

SHORT NOTE

Booted Eagles breeding in Namibia

by

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Steyn (1982) described two populations of Booted Eagles *Hieraaetus pennatus* in southern Africa, one of non-breeding Palearctic migrants, the other of intra-African migrants which breed in the Cape Province, Republic of South Africa. The Palearctic population is present in southern Africa from November to February (Brooke 1974) while the Cape population is largely absent from its breeding range from April to July (Brooke *et al.* 1980). Biggs *et al.* (1981) have presented evidence to suggest that the Cape Booted Eagles overwinter in the north-western Cape, Namibia and southern Angola; over 70% of their Namibian records fall between April and July. This note reports on a third population in Namibia, that of breeding Booted Eagles, and a possible change in the demography of the populations.

The following observations were made: On 13 July 1983 at approximately 09h15 six light phase Booted Eagles were seen soaring on the north side of the Waterberg Plateau, Namibia (20°19' S, 17°18' E; 1500 m a.s.l.). These observations were incidental to counts of nesting Cape Vultures *Gyps coprotheres* from the base of the Waterberg cliffs (approximately 60 m in height) using a 40X telescope mounted on a tripod. One of the Booted Eagles stooped and struck a Cape Turtle Dove *Streptopelia capicola* as it was taking off from the ground. It flew with its prey directly to the cliffs, landing on a ledge about half way up. Through the telescope a dark phase Booted Eagle was observed sitting on a nest placed on a narrow ledge at the base of a small tree, some 450 m east of the Cape Vulture colony. The nest was considerably smaller than the eagle, the bird's head and tail extending beyond the edge of the nest rim. The nest was estimated to be between 15 and 20 cm in height. The dove was left on the edge of the nest, and the eagle which had made the capture departed. The nesting bird stood up and fed on the dove for just over four minutes, then sat on the nest where it remained for the 3,5 hours that it was under observation.

On 9 August the site was revisited and five Booted Eagles were observed. The dark phase bird was on its nest and did not leave, nor was it visited by its mate for the 5,5 hours it was under observation. A second occupied nest was found, at approximately the same height on the cliff and some 250 m further west, only 200 m from the nearest Cape Vulture nest. This nest was placed well back on a small triangular ledge at the base of a fissure. The ledge was sparsely covered by tufty grass but was bare of shrubs and trees. A pale phase eagle was sitting on the nest, and during the observation period left the nest for only about two minutes to soar in the immediate vicinity. The area was not revisited until 12 November, when only one Booted Eagle was seen and the nests were no longer in use.

These observations indicate that the breeding season of Booted Eagles in Namibia probably commenced in June or earlier, at a time approximately intermediate

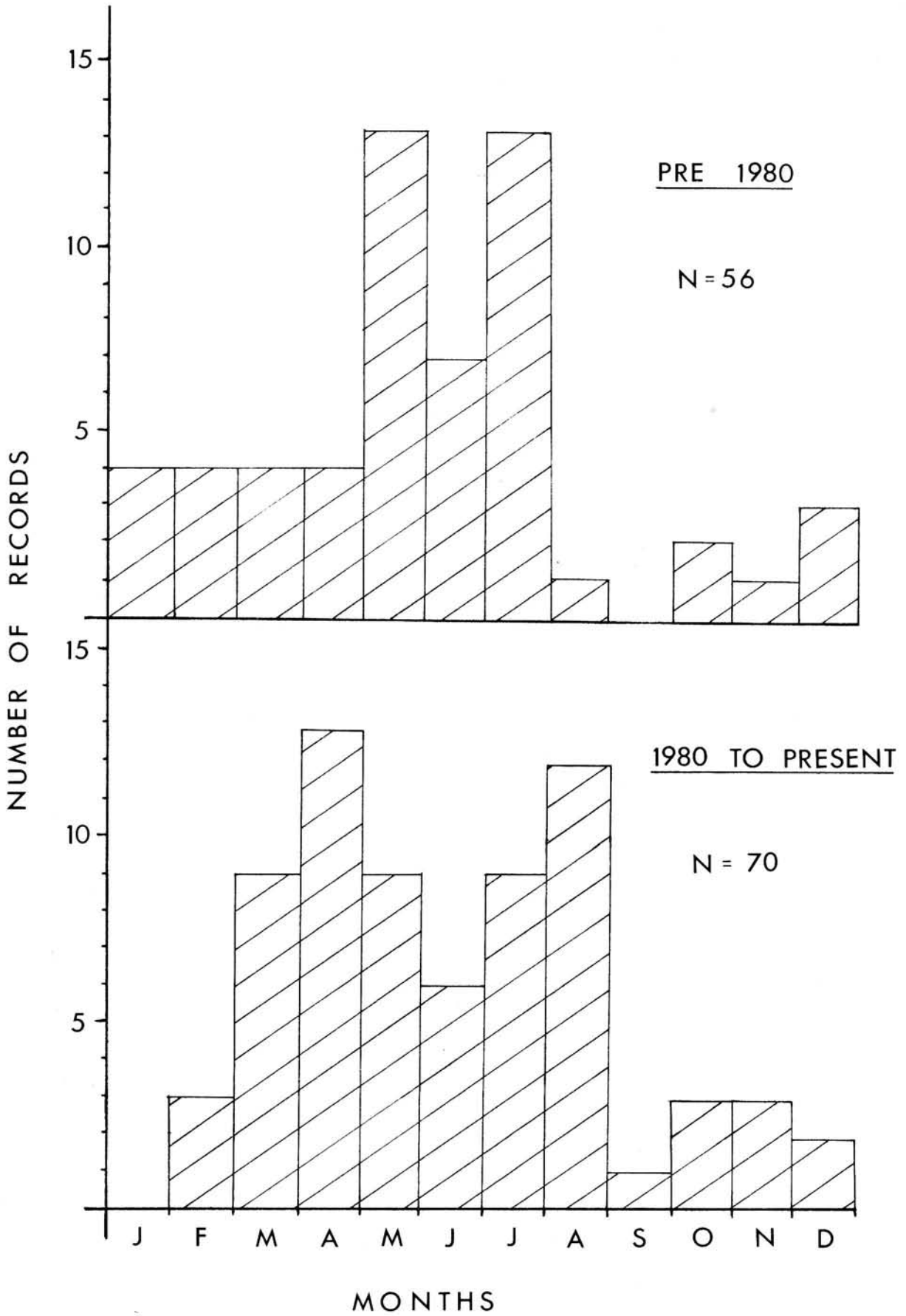


FIGURE 1: The monthly occurrence of Booted Eagles in Namibia prior to 1980, and from 1980 to December 1983.

between the breeding seasons of northern African and southern African populations (Brown *et al.* 1982). This is the dry season in southern Africa and the time when most large raptors tend to breed (Brown 1970), but the reason for the discrepancy between breeding times of the Booted Eagles in the Cape Province and Namibia is not clear. There are no other known breeding records for Booted Eagles in Namibia and it is subject to speculation whether they were previously overlooked (as suggested by Steyn (1982) for the population in the Cape Province) or whether an extension of breeding range has recently taken place.

The pre- and post- 1980 monthly occurrence of Booted Eagles in Namibia is shown in Figure 1, based on published records (Biggs *et al.* 1981, Davidson 1982), and records held by the Directorate of Nature Conservation in the form of atlas field cards and raptor road counts. It is apparent that an extension of the period when the eagles are present in Namibia has occurred. This may be due to the establishment of a breeding population (size unknown), or may be due to some other factor such as the drought in the subcontinent resulting in low reproductive success in the Cape population, with the birds consequently leaving their breeding range early and returning later, possibly due to food shortages.

The movements of the breeding population of Booted Eagles in Namibia outside the breeding season are as yet unknown. A pair was observed on the south-east side of Waterberg on 15 November (J. Komen pers. comm.), some 17 km from the nest site, but while these could have been locally breeding birds, the possibility that they could be Palearctic migrants cannot be ruled out.

An interesting addendum to the observations of Booted Eagles at Waterberg was supplied by A. Cilliers

(pers. comm.). On 14 July 1983 a Booted Eagle was observed feeding on a freshly killed Redbilled Francolin *Francolinus adspersus* in the Waterberg Plateau Park. This is the largest recorded prey item for the species in southern Africa, the previous largest being a Namaqua Sandgrouse *Pterocles namaqua* (Steyn 1982).

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