

NAMIBIA BIRD CLUB

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All contributions for LANIOTURDUS should be sent to:

The Editor LANIOTURDUS
Namibia Bird Club
PO Box 67
Windhoek

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"BIRD PARTIES"

Dr G Friede
PO Box 3910, Swakopmund

In the summer the habitat on "my" farm (30 km south of Otjiwarongo), which I would describe as thornveld because it is dominated by *Acacia* species in both scrub and woodland form, is teeming with many birds of many species. By July I have to walk 300 m to 500 m to see just one bird — they are so scarce, or so inactive. In August even the Crimsonbreasted Shrike *Laniaries atrococcineus* and the Grey Lourie *Corythaixoides concolor*, who used to announce my coming and accompany me on my way, are but a few and mostly keep silent. In summer one can often identify five or more species from any vantage point in the bush of this farm. In winter birding means hard work and real discovery — only 60–70 species of birds occur here during the winter months.

There is, however, an interesting phenomenon: bird parties. Suddenly there is a Yellowbilled Hornbill *Tockus flavirostris* on the ground and a Crimsonbreasted Shrike near it. As I watch them, delighted, three Pied Babblers *Turdoides bicolor* catch my eye and an African Barred Warbler *Caramoptera fasciolata* busies itself among the dry twigs under a bush. These six birds are in an area of roughly 10x10 m. I walk on and again the bush is silent, no bird in the trees, on the ground or in the sky. Where have they all gone?

On another walk I discover some Burntnecked Eremomelas *Eremomela usticollis*, a Yellowbellied Eremomela *Eremomela icteropygialis* and a Pirit Batis *Batis pririt* in one *Acacia* — all the neighbouring trees are "empty" — the bush is without movement or call and as I walk on the eremomelas and the batis seem to be all there is for the rest of the day. That was July.

In August, in a shrubby area of the farm, I met another such bird party, comprising few birds, but different species: a Brubru Shrike *Nilaus afer*, a Marico Flycatcher *Melaenornis mariquensis*, a Pirit Batis and a woodpecker which fled before I could identify it. Another such get

together, in yet another area of the farm had a Brubru, a Barred Warbler, a Cardinal Woodpecker *Dendropicos fuscenscens* and two Crimsonbreasted Shrikes.

I found two references to "bird parties" in my bird literature, neither of which were particularly useful. In the *African Bird Club Bulletin Vol 1(2)* it was suggested that foraging in bird parties provides "improved feeding opportunities as the progressing flock flushes insects" and also provides "better predator detection". It could be that the eremomelas disturb hibernating insects, which are then caught by the swift batis and the large and clumsy hornbill does the same when foraging on the ground and not quick enough to catch the flushed insects — but if that were to be a lucrative technique I would have expected more birds in the parties. In our 1941 copy of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa* I found the above two reasons mentioned as well and this final sentence: "We must, however, credit them with a love of company and a mutual friendship, unmarred by competition for the same kind of food, amongst these entirely different species so gathered together." As much as I respect Dr Austin Roberts, I must say that I cannot endorse this emotional statement. What we may perceive as "love" and "friendship" in animals is usually connected with the continuation of the species, with the need for security and with habituation. The other reason "~~better predator detection~~" is convincing. Could you think of still another reason?

I think the time for bird parties is over: on the farm they seem to be a winter-phenomenon. The Shepherd's Tree and Hook Thorn are flowering now. The Whitebrowed Sparrowweavers *Plocepasser mahali* have renovated old nests and added some new ones to their favourite nest-tree, the Goldentailed Woodpecker *Campethera abingoni* has excavated its hole in a tree in my front yard and I saw my first Swallowtailed Bee-eater *Merops hirundineus* this morning.

(Bird parties have been quite well researched in different parts of the world with some of the most recent work coming out of South America. Closer to home Carl Vernon did a lot of work on bird parties in the Brachystegia woodlands of Zimbabwe (see Vernon, C.J. 1980. Bird parties in Central and South Africa. In: Johnson, D.N. Proceedings of the 4th Pan-African

Ornithological Congress). *The Kalahari broadleafed woodlands of the Okavango and Caprivi Regions are very similar to Brachystegia woodlands and getting on to bird parties is crucial to any successful birding in this habitat. Bird parties are generally multi species groupings of insectivorous birds and are usually quite noisy — if you hear birds calling (especially white-eyes and tits) you may be on to a bird party — follow it and you will be rewarded with views of often difficult to see species such as Sharpbilled Honeyguide, Rufousbellied Tit and Whitebreasted Cuckooshrike.* — Editor)

RUFOUS MORPH OF EUROPEAN CUCKOO

Charmaine Silver
PO Box 1340, Gobabis, Namibia

On 10 October 1996 I observed a strange looking cuckoo sitting on my lawn near the sprayer (at Ernst Meyer Primary School about 47 km east of Gobabis on the Buitepos Road). The most striking feature of the bird was the barring all over the underparts of the body. The barring on the head and throat was very fine and close together. Barring was from the throat down to the vent with the bars further apart towards the vent. The barring was dark brown on white on the chest and belly. The wings back and tail had rufous and brown strips. The legs were yellow-orange. The bird had a brown iris with a distinct yellow eye-ring, a yellow and black bill, with a yellow gape and the inside of the mouth was orange-red.

After observing the bird for several minutes it flew off, but reappeared two days later. When approached it was not very disturbed. It flew only 10–15 m at a time and would settle on the fence, or raingauge, returning to the lawn. When perched it would remain motionless for several minutes. On the lawn it caught insects. It also caught insects while hopping about in the flowerbeds. It made no noticeable sound or call while we observed it. The bird was later identified as a rufous morph of the European Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*.

(The rufous morph (referred to in the latest edition of Roberts' as Erythristic or red morph) of the European Cuckoo is regarded by most

*authorities as extremely rare. In several books consulted I cannot find any estimate of the actual percentage of the population that is thought to be rufous. It is not illustrated in any of the southern African field guides — however, they all make passing reference to it in the text. If seen in the field it looks remarkably like the illustration of the Barred Cuckoo *Cercococcyx montanus* in the SASOL guide. This is, however, a species of dense forests and woodlands of eastern Southern Africa and is highly unlikely to occur in Namibia. According to the Handbook of the Birds of the Western Palaearctic rufous morphs are all females. How common this form is in Namibia is uncertain — I have seen it twice since 1983, in Bushmanland and the Caprivi — and Steve Braine reports that there were two at Hobatere Lodge this wet season (1996/97)* — Editor).

WATERBERG ENVIRONMENTAL CENTRE OUTING 7–9 FEBRUARY 1997

Daphne McGivern
PO Box 110, Windhoek

Without doubt the highlight of this outing was the Saturday morning spent in the vulture restaurant on the top of the plateau. After a couple of hours of patient waiting within the hide, we were rewarded with the sight of over 100 vultures demolishing an entire Gemsbok carcass within an hour. There were mainly Whitebacked Vultures, several Lappetfaced and about four Cape Vultures. Other birds were rather few with only a couple of Blacksmith Plovers and Yellowbilled Kites keeping the vultures company.

Mark Griffiths, from the Education Centre, had led our party of 24 up on to the plateau. The vegetation up there was thick and we unfortunately saw very few birds. A bonus on the mammal front were some good views of Klipspringer and Sable Antelope. We did get out of the vehicles to try and find a Redcrested Korhaan whose call had alerted us to its presence. We saw it after about ten minutes (and only because it moved out from under our noses!). Before descending back to the Centre, Mark took us on foot to