

NAMIBIA BIRD CLUB

a branch of the Scientific Society of Namibia
and the
Southern African Ornithological Society

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reedbed in the Maningimanzi area along the Zambezi River. The species has been reported on the Luanginga and Lungwebungu tributaries of the Zambezi River in Zambia (Benson *et al.* 1971).

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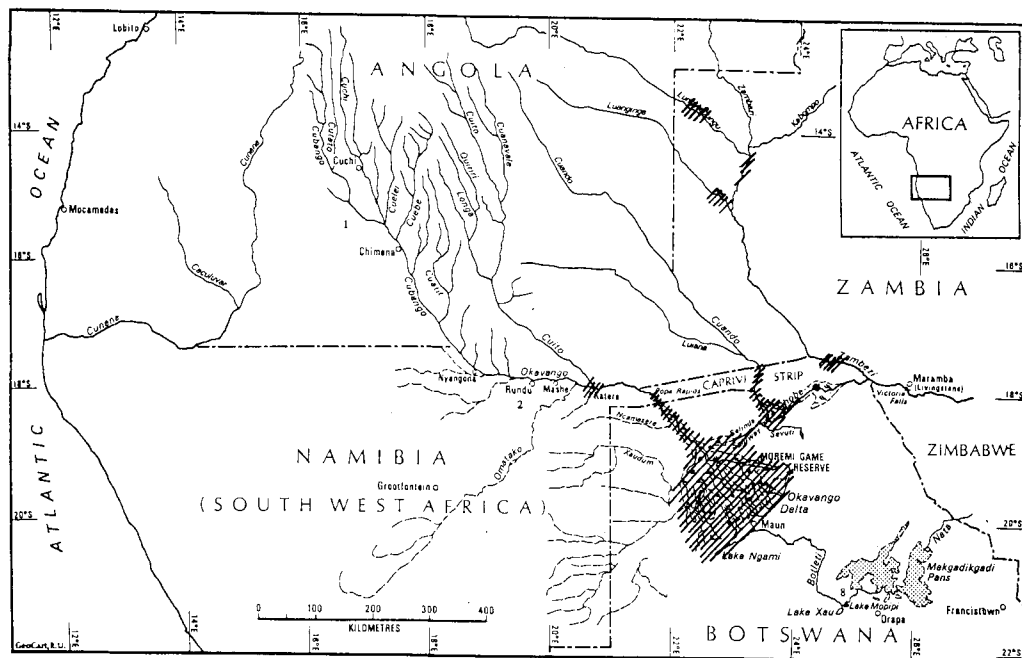


Figure 1: Hatched areas represent known distribution of Greater Swamp Warblers in southern Africa.

KELP GULL FEEDING CAPACITY

On December 6 1988 I inadvertently disturbed a colony of Crowned Cormorants *Phalacrocorax coronatus* on Seal Island, near Lüderitz. The adults took an usually long time before returning to their nests. While they were away an adult Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* flew down and walked along the cormorant breeding ledge feeding on nest contents. In the course of a few minutes the gull took and ate seven small chicks and two eggs. The chicks were all naked and so between newly hatched and six days old. The gull seized each chick by the head and then swallowed it whole.

This incident provides some insight into the capacity of adult Kelp Gulls for ingesting food. Crowned Cormorant eggs have an average weight of 24g, newly hatched chicks weigh 17g, and at five days average chick weight is 75g (Williams & Cooper 1983). Assuming that two of the chicks were about five days old and the remainder newly hatched then the total weight of eggs and chicks eaten by the adult gull was about 266g. Adult male Kelp Gulls of the southern African race *L. d. vetula* have an average weight of 1096g (Brooke & Cooper 1979). This gull therefore consumed about a quarter of its expected body weight in a matter of two or three minutes. At some stages of the breeding cycle the gull might have been feeding to provide for its chicks or to provide food for its mate during courtship feeding. This was unlikely in this case. A survey of the contents of 200 Kelp Gull nests on Seal Island revealed that most had full clutches and that incubation was almost complete with some chicks already hatched. Courtship feeding was almost certainly over at this stage and it was probably too early for the bird to have chicks to feed. We must assume then that this gull ate these eggs and chicks purely for its own sustenance.

The conservation message is to always do your best to avoid disturbing colonially breeding birds when known nest predators are in the vicinity. This is especially the case when the birds are at the most vulnerable stage of breeding. Eggs and small chicks provide easy-to-take prey for a wide variety of nest predators. The Crowned Cormorant with a global breeding population of fewer than 2,500 pairs (Crawford *et al.* 1982) is one of rarest of the world's 30 species of cormorants, although not considered endangered. The effect of this incident on the cormorants at Seal Island is not too serious in conservation terms as the adult birds survived to breed again. This incident will have put back their breeding by about two or three months. They will take some time before their hormones reactivate for courtship. The affected individuals will then join a displaying group

and begin a new breeding cycle. Courtship and mating probably requires two or three weeks and laying of the clutch and incubation a further month to bring them back to the chick hatching stage.

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- A.J. WILLIAMS, CPA Chief Directorate of Nature & Environmental Conservation, P.O. Box 94, Walvis Bay 9190, South Africa.

LESSER BLACKBACKED GULL AT ETOSHA

There are only two records of Lesser Blackbacked Gull Larus fuscus from Namibia according to the Popular Checklist of the Birds of South West Africa/Namibia by Dr A.J. Williams. Although there may have been additional records more recently, the bird is clearly a rare visitor to Namibia and the rest of southern Africa.

On 11 August 1989 we saw one at the western extremity of Fischer's Pan, near Namutoni in the Etosha National Park. The bird first was seen perched in shallow water in the pan and was examined through telescopes and binoculars. It then flew up and circled the pan, diving down occasionally to scavenge items in the water.

The gull appeared to be in second winter plumage, i.e. a transitional stage between juvenile and adult plumage. It differed from an immature Kelp Gull Larus dominicanus in its smaller, slimmer head and body, shorter, less deep bill, flesh-coloured legs, and longer wings extending well beyond the tail

when perched. In flight it had shallower wingbeats, relatively longer, narrower wings, and was more buoyant than a Kelp Gull. Indeed its flight was remarkably similar to that of the Caspian Tern Hydroprogne caspia. The full details of this record have been submitted to the relevant rarities committees.

D.G. Allan, W.K. Steele and C.R. Velasquez, FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7700, South Africa.

A "WHITE-BELLIED" MOUNTAIN CHAT

In May 1989, at the top of the Grootberg Pass (between Kamanjab and Palmwag Lodge, quarter-degree square 1914CC) I noticed a Mountain Chat Oenanthe monticola with unusual plumage. From the midbreast to the lower part of the belly was white, the remaining underparts (including the vent) black. This bird was accompanied by a female of normal plumage.

I find it very puzzling that this variation appears to be undescribed in the usual bird references (e.g., Maclean 1985; Roberts' birds of southern Africa) as I have found in my travels that this particular plumage is anything but unusual! I am a guide with Namib Wilderness Safaris and often travel on a route roughly from Etosha to the coast, via Naukluft to Windhoek. On the trip when I first saw this particular plumage morph, I subsequently saw two more birds of similar plumage at Naukluft Park (2416AB). On a more recent trip I found that four of seven males observed had the white belly.. They were seen in squares 2115 CC (Spitzkop), 2215 BA (south of Usakos), 2215 CB (Wustenquel) and 2013 BC (east of Torra Bay). Most of these birds were accompanied by females, and I have seen individuals with and without the distinctive silver 'cap' plumage on the head.

It would be useful if atlassers noted whether Mountain Chat males had the white belly or not, in order to establish the status and distribution of this ostensibly unusual plumage morph.

Gavin Thomson, P.O. Box 22541, Windhoek, Namibia.