EARLY RECORD OF A YELLOWBILLED KITE IN WINDHOEK LEADS TO A HYPOTHESIS ON THEIR POPULATION AND MIGRATION PATTERNS

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On Sunday 30th August 1997, while walking dogs and casually looking at birds in the hills immediately behind Avis Dam, I saw an adult Yellow-billed Kite flying low and purposefully on a heading due south.

This record was some two months ahead of the first small rainshowers of the season and some four to five months ahead of the main annual influx of kites to the Windhoek area, which follows the main rains. I believe that this bird was migrating south to its breeding grounds in the southwestern Cape, South Africa, where breeding starts in September.

In Namibia, Yellowbilled Kites have been recorded breeding only in the Caprivi and Okavango regions, in very small numbers. Only six nest records exist for the country and I suggest that fewer than 100 pairs breed in Namibia each year. By contrast, tens of thousands of non-breeding Yellowbilled Kites enter the country each year, following the rain fronts and feeding on termites, other insects, small vertebrates and carrion. Even greater numbers of non-breeding Black Kites visit Namibia each year, often forming mixed flocks with the Yellowbilled Kites.

Despite these kites being amongst the most common raptors in Africa, their population dynamics and movement patterns are poorly known. Indeed, the migrant Yellowbilled Kite situation has received remarkably little attention and interest. John Mendelsohn, author of the kite texts in the recent *Atlas*

of Southern African Birds (1997) states of the Yellowbilled Kite "It is not known whether these nonbreeders are southern African bred birds that have yet to reach reproductive maturity, or whether they are migrants from populations breeding elsewhere in Africa."

I am of the opinion that they are mainly birds from elsewhere in Africa, for two reasons. First, the migrant population consists of not only immature but also a relatively large proportion of adult birds; and second, the migrant population is simply too large to be a non-breeding subset of the southern African population. On the eastern side of the subcontinent, the proportion of breeding to non-breeding Yellowbilled Kites is much higher than in the west. Yet even here, for exmple, in the Transvaal, Warwick Tarboton and David Allan reported that the non-breeding Yellowbilled Kite population was much larger than the small scattered breeding population (1984: *The status and conservation of birds of prey in the Transvaal*). In Namibia, the proportion of breeding to non-breeding Yellowbilled Kites would be in the ratio of about 1:500.

On a visit to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia some years ago I counted over 400 Yellowbilled Kites over the city, and found more than 40 nests, half a dozen within sight of Namibia's embassy. Large numbers of Yellowbilled Kites were also seen over Ougadougou, Bakino-Faso and Niamey, Niger in 1996. These birds and their offspring, and others like them from east, central and west Africa, could constitute the non-breeding populations entering southern Africa each year. And the smaller southern African breeding population might return the compliment, by following the rain fronts in the sahelian regions of west and east Africa.

The only evidence we have, apart from the appearance and disappearance of birds from and to the north each year, is a bird ringed in the Skeleton Coast Park by Steve Braine and recovered on its northern passage a few months later from an aircraft engine in Burundi. And this from the only Yellowbilled Kite ever ringed in Namibia!

In summary, I suggest that there are two main Yellowbilled Kite populations in Africa: (1) The larger population breeds north and east of the

Congo basin, from west to east Africa. After breeding, these birds migrate south to southern Africa, and constitute the bulk of our non-breeding Yellowbilled Kite population. These birds arrive some months after our breeding birds, but timing and dispersal (and thus numbers in a particular region) depend on rainfall patterns. They are nomadic and follow the rain fronts, being most common in the semi-arid and dry sub-humid regions of Namibia, Botswana, western Zimbabwe and the northern Transvaal. (2) The smaller population breeds in southern Africa, mainly in the northern and eastern regions. These birds arrive early, in August, and breed from September. After breeding, they migrate northwards, probably to the sahelian regions of west and east Africa, where they arrive probably some months after the breeding population. In their northern range they are probably nomadic and follow the rain fronts in semi-arid and dry sub-humid regions.

It now simply remains for us to gather the evidence to prove (or disprove) this hypothesis.

A RASH OF RARITIES: BIRDING AT IMPALILA ISLAND AND ALONG THE ZAMBEZI RIVER

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Impalila Island, the eastern most extention of the Caprivi Strip, is a small area (4 km x 10 km) of relatively high ground at the confluence of the Zambezi and Chobe Rivers. Bounded in the West by the Kasai Channel and in the North and South by the Zambezi and Chobe Rivers respectively, the island is basically formed on the western most extension of the basaltic rocks characteristic of the Victoria Falls area. The island comprises a mosaic of diverse habitats, ranging from open water and rapids, to