NAMIBIA BIRD CLUB

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and
the Southern African Ornithological Society

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Then, as suddenly as he had begun, he retreated to about ten feet from the hen and stood motionless, perfectly hidden by his cryptic coloration, no crest to be seen (had we imagined it?) and only his beak regularly opening and closing about twice a second, but soundlessly now, his eye fixed on the female all the while. Presently, she rose and crept off a few yards, and when he followed, she ducked behind a tuft of grass - invisible again. He too stood, continuing his soundless beak action, and by following the direction of his gaze, we could only pick her out amongst the grasses if the sun caught her eye.

This status quo continued for up to twenty minutes, and off he'd go again: clacking loudly and increasingly insistently, circling her rapidly from six inches to ten feet, depending on the vegetation, his crest rising and falling, sometimes scruffy and sometimes forming a perfect crescent.

After three such performances - we lost track of time - the female began to peep quietly; we were close enough to detect the sound. Finally, she got up and cautiously crossed the road, ignoring the male. He followed equally slowly, but only to the edge of the road. By this time she had reached the other side and another bird - presumably a male - appeared from the vegetation and began "whooping" gently (listen to your bird tape).

At this, the first male lost interest, maybe the female had now left his territory and he returned to the grassy tufts and began pecking at them, showing no hint of a crest or any of the previous excitement.

In the meantime the female had disappeared, probably lying low and the third bird had also vanished from our sight, only his gentle whooping remaining as evidence that we had not dreamt it all.

SOUTH AFRICAN CLIFF SWALLOWS IN NAMIBIA

P.A. & M. BRIDGEFORD

Namib Naukluft Park, Private Bag 1018, Maltahöhe

INTRODUCTION

South African Cliff Swallows *Hirundo spilodera* are poorly distributed in Namibia and Maclean (1985) shows that they are found in the north-east of the country to just south of Windhoek. Earle (1987) states that "patchy distribution in S.W.A. is probably the result of a lack of records from these areas". However, even with additional information from the Namibia Bird Atlas Project, they are still sparsely distributed, although the range has been extended to the south. (Figure 1).

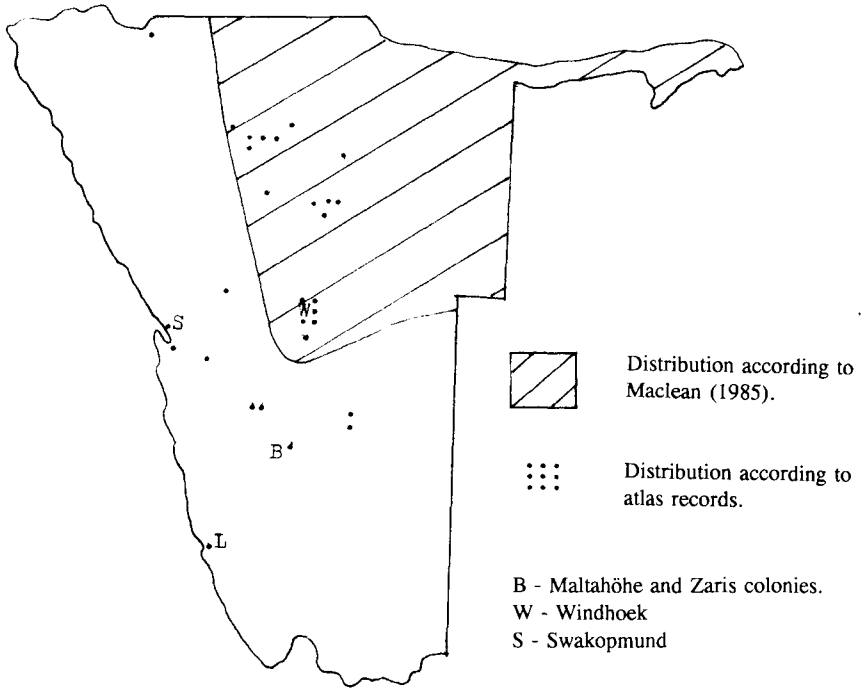

Figure 1. Distribution of South African Cliff Swallows in Namibia.

Table 1. Breeding of South African Cliff Swallows at maltahöhe and Zaris Colonies. These figures represent the minimum numbers of nests with contents. Rainfall on the farm Burgsdorff floods the culverts and surrounding area of the Maltahöhe colony.

	Date	No. of nests	Nests with pulli	Nests with eggs	No. of adult birds	Rainfall
Maltahöhe Colony	Dec.'88	?	?	?	Hundreds	Dec.'88/42 mm Area flooded.
	Feb.'89	497	25	4	Hundreds	Dec.'88/42 mm Jan.'89/14 mm
	Mar.'90	?	?	?	None	Feb.'90/ 9 mm Mar.'90/ 7 mm
	Oct.'90	420	2	3	100 plus	Sept./Oct.'90/ 0 mm
	Dec.'90	0	0	0	2	Dec.'90/20 mm
	Dec.'91	393 + 310 broken nests	0	11	± 50	Sept.'91/19 mm Nov.'91/ 5 mm
Zaris Colony	Jan.'92	112	26	3	± 200	Water in culvert. Scattered showers in area.

BREEDING

Few breeding records exist and the nest record cards from the Directorate Wildlife Conservation and Research in Namibia only have four records of individual nests, three from the Hardap area and one from Windhoek.

In December 1988 we found a breeding colony of over 300 nests 15 km south-west of Maltahöhe under seven adjacent culverts on the main road. Hundreds of birds were flying in the area of the nests, but because of flooding, no accurate count of nests or contents was attempted. The majority of the nests were under two culverts 2,0m and 2,5m high respectively.

We revisited the colony in February 1989 and a total of 497 nests were counted. Again hundreds of birds were flying around the colony. Only nests where chicks could be seen in the nest entrance or where pulli or eggs could be felt were recorded but we suspect that many more had pulli or eggs or both.

The nests were checked by inserting a finger into the nest and if the tunnel was not too long pulli and eggs could be felt but the latter were easier to count. Although this is not an accurate way of counting clutch sizes it does give an indication of the breeding or non-breeding.

In March 1990 no adult birds were seen in the vicinity of the colony and it was very dry in the area. The next count was done in October 1990 but there was little breeding activity although a considerable number of adult birds were seen. Two months later no breeding was recorded and only two adult birds were seen.

This colony was next inspected in December 1991 during one of the worst drought in many years. Only 11 nests had eggs and not many adult birds were observed. A total of 310 nests had been broken, many due to natural causes, but from the complete destruction of many of the nests it appeared that humans were responsible.

Another small breeding locality, the Zaris colony, was found 5km from the main colony in January 1992 in a culvert only 1,2m high but flooded its entire length with about 20cm of water and small pools at either end. Although much smaller than the other culvert at the Maltahöhe colony it had proportionately more nests. The birds were very active and a minimum of 25% of the nests had chickens or eggs in comparison to 2,7% at the Maltahöhe colony two weeks earlier. (Table 1).

HABITAT AT COLONIES

The breeding colonies of South African Cliff Swallows in Namibia are in dry, flat areas, classified by Giess (1971) as dwarf, shrub savannah. This is similar to the habitat in the South African breeding range described by Earle (1987) as mostly flat grass veldt and Karoo semi-arid areas.

CLUTCH SIZES

Earle (1986) found the mean clutch size to be 2,4 but this varied from season to season and two eggs clutches were commoner later in the season. As can be seen from Table 2 the majority of the nests at the Maltahöhe and Zaris colonies had either two eggs or two pulli. This could be a bias in counting the chicks as it was easier to distinguish between one chick or two, but not between two or three. Reduced clutch sizes could also be due to the aridity of the area and the concomitant shortage of food.

CONCLUSION

This is the first record on colonies of South African Cliff Swallows breeding in Namibia with a total of over 500 nests in December/January 1992.

Breeding in Namibia is most probably restricted in other savannah areas because of the lack of suitable breeding sites in these preferred habitats. Although they are called "Cliff

Swallows" no "natural" breeding sites are known at present and all sites are manmade structures (Earle 1987).

Not many observations were made at the colonies but the erratic breeding behaviour of South African Cliff Swallows appears to be directly linked to rainfall in the area. This is in accordance with finding of Earle (1986) that "it also seemed as if a certain minimal amount of rain was needed before there was an upsurge in the number of new clutches started.

The use of the very vulnerable Zaris culvert as a breeding area is perhaps a measure of the desperation of these birds to find a suitable nesting site in their breeding range.

Table 2. South African Cliff Swallow clutch sizes at the Maltahöhe and Zaris colonies.

Clutch Size	1	2	3
No. of nests with eggs	10	10	1
No. of nests with pulli	6	22	5

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Mr and Mrs Walter Kirsten of Burgsdorff for the rainfall figures and hospitality.

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? THORN BIRD ?

SUZI VAN DE REEP

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Some time ago, on 7th February 1989 at 10h30 to be precise, on a typical summer day, I was trying to get some paper work done as I sat in our little office at Namutoni where we lived. I always enjoyed the distractions of the bird-life outside my window, but on this morning it was the behaviour of the Bushmen that distracted me. Three of them were staring up into an Acacia tortilis that is about 10 feet tall. Curiosity overcame me and I went out with my binoculars. Initially all I could see was a bird which had long red legs and somehow didn't belong in an acacia tree. Then I caught the iridescent blue-green plumage on the body and the odd glimpse of a reddish-brown eye glinting between the leaflets.

That was when I had to fetch the bird book to verify my suspicion. Could it really be ...? was it...? well, it definitely was a Gallinule, and according to the picture it had to be the Lesser Gallinule (*Porphyrula alleni*)! There was the cobalt blue frontal shield distinctly visible above the red beak. But what was it doing nine feet up an acacia tree? The closest water was a rain puddle at the camp gate, about 500 yards away of the swimming pool, about the same distance... I began to wonder if the bird was feeling alright (in it's head, you know)... but it seemed fine. It poked around in the branches and then stayed motionless for along while.

After observing it closely and enjoying the colours, admiring the long toes and double checking with the book, I took a couple of photographs - not an easy task with all the tiny acacia leaflets obscuring essential features. Finally I returned to my desk and the paper war. On checking the tree later, I found that the bird had departed. I didn't see it again, but there was a family of African crakes (*Crex egregia*) with five chicks at the puddle at the gate as I drove out of the camp that same afternoon. These were two very special water bird sightings in one day and all within the camp too!

...And a Lesser Gallinule in a thorntree!