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Editorial

A new year has rolled around and at least we have enough material for an issue of our journal the *Lanioturdus*.

After good rains in October and November we then had a very long dry spell until the first week of January. More good rain then with up to 100 mm at some places but another dry spell into February. The poor birds have had their share this season of starts and stops as far as breeding has been going. The masked weavers have built nests but then they sit and wait for the females who are not quite in the mood. Wait until the next rain!

During the festive season we went to Alaska to see our children and grandchildren. We mainly stayed in the city of Anchorage where the weather was a bit like here with the starts and stops to winter. Instead of just being winter the weather brought freezing temperatures with snow and then it would warm up above freezing and rain. Watching the Bohemian Waxwings (family: *Bombycillidae*) they would huddle in the hundreds during the cold but then when it warmed up descend on the crab apples and other shrubs with berries and eat the defrosted fruit.

Once again I appeal to all members to help the club. If you want to keep the club viable you must also do your part and try and get new members to join.

African Green Pigeon distribution

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On a recent trip (late August 2004) to the Kunene Region in far northwestern Namibia I observed Green Pigeons (*Treron calva*) feeding in wild fig trees (*Ficus sycomorus* and *Ficus cordata*) at Otjapitjapi between Sesfontein and Opowo.

According to Maclean (2001) Green Pigeons are absent from the arid western regions of Namibia. However, Tarboton's (2001) distribution map for the species includes the far northwestern corner of Namibia. Green Pigeon diet is confirmed as fruit – mainly figs – something also confirmed by the local villagers at Otjapitjapi. According to them the pigeons migrate into the area during the *Ficus* fruiting season. The fruiting season for the *Ficus* species is between September to February for *F. cordata* and July to December for *F. sycomorus* (Coates Palgrave 1983). *F. sycomorus* fruits are even utilised by humans (Van Wyk & Van Wyk 1997).

The main breeding season for these pigeons is documented as between August and January (Maclean 2001) and October to April (mainly November to December) (Tarboton 2001). How this source of “westerly” figs affects or influences the distribution, migratory patterns and breeding season in Namibia is open for speculation.

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Black Skimmer at Walvis Bay

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While setting up mist-nets on the tidal flats at Meersig, Walvis Bay (2258S 1429E) in the late afternoon of 24 February 1998 I noticed a skimmer sitting amongst a flock of Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*. Mist nets were unceremoniously dumped as I reached for my binoculars. After watching the bird for a short time and taking a brief field description I assumed the bird to be an African Skimmer *Rynchops flavirostris* although was puzzled by certain features and when walking back to the embankment to call Keith Wearne (who was waiting for me there) something niggled at the back of my mind that all was not right. By the time Keith reached the spot the birds had flown. Remembering the record from the Cunene submitted by Joris Komen to the Namibian Rarities Committee some years earlier, and subsequently sent to the South African Rarities Committee for comment, I thought “was this possibly a Black Skimmer”? Our comments on the earlier record were that we thought that it was likely to be a Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger* but no-one was prepared to put their heads on the block and say that it definitely was that species as the field description was not detailed enough. Our comments on this record were returned to the Namibian Rarities Committee who decided to leave the bird as a ‘possible’. Unfortunately all trace of this submission was subsequently lost.

The morning following my Walvis Bay sighting, after a successful night wader netting when I also caught a European Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*, I phoned Peter Kaistner in Windhoek who was very familiar with this bird in North America. He came down with Chris Hines on the 28th and after searching for the bird they retired to the Raft for a beer. Whilst sitting there the skimmer flew past very close affording only a quick view the most important of which was that of the tail, which I had not viewed well in the short time that I saw the bird in flight. Peter agreed that he thought the bird to be a Black Skimmer. On returning to South Africa I tried to dig up as much as I could on this species, especially on the immature plumage, and found the available literature sadly lacking in detail and it was only in 2003 that I discovered and managed to obtain

a copy of 'Black Skimmer' (Gochfeld and Burger. 1994, The Birds of North America, No 108). Comparison has also been made with colour slides of birds in the hand that I took in Zambia and with some of the excellent photos that have appeared in *Africa Birds & Birding*, especially in the August/September 2004 issue (Paxton M, pp 40-47).

A field description was made at the time, details of which appear here: Bill red with large black tip, the black extending further back along the lower mandible. The bill was shorter than would be expected in an adult and was not much longer than length of head – possibly this giving the impression of a heavier bill than that of the African Skimmer. (Tern bills take about a year to grow to full size).

Wing span in flight about 2x that of a Black Tern, a flock of which it associated, flying in formation when they rose. It was able to maintain the flight manoeuvres of the smaller tern quite easily. While sitting the bird had a heavier, stockier look, with possibly a more chesty appearance than in an African Skimmer.

The upperparts were dark brown with some pale edging to feathers still evident on wings and mantle. These pale edged feathers were scattered erratically indicating that the large majority of juvenile plumage had been lost. Peter Kaistner, who saw the bird at very close quarters and from above, albeit in poor light, saw more markings on the back.

Particularly obvious was the *broad* white trailing edge to the secondaries and inner primaries. The white increased in width noticeably from primaries to secondaries and seemed increase further to inner secondaries *contra* to the textbooks which show it narrowing again on the inner secondaries.

Head and neck dark brown this colouring thinning a bit on the neck. No pale streaking discernable. Underwing coverts very white, base of primaries whitish and rest of primaries dark. Tail, seen from above by Peter Kaistner, was distinctly white with black centre.

Points to consider. Firstly size: (a) the Black Skimmer is larger than the African Skimmer. The latter has a wingspan approximating that of a Grey-headed Gull *Larus cirrocephalus* (P Leonard pers. comm.). Figures given in Harrison's *Seabirds* (1983) show a wingspan of 66 cm for the Black Tern, 102 cm for a

Greyheaded Gull, 106 cm for an African Skimmer and up to 126 cm for the Black Skimmer. The latter is close to double that of the Black Tern. This was a very conspicuous feature when these two species were banking together in flight.

(b) The underwing of the African Skimmer is rather greyish with poorly contrasting black towards end of primaries. That of the Black Skimmer is white with strongly contrasting black primary ends.

(c) The tail of the African Skimmer is greyish in flight although this can appear variable with light angle; the outer web of these feathers is off-white while the inner web is greyish-brown. In the Black Skimmer the tail is white with the black centre bar.

(d) The plumage of this bird showed that most juvenile feathers had already been lost as would be expected of a bird normally breeding in the June/August period and fledging mainly August/September in North America. The African Skimmer lays mainly August to October with fledging October to December and juveniles are still in first plumage, or just starting to lose it, in February.

(e) The African Skimmer shows a very pale, narrow grey-brown trailing edge to the secondaries while that of the Black Skimmer is broader and conspicuously white.

(f) The bill of the African Skimmer is slimmer than that of its American counterpart and although showing a darker tip in some adults this is never as contrasting, conspicuous and extensive as that of the Black Skimmer. The juvenile of the latter species also shows the contrast well despite having an overall duller bill. African Skimmer juveniles would still have original bill colour of yellowish/dull yellowish-orange in February whilst immatures returning to Zambia July/September do not have a black bill tip (P Leonard pers. comm.).

(g) The dark crown was clearly demarcated from the white forehead and face; the juvenile African Skimmer at this time of year would not show this feature distinctly, having a clearly streaked head with poor frons colour differentiation.

(h) The brown of the upperparts was darker than that of a young African Skimmer.

The question now is "Where did this bird come from and how did it get here?" The large nominate North American bird is a short to medium distance migrant moving from the Atlantic coastline of the U.S.A. mainly to the western shores of the Caribbean. The smaller eastern South American race, *intercedens*, has a medium brown tail and although migrating south from Brazil to Argentina spends its life on large rivers and estuaries and is even more unlikely to reach southern Africa. The only scenario that I can suggest is that this bird was migrating south through the West Indies, as a small proportion do, and was carried out into the Atlantic during an intense tropical depression and eventually reached West Africa. In its disorientated state it then continued southwards along the coast to reach Namibia. The North American bird is both a coastal breeder and coastal migrant. Despite the overall numbers of the African Skimmer in southern/central Africa there have never been any reports of this bird occurring on the coast although birds from the Niger River in West Africa do occasionally wander coastwards. This bird appeared quite at home in Walvis Bay lagoon and may have been present for some time as there was a January report of a skimmer seen there. The nominate race being a bird of coastal regions in the Americas it would be more likely to stay in this habitat than wander inland along the larger river systems.

Bird observations and notes

White Stork - *Ciconia ciconia*

On the morning of January 9th, 2005, I came back from a cattle post just past 09h00. I noticed a big bird walking in the agricultural field, thinking first of a Secretary bird. However, this bird was white. A look through the binoculars confirmed the White Stork. I took the spotting scope to have a closer look. I thought of the possibility of this bird having been colour-ringed at some stage. I approached not too close, but I could see this bird had no rings, pity.

It kept patrolling the short vegetation, looking for something edible. This is only our second record of White Stork on our farm, 1818 Cc. The so far first and only record had been on March 7th, 1993, also on the agricultural field, as far as I can remember. (Günther Friederich)

NAMIBIA BIRD CLUB

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LANIOTURDUS publishes articles and notes of broad birding interest to the membership of the Namibia Bird Club. Contributors should look at recent issues of the magazine for guidance and suitability and presentation of material. Manuscripts in English, German or Afrikaans are requested and should be typed in double spacing on A4 paper. If papers are submitted in German or Afrikaans a short English summary should accompany the article. For papers in English, summaries in German or Afrikaans may also be submitted. Sketches, maps and figures should be submitted on good quality white paper in black ink. High contrast black and white or colour photographs (prints or transparencies) may be submitted to illustrate articles. Artwork illustrating any aspect of birds and/or birding are also requested. All submissions should have the author's address, contact telephone number and e-mail address (if applicable).

The preferred medium of submission for articles is either computer disk (high density 3.5") or attachments to e-mails. The preferred word processing programme is MS Word Version 7.0 on Windows 95. Any other programmes are acceptable but authors should also include an alternate version in either text only (.txt) or rich text format (.rtf) files. Handwritten articles are acceptable but must be printed and legible. Short notes and observations should be submitted on a quarterly basis.

All disks and photographs will be returned to authors but manuscripts will not be returned. A single copy of the issue in which your article appeared will be sent to the senior author.

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