

BIRDS OF THE BANGAZI PLAIN, NORTHERN ZULULAND

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The purpose of this article is to draw attention to a magnificent area in Zululand and to some very special birds that occur there. The Bangazi Plain lies between the coast to the east and the Mkuze river and its floodplain to the west, extending from Sodwana Bay in the north to the north end of Lake St Lucia in the south. This area is approximately 45 km long and from five to ten km in width. We called it the Bangazi Plain because it includes Lake Bangazi North, not to be confused with Lake Bangazi South which is adjacent to Cape Vidal.

The area, surprisingly, has escaped

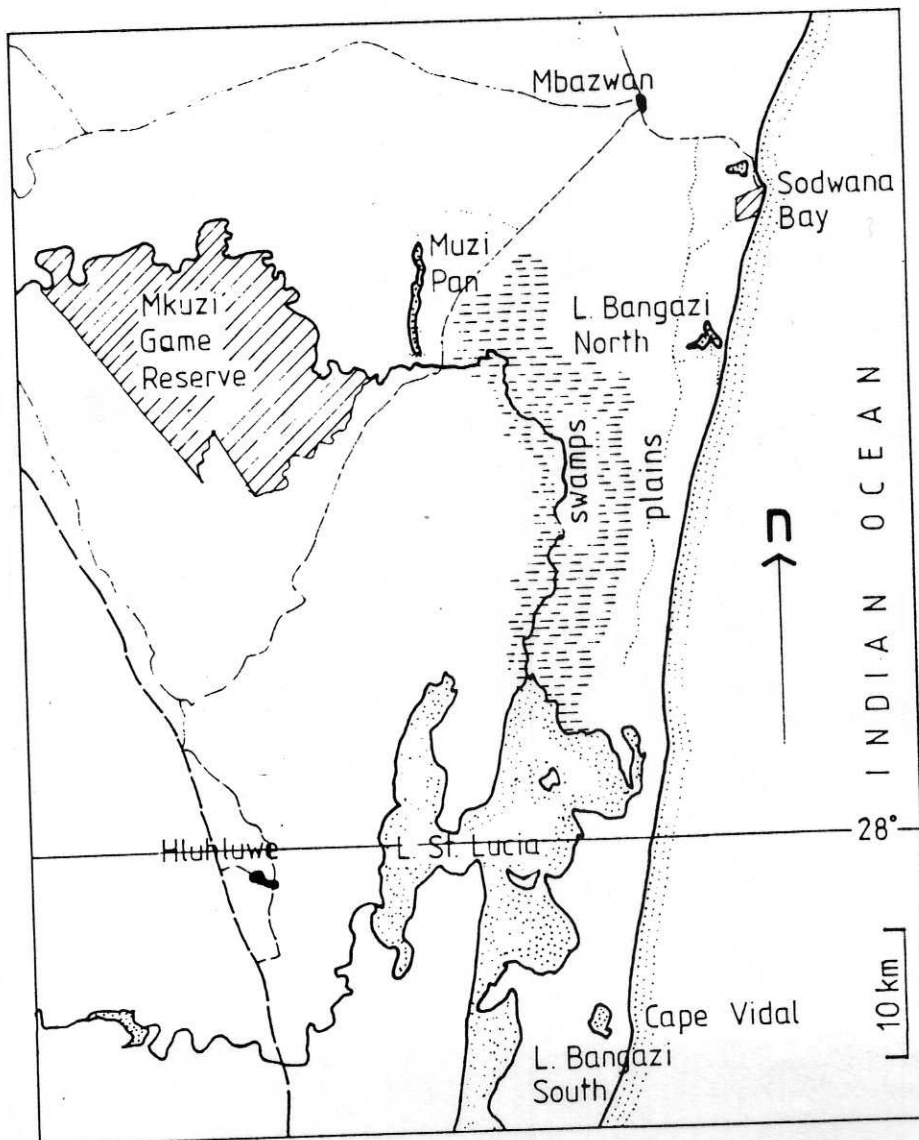
attention from ornithologists and, until recently, from most people concerned with conservation. Access has been restricted, not only by a lack of public roads but also by the authorities responsible for its management and use. Before the early 1950s, it was unallocated state land and some of the area was occupied by local people. Then it was declared state forest, as part of the Sodwana Bay State Forest under the control of the Department of Forestry, and the inhabitants and their stock were moved out. Responsibility for the management of its fauna and flora was assigned to the

Natal Parks Board, while the South African Defence Force and Kentron were given the use of the area for military training and testing activities. In 1987, control was transferred from the Department of Forestry to the Natal Parks Board so that the whole area could be conserved as a reserve. It is, however, still used for military purposes.

Bangazi Plain's value as a natural area lies in the fact that it is the last substantial piece of tropical coastal grassland remaining in South Africa. Few people have recognised these grasslands as a distinct habitat to be conserved, but it is the home of a number of restricted birds such as Pinkthroated Longclaw, Grey-rumped Swallow and Natal Nightjar. In the past, these species occurred commonly further south along the Natal coast but, with the destruction of grasslands, they have now either disappeared completely or are found only in a few isolated places. While a number of other patches of grassland survive in Zululand, none is comparable in size to the Bangazi Plain and few are conserved. In addition to the grassland, Bangazi includes a system of pans and swamps, a continuous belt of dune forest and the sea shore.

We have not included the extensive Mkuze floodplain with the great papyrus swamp which bounds the Bangazi to the west. Goodman (1987) has described the floodplain and some of its problems, while plant and preliminary faunal surveys of the area have been reported in Stormans and Breen (1986). The Mkuze swamp really deserves intensive ornithological exploration; as a papyrus swamp about 15 km long and two to five km wide, it is unique in South Africa.

On our first visit to Bangazi Plain during September 1984, we were at once impressed by its size and beauty and, of course, by the discovery of interesting birds. Starting in November 1985, we have made eight 3-4 day trips there, usually accompanied by other birdwatchers, compiling lists of birds and collecting a few selected



*Lesser Jacana*

Wildlife Society

specimens. Two visits were made in winter (July), four in summer (November, January and February) and one each in October and April. Altogether we spent 31 days there during which we recorded 246 species.

Winter migrants

One of the interesting and valuable aspects of Bangazi Plain is that it is an important wintering area for many species. In fact, there appears to be a greater diversity of birds there in winter than in summer. During our two winter visits, 178 species were listed, against 167 during the four summer trips. Among the expected winter migrants were Stonechats, Cape Robins and Fiscal Flycatchers. One surprising regular migrant is the Shorttailed Pipit. This bird is found locally in short, sparse grass, although some in-

dividuals were seen in relatively dense grass cover. We also found large numbers in similar habitat further south in the western shores area of Lake St Lucia, so it is possible that these coastal grasslands are the main wintering grounds of Shorttailed Pipits that breed, during summer, in the foothills of the Drakensberg.

In addition to these regular migrants, we also noted a few other species only in winter. Some of these were seen also in October and April, but they were apparently absent during our mid-summer visits. These include Little and Cattle Egrets, African Spoonbill, Helmeted Guineafowl, Greyheaded Gull, Rameron Pigeon, Black and Little Swifts, Black Cuckooshrike, Forktailed Drongo, Dusky Flycatcher, Fiscal Shrike, Whitebellied Sunbird and Spotted-backed Weaver. Many of these species breed commonly in adjacent

areas and so their movements are probably on a local scale.

Water birds and associated species

The many pans and marshes of Bangazi Plain vary in size, permanence, depth and vegetation. Such profusion and diversity of wetlands makes it a good area for birds associated with water. Some of these are rare elsewhere in South Africa, so it was exciting to record large numbers of Lesser Jacanas, Rufousbellied Herons, Glossy Ibises, Pygmy Geese, White-backed Ducks, Caspian Terns and a large breeding colony of Whiskered Terns. Yellowbilled Egrets were sometimes the commonest waterbirds when flocks of 50 or more were seen on a single pan, while there were usually substantial numbers of other egrets, herons and ducks. Among the less common aquatic species were

Saddlebilled and Woollynecked Storks, Goliath Heron, Little Bittern and Redwinged Pratincole.

We spent a good deal of time thrashing through marshes but saw surprisingly little in the way of rails and crakes — the odd African Rail and Redchested Flufftail was seen or heard while a few Black Crakes and Purple Gallinules were sometimes about. Redknobbed Coots were entirely absent, and bishops and widows were also inexplicably poorly represented; the Redshouldered Widow was the only one present. Broadtailed Warblers were found in small numbers.

While not directly associated with water, Pinkthroated Longclaws were at times plentiful in the thick grass around the pans. In places they can be seen alongside Orange- and Yellowthroated Longclaws (both are abundant), making this a good place for comparing all three *Macronyx* species. Incidentally, three snake eagles also occur regularly at Bangazi — Southern Banded, Blackbreasted and Brown.

The grasslands

The birds of the grasslands were really interesting because many are species normally associated with the highveld grasslands of the Transvaal and Orange Free State and the Natal Midlands. Stanley's Bustards were known to be resident in low-lying Zululand, but the finding of Pale-crowned, Desert and Cloud Cisticolas, Rufousnaped Lark, Quail Finch, Blackrumped Buttonquail, Cape Turtle Dove, Coqui Francolin, Banded Sand Martin, Blackwinged Plover and Orangethroated Longclaw was surprising. All of these are resident, though not all are known to breed. Subsequent inquiries showed that Austin Roberts and Philip Clancey had, in fact, recognised some of these populations as distinct long ago.

The presence of these residents and other "highveld birds" (Cape Robin, Shorttailed Pipit and Stonechat) as winter visitors suggests a close relationship, both structurally and historically, between these coastal grasslands and those at higher altitudes in the interior. The only common grassland species that could be considered tropical in origin or character was the Greyrumped Swallow. They were seen frequently during all our visits except, oddly, the November one.



Grasslands of Bangazi plain

Roger Homer

Two birds that seem to be nomadic in the area are Lesser Blackwinged Plovers, observed in July, and Lemonbreasted Canaries, noted in January. Bluecheeked Bee-eaters are widespread in summer and Sand Martins are subject to influxes in late summer.

While Rufousnaped Larks are abundant, it was odd that a few Flappet Larks were the only other larks recorded. We were also puzzled by the scarcity of pipits, apart from Shorttailed Pipits. Much of the habitat appears suitable, in particular extensive areas of grassland after burning. Only a small number of Richard's Pipits are present throughout the year in a few restricted areas and a single Plainbacked Pipit was recorded in February.

A nest of a Blackrumped Buttonquail, containing one egg, was an exciting discovery on 18 September 1984. This is apparently the first nest found of this species in South Africa in recent years and Brooke (1984) even suggested that the bird may no longer breed in this country.

Forest and Woodland Birds

Several noteworthy forest and woodland birds occur at Bangazi Plain. Crested Guinea fowl, Woodward's Batis, Wattle-eyed Flycatcher, Brown Robin, Green Twinspot and the long-crested race of Knysna Lourie (sometimes called Reichenow's Lourie) are common in the forest covering the coastal dunes. West of the dunes, the forest is fragmented into patches of

woodland which hold Yellowspotted Nicator, Grey Waxbill, Pinkthroated Twinspot, Green Coucal and Rudd's Apalis. The call of a Barred Owl was heard one evening in July.

We collected several white-eyes and compared them with examples collected to the north and further south. The Bangazi birds fitted neatly between Yellow and Cape White-eyes. In fact, white-eyes get progressively yellower the further north they are found up the coast from Durban, calling into question the usefulness of retaining Yellow and Cape White-eyes as distinct species.

Rare and endangered species

Many of the species mentioned are considered rare in South Africa. Brooke's (1984) Red Data Book for South African birds lists 102 species for which some kind of concern, further study or conservation action is recommended. His list provides a useful basis on which to judge the importance of habitats or areas for conserving birds. Because some birds are rarer or more threatened than others, Brooke formulated the following groups: extinct, endangered, vulnerable, rare, and birds of indeterminate status.

We recorded 26 of the 102 species, nine of which were seen infrequently, indicating that Bangazi did not hold substantial populations of them. The other 17 were seen regularly or were actually abundant: Blackrumped Buttonquail, Bateleur, Stanley's Bustard, Natal Nightjar, Pinkthroated Long-

claw, Rufousbellied Heron, Saddle-billed and Woollynecked Storks, Pygmy Goose, Southern Banded Snake Eagle, Lesser Jacana, Red-winged Pratincole, Shorttailed Pipit, Caspian Tern, Woodward's Batis, Wattle-eyed Flycatcher and Yellow (?) White-eye. The value of Bangazi becomes most apparent when one considers that the first 14 of these are among the 65 species Brooke classes as endangered, vulnerable or rare (the status of the remaining three is considered indeterminate). This means that Bangazi provides suitable habitat and a good home for over 20 per cent of those species requiring conservation measures in South Africa.

In this analysis we have considered only those species that occur within the Bangazi Plain area. If we were to expand this to embrace all of low-lying Zululand north from St Lucia estuary and west to the Lebombo mountains, the whole region can be seen as one of vital importance to the conservation of birds in South Africa. To the 14 species already listed the following would be added: Martial Eagle, Pinkbacked and White Pelicans, Marabou, Yellowbilled and Openbilled Storks, Palmnut, Hooded and Whiteheaded Vultures, Lesser Blackwinged Plover, Pel's Fishing Owl, African Broadbill, Neergard's Sunbird and Lemonbreasted Canary. We then have 28 species or 43 per cent of South Africa's known Red Data candidates in one small part of the country.

Luckily, Zululand is reasonably well provided with nature reserves and most of the birds mentioned are common further north in eastern

The Peregrine Falcon

(Continued from p. 80)

habits. One of the sites is situated in a gorge where one has an unobstructed view of the nest and we are planning to spend some time there this year observing the birds at relatively close range. (Not close enough to cause disturbance. On past visits, even when nestlings were present, the adults took little notice of us unless we walked too close to the edge of the gorge). Casual observations at various sites have revealed the following prey: Cape Turtle Dove, Laughing Dove, racing pigeon, Alpine Swift, flying termites and a large dragonfly and



Aerial view of pans when full

John Mendelsohn

Africa. Nevertheless, we have a responsibility to those species that happen, through political fate, to fall within our boundaries. In recent years, there have been proposals to develop large areas of the Zululand plain for economic purposes. We hope that these proposals are implemented with caution and due concern for the birds in the area.

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we have also noted unsuccessful attempts to catch European Swallow, Lesser Doublecollared Sunbird and Cape White-eye. John Morris told me of a Peregrine killing a Blacksmith Plover on a farm near Stellenbosch.

An interesting aspect of our study so far has been the frequency with which Lanner Falcons have been seen in the immediate vicinity of Peregrine nest sites. Surprisingly, interaction between the two species seems to be minimal but at one Peregrine nest site the Peregrines successfully drove off a pair of Lanners.

In conclusion we should like to mention that this project is registered with the Department of Nature Conservation, University of Stellenbosch.

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