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Editorial

Normally I would have been tempted to devote a good part of the editorial space to another two species which have allegedly turned up in the northwest of Namibia. These birds were allegedly seen by one of the region's top birders but the validity of these claims appears to be in doubt and hopefully I will obtain more information and will be in a better position to comment in a future edition.

However, my editorial comment concerning previous sightings of Black Skimmers in Southern Africa (Lanioturdus 46 (1)) seems to have raised some lively debate and I think it is only right to conclude this issue now.

I published Tony Tree's response in Lanioturdus 46(2) and this has in turn solicited a response from Joris Komen which I am reproducing here. I am going along with Joris's closing remark that this matter should now be put to rest and I will not publish any further correspondence on this matter.

Joris's response reads:-

US state of Louisiana. They were released in the protected area at White Lake Wetlands after the wetlands in this region were rehabilitated. Such wetlands are the most important habitat for cranes. The Whooping Crane is one of the most threatened bird species in the world. Since 1941 the wild population has recovered from 21 individuals to over 350.

The two new world crane species, Whooping Crane and Sandhill Crane, have suffered from habitat losses and like many other large birds have been victims of hunting and indiscriminate shooting because they are large, easy targets. Further threats include power lines as cranes are low-flying migratory birds. Close monitoring, bans on hunting and projects such as the abovementioned have helped to reduce losses.

References:-

Birds of Prey, Majestic Masters of the Sky, Paragon Books Ltd 2006
Hagenbeck, Das Magazin für Tier- und Artenschutz, Ausgabe 02/2011
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Picture: Dreier, Wolfgang from W.Grunnt, H.Strehlow: Vögel, Harri Verlag, Deutschland

Birding Central and Northern Namibia 10 to 20 October, 2012

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Returning to Namibia for the first time since a whirlwind 'Spirit of the Namib' trip with Wilderness Safaris in 2007, Barbara and I were keenly looking

forward to birding central and northern Namibia in October. Joining us were two keen birders from the Eastern Cape.

We gathered at OR Tambo International to meet BirdLife Eastern Cape Chairman Corne Erasmus and Martie Potgieter, who we were later to find to be pretty intrepid and seasoned travelers to exotic birding destinations.

Our trip was going to be a something of an 'amazing race' zigzagging across central and northern Namibia collecting lifers at speed.

I initially estimated travelling some 3 500 kilometres in 10 days, but this was optimistic as we ended up doing 4 250 kilometres.

Arriving at Windhoek at 14h00 on Day 1 (October 10), we collected our Mazda Double Cab 4x4 and immediately headed for Avis Dam on the run in to Windhoek.

Our first bird was a Monteiro's Hornbill quickly followed by a beautiful Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Shaft-tailed Whydah (female), Ashy Tit, Pirit Batis, Bradfield's Swift and surprisingly a Karoo Eremomela. (*I can't help but think that the last was a misidentification of possibly a Burnt-necked Eremomela, perhaps sans neck band – I am not aware of any records of Karoo Eremomela anywhere near Windhoek – Ed*)

The first day ended disastrously when Corne and Martie's camera bags were mysteriously whipped out of our vehicle whilst signing in at their B&B, but strangely not mine. So reporting to the police prevented them from joining Barbara and me for dinner with the chairperson of the Namibia Bird Club, Gudrun Middendorff, and her partner Neil Thomson. The good advice received

was invaluable later as we hunted down the targeted Namibian specials.

We started Day 2 (October 11) remarkably chirpy in the circumstances, as we set out for Daan Viljoen Game Reserve, once again a disappointing venue possibly due to our being ahead of the rains.

Our Daan Viljoen specials were to be Carp's Tit, Rockrunner, Barred Wren-Warbler and Orange River Francolin but none appeared. Good sightings of Short-toed Rock-Thrush, South African Shelduck, Squacco Heron, Black-necked Grebe, Swallow-tailed Bee-Eater, Red-billed Spurfowl, Hamerkop, Common Scimitarbill and Monteiro's Hornbill (which was to follow us around Namibia!) were our compensation.

Next was the Khomas Hochland safari to Spreetshoogte Pass for the elusive Herero Chat. Namibia is known for its firm and well groomed gravel roads but the C26/C24 was not true to form, and the 220 km was to take 4 hours.

We called the Herero Chat, it appeared fleetingly for only eagle-eyed Barbara to see it this time, disappointing Corne and Martie for whom it was a long outstanding lifer. Losing an hour chasing it was costing time we didn't have to spare.



Rüppell's Korhaan

Investing in this special instead of the fast route to Walvis Bay via Swakopmund was to lose us the afternoon planned for Walvis Bay. Continuing through Gaub and Kuiseb Passes via the Kuiseb Canyon, yielded Dune Lark, Mountain Wheatear, Gabar Goshawk, Rüppell's Korhaan and Tractrac Chat. This faster stretch still took us three hours for 200 km.

We drove into Walvis Bay at 18h00 at sunset, 8 hours after leaving Windhoek. Lesson learnt - don't "go the extra mile" for one special, rather take them in bunches!

Our accommodation for the night was The Stiltz and a tasty seafood meal was enjoyed on the end of the Swakopmund Jetty.

Day 3 (12 October) found us headed for our stay at Erongo Wilderness Lodge which is encircled by the Erongo Mountains and the desert, mountain and bushveld ecosystems combine, where a number of specials were awaiting us. Arriving at midday we quickly saw Dusky Sunbird, Hartlaub's Spurfowl, Short-toed Rock-Thrush, White-tailed Shrike, Pale-winged Starling, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Rockrunner and heard Freckled Nightjars calling.



Hartlaub's Spurfowl

That evening a lovely meal in a balmy outdoor setting was enjoyed by all, slightly spoiled by the serving of the national meat dish ... Oryx, a very dense and heavy meat to consume.

Next morning, after a sumptuous breakfast, we went on a guided walk and rapidly chalked up Chestnut Weaver (still in non-breeding plumage), Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Carp's Tit, and Benguela Long-billed Lark, but we dropped on the expected Damara Hornbill, Barred Wren-Warbler and Violet Wood-Hoopoe.

Having been forced to reverse the order of our trip due to Erongo Wilderness Lodge only being able to accommodate us on 12 October, we left the lodge at 11h00 on Day 4 (13 October), back-tracking to Swakopmund.

On our way out of the Erongo Mountains area about 10kms west of the lodge, on a tip-off from the lodge guide, we shuffled up the dry river bed of an Omaruru tributary to where it met the dry river bed of the wide Omaruru, quickly encountering the shrieks and brief sightings of Rüppell's Parrots. Next stop was the Spitzkoppe for another go at Herero Chat. Sadly after an hour or two searching the spots of recent sightings, we missed out once again.

From Spitzkoppe we opted for the D1918 gravel road across the coastal plain, with its distinctive black rocky outcrops in the grey-white desert, to Henties Bay for Swakopmund. This proved a good choice as we nearly ran over the preening Gray's Lark outside the gates of the Mile 4 Saltworks. A good half-hour was spent soaking up this cute little special.

After freshening up we hit the town looking for a traditional German style restaurant and gulped down jugs of German draft washing down schnitzels

with rosti and the other Bavarian condiments.

After a fun night in Swakopmund, Day 5 (14 October) saw us set off early excited at the prospects awaiting along the Promenade and Salt Works at Walvis Bay.

Grey Plovers, Common Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit, Kelp Gull, and all the usual waders were soon found on the way, before arriving at birders heaven – the Walvis Bay Salt Works. Alongside the municipal chalets we searched for the American Golden Plover but did not find it amongst the numerous Grey Plovers and Chestnut-banded Plovers.

Local birding guru Mark Boorman was unfortunately away for a long weekend out of town, but briefed me on the near miss of the Black Skimmer two days earlier, recent sites for Franklin's Gull, Wilson's Phalarope, Red and Red-necked Phalarope.

We easily found Greater Flamingo, Chestnut-banded Plover, Pied Avocets and Little Stints in their dozens, Franklin's Gull (a lifer for all of us), Red-necked Phalarope, Great White Pelican, Black-necked Grebe, and all the usual waders and cormorants. We searched among the flotillas of "dancing" phalaropes for the single Wilson's and the three or four Red Phalaropes recently sighted, but without success.



Black-backed Jackal

A highlight however was coming across one of the very pale coloured Black-backed Jackals that predate on the Greater Flamingo, carcasses of which were everywhere to be seen, and blend in so perfectly with the colouring of the salt works.

After refueling in Walvis Bay and getting antibiotic treatment for Martie (who was not only suffering the cross-country safari, but the effects of the flu as well) we set off with rally driver Corne at the wheel, for the Waterberg Plateau Park which we reached rather quickly at midday, to a wonderful welcome by two Damara Hornbills (A lifer for all of us).



Damara Hornbill

We quickly got ourselves settled in at Waterberg Plateau Lodge, which sits majestically high up on the plateau, on a rock terrace guarding the extensive Kalahari plains below extending as far as the eye could see, and seated below

the enormous, vividly red sandstone rocks and cliffs of the Waterberg Plateau above.

Once more the rocky slopes yielded numerous Rockrunners and Rosy-faced Lovebirds, more Damara Hornbills, a lone Rüppell's Parrot, a few friendly Black-chested Prinias, two quartering Verreaux's Eagles, a distant Lappet-faced Vulture and swirling Bradfield's Swifts.



Rockrunner

Waterberg Plateau Lodge is a simple but majestic venue we would highly recommend more time be spent at, even though we were served up with Oryx for dinner once again.

We left the Waterberg Plateau Lodge early on Day 6 (15 October) for Tandala Ridge Wildlife Lodge, but not without visiting their twin Waterberg Wilderness Lodge resort down below, where a flock of Violet Wood-Hoopoe was encountered. We drove swiftly to this under-rated venue hosted by Tim and Laurel Osborne, which offers only two chalets, but in ideal conditions (especially after the first rains), is renowned for having eight of the seventeen Namibian endemics including the following specials: Lark-like Bunting, Hartlaub's Spurfowl, Orange River Francolin, Rüppell's Parrot, Bare-cheeked Babbler, Carp's Tit, White-tailed Shrike, Monteiro's and Damara Hornbills, Chestnut Weaver, Red-crested Korhaan, Southern Pied Babbler and Barred Wren-Warbler.

True to form we had magnificent sightings of Damara and Monteiro's Hornbills, Orange River Francolin, Double-banded Sandgrouse, Barred Wren-Warbler, Bare-cheeked Babbler, Carp's Tit and large flocks of Chestnut Weaver.



Orange River Francolin

Tim and Laurel are both highly respected wildlife biologists who returned to Namibia in 1997 from Alaska, and have over 40 years of birding experience. They have been avid ringers since 1999, ringing over 24 650 birds! That evening we were entertained by three porcupines coming out of their lair for their evening snack of fruit and nut-based feed tenderly offered by Tim and Laurel, and yet again Oryx but this time braaied a soft and juicy medium rare by Tim, so for once I enjoyed this Namibian specialty!

We set out very early on Day 7 (16 October) for Kunene River Lodge via Ruacana this being the longest stretch on the trip. On our way to Kamanjab we



Madagascar Bee-eaters

enjoyed a great sighting of two Rüppell's Parrots drinking from a leaking irrigation pipe. In hot conditions we found a pair of Madagascar Bee-eaters at the camp site at Hippo Pools, before tackling the tough road conditions to Kunene River Lodge.

To our regret Peter Morgan, the owner of the lodge, just happened to be away on a shopping trip to Ondangwa when we arrived so could only confer with him that evening for the best spots for the elusive Cinderella Waxbill and Grey Kestrel, which left little time the next morning to attempt to find them, and we didn't.

We found the area very productive seeing: African Mourning Dove, Rufous-tailed Palm-Thrush, thousands of Red-billed Queleas, Carp's Tit, Bare-cheeked Babblers, White-tailed Shrike, Rosy-faced Lovebirds, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Red-necked Spurfowl (in the distinctive NW race *afes*) White-browed Coucal, Swamp Boubou and Northern Black Korhaan.



Red-necked Spurfowl

On Day 8 (17 October) on our way out of the Kunene River area we waited patiently for Cinderella Waxbill at one of Peter's special spots without success, before taking the alternative and better route from Kunene River Lodge via Swartbooisdrif, Otjiveze, the D3700, Opuwo and the C41 for our return to the C35. Once again Corne was at the wheel and the trip to Kamanjab 'flew'.

On the way we stopped and paid tribute to the Dorsland Trekkers at the memorial and graveyard to their memory, not far from Swartbooisdrif.

Barbs drove to Okaukuejo in Etosha, completing our 'great trek' by 14h00, leaving the afternoon for some birding.

Corne and Martie chose to stay in and about the camp but Barbara and I drove down to Gemsbokvlakte and Olifantsbad in search of Red-necked Falcon, picking up great sightings of Secretarybird, Greater Kestrel, Kori Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan and Spike-heeled Lark, and a large fine specimen of a desert adapted Black Rhino at the waterhole, also guarded by a Black-backed Jackal.

The camp was fully occupied and in quite a festive mood for supper at the lodge, and a well-earned early-to-bed was enjoyed by all.

On Day 9 (18 October) we chose to scan the plains north of Okaukuejo and found Red-capped, Pink-billed and Spike-heeled Larks, Common Ostrich and Chestnut-backed Sparrowlarks.

En route to Namutoni via Halali we picked up Cape, White-headed and White-backed Vulture, Bateleur, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Greater Kestrel, Chat Flycatcher, Pygmy Falcon and Little Sparrowhawk.

After spotting a pride of Lion snoozing away from the heat of the sun under a bush near the Klein Okevi waterhole, we drew a blank on Burchell's Sandgrouse at Tsumcor Waterhole (although we heard them fly over) and found the famous Fischer's Pan bone dry, so retired to our next stop Mokuti Lodge just outside the Namutoni Gate.

After a pleasant dinner at this luxurious lodge, an early night and a hearty breakfast, we successfully birded the

beautiful gardens for the resident Black-faced Babbler in the early morning of Day 10 before leaving for our stop-overs near Otjiwarongo. We dropped off Corne and Martie and had a light lunch at their Otjiwa Lodge before driving on to our overnight stop at Okonjima Lodge (to which is attached the Africat Foundation), which was fully booked when they agreed to join us on the trip.



Black-faced Babbler

Next morning (Day 11 19 October) we drove at a gentle pace to Windhoek International Airport for our return flights to Johannesburg.

So our journey came to an end after accumulating a trip list of 220 species and between 13 and 15 lifers apiece, on a wonderful but slightly rushed journey through beautiful Namibia.

Some lessons learnt from our lengthy safari for aspirant trip planners. Provide more time for Walvis Bay and Mile 4 Salt Works, Erongo Wilderness Lodge, Waterberg Plateau Park, Tandala Ridge Wildlife Lodge (now that Hobatere Lodge is closed down) and Kunene River area. They are the hotspots!

(The Black-faced Babbler in the photograph is a ringed bird. According to the SAFRING website only twelve birds of this species have ever been ringed! – Ed.)