area became a Mecca for a large variety of mainly fish-eating bird species.

A gamebird census/survey of the Salambala Conservancy was planned as a follow-up to a similar survey last year. The main objective of this survey was to assess possible trends which would have a direct influence on gamebird quotas. Duck species were being considered as part of the quota system and the previous survey in February had revealed very few duck species. However this recent water-level change offered a tremendous opportunity to assess duck population densities. We therefore carried out some quite simple counts along extensive river frontage. The time allocated to this survey was unfortunately too short and some large areas of river frontage were left unsurveyed by the initial team. However, on the weekend 13/14 September a fine replacement team was formed to cover some remaining water frontage of the Chobe River within the Conservancy boundaries. The team consisted of: Mark Paxton, Dick and Katie Sharpe, Philip and Louise Nicholls, Simon and Annie Mayes, Charl van Reenen, and Granny Sharpe (a veteran camper of note).

We had four vehicles and a powerboat with which to cover as much area as possible during the limited time over the weekend. A short trip into the area on the Friday to identify a suitable camping/launching site proved relatively fruitless but did reveal the fact that we were definitely in for a hard count.

The terrain consisted of large grassland areas interspersed with soggy patches within which were numerous pools of water which had detached themselves from the main stream with the progressive drying up of the river system. It was on these pools that the majority of the birds were concentrated.

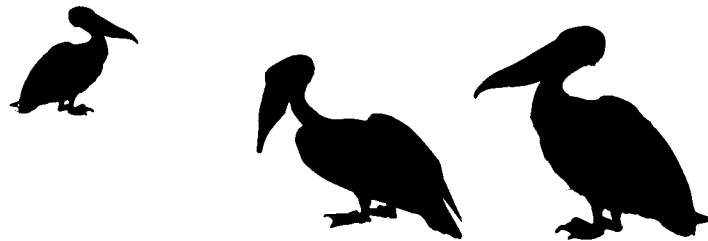
The team split up into two groups one of which covered some of the treacherous grassland areas by vehicle, while the less adventurous chose to recline gracefully on the boat, ably skippered by Dick (Moby Dick). The water was barely knee-deep in most places so, although the motor was used occasionally, for the majority of the trip the boat was either dragged or pushed grudgingly along by the hapless Chief Scout Charl, making progress slow and cumbersome. This also resulted in less distance being covered than expected. The ideal alternative would have been to do the river count by canoes. The mainstream in some areas was also difficult to identify, and our progress involved a substantial amount of trial and error sorties up the many side channels. However, from a birding point of view these channels proved more fruitful than the main channel.

Our campsite which we found relatively easily (despite the Chief Scout's earlier attempt) was within 10 kms of the main road from Katima to Ngoma bridge border post, and afforded an excellent view of the Chobe river about 200 m from us. Two lovely Mahogany trees (*Trichelia emetica*) afforded comfortable shade from which to view the large variety of game on the Botswana side. Kudu, Impala, Sable, Waterbuck, Burchell's Zebra, Baboon and Elephant were seen drinking from our campsite. Lion and Hyena made the night more interesting with their continuous calls. Surprisingly, the immediate vicinity of the river had very little human activity apart from the occasional fishermen in traditional dugout canoe. The river was intensively netted with many areas completely covered with nets across the river for hundreds of metres. Even so fish were abundant albeit of small size due to the selectivity of the gill nets used. On two occasions live cormorants were freed from these nets. Undoubtedly these nets are detrimental to the bird populations. We also often came across nets littered with dead fish which had been in the nets for a substantial amount of time, obviously forgotten by the net owners. This sort of unnecessary wastage certainly needs some

mention and possible action from the relevant authorities.

We had various interactions with Botswana Defence Force (BDF) members and Customs and Immigration officials regarding our activities along the river, but these were all amiable and often helpful.

The birding over the weekend was excellent. Pinkbacked Pelicans were abundant and in varying concentrations centered around the drying-up pans, cut off from the main channels or at the ends of the various side channels. These flocks varied in number depending on the size of the pool: from six birds to groups of approximately 1500. The particularly larger groups had to be estimated, as accurate counts amongst the mixed soaring birds were impossible. Of the total population seen, an estimated 10% were subadult birds. Earlier in the week a breeding colony had been found in the southern area of the Salambala Conservancy. This colony consisted of some 40 individual birds and 22 nests. A large portion of these nests had been destroyed when their weight caused the branches to break. There was also evidence that chicks and adult birds had been shot on the nests verified by spent shotgun shells in the immediate vicinity and dead birds hanging from the nests. However, some of the birds looked as if they were incubating eggs on newly renovated nests. This all indicates a breeding status in the area primarily due to a seasonal abundance of food. Concentrations of pelicans along this river system are not entirely uncommon (Steve Braine, pers. comm.), but it was exciting to see so many Pinkbacked Pelicans in this limited area.



Reed Cormorants were noted in varying groups of between two and 15 throughout the mainstream area and were one of the commoner birds. Grey Herons, Blackheaded Herons and Purple Herons were evenly dispersed with larger groups at the isolated pools. Because of the lack of reed cover along most of the river course, Purple Herons were poorly represented.

Great White Egrets, Little Egrets, Cattle Egrets and Squacco Herons were evenly distributed in both the mainstream areas and the isolated pools. Slaty Egrets were found in marshy or soggy areas with minimal water and some reeds or long grass cover. Only single birds were seen and did not seem to be associated with other bird species.

Greenbacked Herons and Rufousbellied Herons were only seen on the mainstream and poorly represented due to the general lack of suitable vegetation. Blackcrowned Night Herons were noted in isolated pockets where overhanging or dead trees offered some cover. There was a notable lack of adult birds with almost all the birds being subadults of varying stages of plumage colour.

As expected Hamerkop were found widely along the mainstream in groups ranging from two to four birds. Several species of storks were seen during the weekend. Of particular interest were two White (European) Storks which were seen on one occasion with one exceptionally large group of pelicans, herons and storks. Saddlebilled Storks were generally noted as single birds with a few subadult birds. Marabou Storks were abundant everywhere on the mainstream, on isolated ponds and at the Ngoma bridge where large numbers were seen catching fish. Yellowbilled Storks were found in groups of two to 15 at isolated pools associated with the other larger storks, herons and pelicans.

Sacred Ibis were poorly represented at isolated pools, however, Glossy Ibis were evenly dispersed and seen flying in from great distances in characteristic formations. Surprisingly, given the shallow water conditions, African Spoonbill were not common and were only noted flying overhead.

Several species of waterfowl were seen in good numbers over the weekend.

Whitefaced Ducks, Redbilled Teal and Spurwing Goose were the most prolific although in small groups and not in large concentrations as in previous years. As expected Southern Pochard were rare and only one pair was seen on the mainstream. Knob-billed Duck were only seen flying overhead in small groups of two to five.

African Fish Eagle was surprisingly uncommon and only single birds were noted both of which were subadult. African Marsh Harriers were equally badly represented but probably due to the surrounding trampled vegetation being inadequate for their hunting requirements.

Waders were abundant. African Jacana were well dispersed throughout the mainstream where suitable floating vegetation occurred, or at the isolated pools. Kittlitz's Plover, Threebanded Plover, Wattled Plover and Crowned Plover as expected were not common. However, Blacksmith Plovers were prolific with a relatively high percentage of the population being young, newly fledged birds. They were seen often in large groups of up to 18 birds along the banks of the mainstream.

Of the migrant waders, Greenshank and Ruff were noted mostly as single birds or in small groups of up to 4 birds, mostly in the shallow side channels.

Blackwinged Stilt occurred in one shallow side channel in the area in a small, scattered group. Another species which was surprisingly rare was Water Dikkop with only a few single birds on the mainstream.

Redwinged Pratincoles were somewhat scarce, although in other more suitable areas of the Conservancy they were prolific. They were found in isolated groups often associated with freshly ploughed lands on the river edges.

Greyheaded Gulls were everywhere as single birds or in groups of up to 30. Whiskered Terns and the odd Whitewinged Tern were noted as single birds or small groups of up to four. Surprisingly, the other areas of river frontage within the Conservancy revealed no terns.

Other riverside species included, Copperytailed Coucal which was poorly represented due to lack of suitable vegetation. Pied Kingfishers were prolific throughout, mostly in pairs with well-used perches along the river, and sometimes in groups of up to six birds.

Bird species	13 Sep'98	14 Sep '98	Total
Pinkbacked Pelican	1842	71	1913
Reed Cormorant	51	48	99
Grey Heron	12	34	46
Blackheaded Heron	1	2	3
Purple Heron	1	3	4
Great White Egret	50	22	72
Little Egret	10	11	21
Slaty Egret	7	8	15
Cattle Egret	5		5
Squacco Heron	27	23	50
Greenbacked Heron	8		8
Rufousbellied Heron	10	4	14
Blackcrowned Night Heron	16		16
Hamerkop	9	4	13
White Stork	2		2
Saddlebilled Stork	10	1	11
Marabou Stork	159	8	167
Yellowbilled Stork	63		63
Sacred Ibis	8		8
Glossy Ibis	86	4	90
African Spoonbill	6		6
Whitefaced Duck	67		67
Redbilled Teal	41	89	130
Southern Pochard		2	2
Knob-billed Duck	19	12	31
Spurwing Goose	43	6	49
African Fish Eagle	2	1	3
African Marsh Harrier	2	2	4
Helmeted Guineafowl	3		3
African Jacana	36	8	44
Kittlitz's Plover	2		2
Threebanded Plover	4	3	7
Crowned Plover		1	1

Blacksmith Plover	58	84	142
Wattled Plover	2		2
Common Sandpiper	3	5	8
Greenshank	2	28	30
Ruff		5	5
Blackwinged Stilt	4	16	20
Water Dikkop	2	2	4
Redwinged Pratincole	2		2
Greyheaded Gull	80	6	86
Whiskered Tern	25	12	37
Whitewinged Tern		1	1
Copperytailed Coucal		1	1
Pied Kingfisher	23	18	41
Totals	2803	545	3348

Raptors were few and far between throughout the region with only a few larger eagles about. These included Bateleur, African Hawk Eagle, Tawny Eagle, Blackbreasted Snake Eagle, Western Banded Snake Eagle and Wahlberg's Eagle. Only one Dickinson's Kestrel was seen and a few Gabar Goshawks. Some Yellowbilled Kites were occasionally noted. A few Hooded Vultures brightened up the days though.

Although we were primarily interested in the wetlands birds we couldn't help looking out for other birds while doing the count. Capped Wheatear, Cape Wagtail and Stone Chat were regularly seen, as were Grassveld and Plainbacked Pipits. Small groups of Meyer's Parrots were seen, but mostly heard. Pearlspotted Owl and African Scops Owl were consistent night companions at the campsite, as were Mocambique Nightjars. Greyrumped Swallows were everywhere and Palm Swifts were regularly seen. Lilacbreasted and Purple Rollers were noted throughout the area. Grey Hornbill, Threestreaked Tchagra, Longtailed Shrike and Whitebrowed Robin were seen in the drier tree copses. Hartlaub's Babbler, Swallowtailed and Little Bee-eater were often seen from the river, as were Carmine Bee-eaters. Helmeted Guineafowl should have been better represented judging by the numbers seen on the Botswana side of the river. Very little time was actually spent away from the main river system and we therefore, missed quite a few grassland species.

General comments

The area presented some exceptional birding opportunities. Being so close to Katima Mulilo it should be visited by birders or tourist companies more often. The area is relatively easy to travel in if one gets used to the various roads/tracks going off in haphazard directions. The local population does not associate heavily with the floodplain areas for obvious reasons, and their homesteads/villages are placed quite far apart. Suitable campsites are therefore not too difficult to find, offering some degree of privacy. Cattle are prolific in the area and the floodplain vegetation shows heavy trampling and grazing pressures. The opposite bank with the Chobe Game Reserve offers welcome sightings of a large variety of game. Unfortunately the river is heavily and uncontrollably netted by the local Namibians. There is much evidence of elephant activity which includes substantial damage to the trees in the floodplain area – this is also unfortunate. It is unlikely that the remaining isolated copses of large trees can take too much of this destructive attention from elephants.

This area can definitely be marketed successfully for the benefit of the Conservancy with the attraction of the adjoining Chobe Game Reserve. Some control in this area will easily encourage more animal movements from the rich opposite bank and one wonders why this area is not being considered as a "core area" in the long-term conservancy plan.

