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## Editorial

Timothy O. Osborne

This edition has been edited 16,000 km from Namibia while I was in Alaska visiting our daughters and granddaughters. When we arrived in early March it was  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the only birds I saw were hardy winter birds like ravens, redpolls and ptarmigan. Now it is Easter and the sun is shining, the snow is melting fast in the  $10^{\circ}\text{C}$  weather and Trumpeter swans, Canada geese and mallards are arriving into the snow-melt ponds. I have been out of touch with the Bird Club but I note that still our membership has not increased with the new year. Again I have to appeal for everyone to give out membership forms to people you know who are not members. How many of you have done this? The Club is slowly withering on the vine and it is frustrating for those of us who live somewhere other than Windhoek. We do not know what is going on with the Club. Are we perishing as a Club or not, that is the question? Certainly birding is growing worldwide and I would hate to think that we are not part of that trend.

At least I am still receiving articles for *Lanioturdus*, which means that there are still interested Bird Club members who want to communicate with their fellow members. As the article on Herero Chats shows us there is still plenty to be learned about our local birds. We have another chapter in the Paxton boat saga. He is still looking for volunteers (victims) to assist him as he tries to count birds on the various waterways of the north. One place he has not counted yet is the Orange River. Perhaps it is too tame without his usual challenges of crocs, hippos, bilharzia and UNITA soldiers.

## OBSERVATIONS FROM PETER CUNNINGHAM

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1. On 16 October 2002, I witnessed along with Willie Adank, a Fish Eagle – *Haliaeetus vocifer* – attacking a Goliath Heron – *Ardea goliath* – in the Mahango Game Reserve along the Okavango River. The eagle attacked the heron on 3 occasions forcing the heron into the water. This was accompanied with raucous screeches from the heron. The attacks did not do any obvious serious damage to the heron and the latter was able to emerge safely from this incident. It was unclear what caused the eagle to attack the heron. [Editor's note: when fish eagles are breeding they feed their young a variety of warm-blooded prey like ducks, herons and egrets].
2. At a local tea garden (Jenny's Place) in Windhoek I witnessed House Sparrows – *Passer domesticus* – feeding on sugar from sachets after breaking them open. A male House Sparrow was observed pecking and worrying sugar sachets until broken and then joined by a number of females to enjoy the sugar. This just goes to show that even the common sparrows can become problem individuals once a food source has been identified.
3. I recently (last week of October 2002) saw 2 Blue Waxbill – *Uraeginthus angolensis* – in my garden before 07h00 and after Windhoek had received a light shower overnight. This is the second time (*Lanioturdus* 35(2): 24) that I have seen this species in Windhoek. Previously I suggested that they have migrated westwards from their normal distribution further eastwards after the above average rainfall the west has experienced over the last few years or are a source of escapees. The question now is: are they found throughout the year in the Windhoek area? [Proofreader's note: Certainly in my Windhoek garden they are.]
4. On 3 December 2002, a melee of birds were observed by myself along with Willie Adank and Dave Joubert, in a feeding frenzy on the Polytechnic of

Namibia's grounds after termites made their appearance during the late afternoon. Birds observed feeding on the termites were Little Swift, White-rumped Swift, House Sparrow, Whitebacked Mousebird and Feral Pigeon. The most interesting observation was that of the Whitebacked Mousebird as Maclean (1985) indicates the diet for the species as: "fruit, flowers, leaves, nectar and seedlings". The Speckled Mousebird (Distribution: eastern parts of Southern Africa) has however previously been documented as feeding occasionally on insects (mainly termites), although this dietary observation may be new for the Whitebacked Mousebird. (Maclean, G.L. 1985. *Robert's' Birds of Southern Africa*. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town, RSA.)

5. Whitebacked Mousebird were also observed feeding on the alien invasive *Alternanthera pungens* (Khakiweed or Paperthorn) that often grows between paving in built-up areas throughout Southern Africa. The paperthorn originates from South America and is thought to have been introduced by horse fodder brought in for the British troops (Khakies) during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). I observed Whitebacked Mousebirds feeding on the leaves and seeds of this plant on a number of occasions during the latter part of 2002. The question now arises: To what extent are birds which feed on these alien species responsible for their distribution throughout Namibia?

## CHOBE RIVER COUNT

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During January I enquired after the water-level of the Chobe River system from our good friend Katie Sharpe. Being resident in Katima Mulilo and a regular weekly traveller to Zimbabwe over the Chobe River at Ngoma Border Post, I assumed that she would have concise and accurate information. Katie is also a keen birder and has assisted with several birding excursions in the past, notably

on the Chobe River. I had complete confidence in her observation skills and the accuracy of the information she gave me regarding the level of the Chobe River and a proposed count. She was quite adamant that the river was too low to allow boating and we therefore planned to carry out our count by vehicle and on foot. This was not the preferred option but the local expert's advice seemed to indicate that this was the only option available to us.

Linda Sheehan and I therefore made some extravagant preparations to move the show from Shamvura to Chobe and start the arduous business of a foot/vehicle count of the usual stretch of the Chobe River. A "short" stop at the Sharpe's Fish Farm at Katima was obviously required and we spent a few "short" days here working ourselves up to what was obviously going to be a slog of a count. Being resilient and dedicated birders we were not prepared to let any possibility of hardships like walking stand in our way and were quite cheerful about the prospect when talking to all the potential "helpers" at the Fish Farm. To our complete astonishment everybody seemed to have pressing work commitments preventing each of them from joining us, and we were left on our own. Determined not to be thwarted, we went to the Chobe River to our usual campsite with our minds set. On arrival we were quite surprised to find the Chobe River water level quite comfortably high and easily navigable by boat. The birdlife along the river banks was prolific and clearly indicated that a count along the river was required to cover the numbers with any degree of accuracy. We therefore returned to the Fish Farm to confer with the "local expert" – Katie.

We then spent some time there deciding whether to return later with a boat and carry out a proper count. The time however meant that we'd have to come back in early February. We contacted our ultimate leader (Rob Simmons) who graciously allowed that under the circumstances we should return and cover this area even though it would be during February. Naturally our local expert was given a fair amount of blame which she accepted with her customary grace. She even accepted the term "blond" cropping up somewhat repeatedly without any form of aggression and Linda and I returned to Shamvura without any blood being shed.....yet!

Suitably kitted out with a boat and the usual camping apparel we returned on 7 February to the Fish Farm in the belief that we were finally ready to start the

count in earnest. A typical overly social evening with the IRDNC crowd and other Katima residents revealed the fact that there were suddenly quite a few willing volunteers to help with the count now that the prospect of several boat trips were involved. The prospect of relaxing on deck sipping G + T's to the gentle lapping of the waves on the side of the boat as we meandered along the Chobe River seemed quite appealing to most of the party.

The following day Linda, Sukela and I prepared to leave and set up camp along the Chobe River. Carol Murphy would be accompanying us. However.....my day did not quite start off well! I lost my teeth! Now to most "old people" this is a catastrophe because it includes a full set of false teeth, the lack of which makes the mouth fold in on itself and cause funny speech. My situation was mildly different, as my set comprised of two front teeth which temporarily filled a gap to be closed by permanent caps on the next visit to the dentist. Nevertheless, the loss was no less catastrophic because it seriously marred my normally captivating smile and gave me an alarming lisp. It also destroyed my self-confidence. The prospect of facing a day of negotiating the forthcoming count with obstructionist border custom officials, police and the BDF, while whistling through a cavernous gap in my teeth, was daunting. I was also bravely trying to find some semblance of humour in a throbbing hangover and my mysteriously missing teeth almost turned me suicidal. The worst thing was not knowing how they got out of my mouth in the first place! The plate was designed as a permanent fixture and not to be removed regularly. I had constant visions of a wineglass somewhere in the house with my teeth clenched to the rim. I eventually had the whole Sharpe household retracing my steps of the night before in search of the "missing mincers" and, needless to say, they were not very diplomatic about the affair. They were eventually found under the bed and to this day I have absolutely no recollection or explanation of how on earth they could have got there. Quite relieved and armed with a complete smile I loaded up and we progressed to the next stage of our count excursion – the campsite.

We set up at our usual campsite after some exploratory routes trying to find the spot. We then put the boat in the water and, true to form, spent the rest of the day dismantling the engine, which had decided to add its bit to our mishaps. It then started raining and we decided to leave the boat engine until morning. Camping could have been quite a wet and dismal affair had it not been for a medicinal

bottle of whiskey, which happened to find its way into the food box. Carol's little "Drakensburg Special" tent was not quite equipped for torrential rain and my bedroll was completely unsuitable for the weather the "Old Man" was sending us, so we all ended up stuffed into Linda's two-man tent for the night.

The following morning we surfaced to find the rain had left us a soggy semblance of a camp but we bravely found some reason to be cheerful. The boat engine seemed to also be in a positive frame of mind and presented us with no further problems. We loaded ourselves up with the wherewithal for a bird count and, after clearing the boat of the previous night's torrential gift from heaven, we headed out to count the mighty Chobe River. We'd arranged for the remainder of the forces to join us later on that day, so the idea was a basic reconnaissance trip with the more serious counting when the cavalry arrived. The Chobe in fact proved a lot easier to count than expected with no real large groups of waterbirds as in previous years. We therefore took it in our stride between the three of us, with Sukela as lookout/Maidenhead. We completed the North-eastern Section of the count with relative ease. Some hippos near the end gave Carol some moments of anguish and she had very little confidence in the skipper's self-preservation skills.

We headed back to camp keeping the little aluminium flat-bottom boat on the plane by going at speed wherever possible on the relatively shallow river. I was intent on spotting new birds to add to the diversity and we therefore explored some inlets off the mainstream we'd purposely left out on the earlier trip. Carol, who was new at all this, was just starting to settle down to the trip and we were all starting to enjoy ourselves. I was also getting over my earlier encounter with the Tooth Fairy and the humour was beginning to outweigh the embarrassment. While in such good spirits we planed along the river when I noticed an inlet and decided to do a quick turn into it. The turn proved to be a bit wide and I found us heading towards a small mound of floating vegetation at the entrance of the inlet. It was too late to alter course and we hit the mound on one edge, then carried on over it to the water on the other side. All very okay, or so it should have been! Linda was sitting on the bow of the boat at the time of impact and she abruptly disembarked, helped along by the collision impact. She fell into

the water on the other side of the mound and the boat fell on top of her, with the motor going at full tilt. Of course, none of this was known to all the rest of us who managed to hold our seats until the boat landed on the water at the far side of the mound. I then looked behind, my first thoughts being on the state of the motor which was howling at full speed, not realising I'd lost a passenger.

To my complete astonishment Linda popped up just behind the engine spluttering and gasping. She was spitting our large mouthfuls of "Chobe slush" made up of years of fermented vegetation, which accumulates in a shallow, slow-flowing watercourse like the Chobe. Linda is not a voluntary swimmer and I couldn't help a fleeting thought of why she had chosen this place and this river for a dip. I immediately calmed the engine and asked Linda if she was okay. She was not happy standing waist-deep in crocodile-infested, sludgy-brown water, and although she was okay she was obviously not just taking a dip in the heat of the day. She seemed more distressed at losing her glasses and I jumped in to help her on to the boat; after a quick inspection told me that her glasses were gone for good in the metre deep sludge. I helped Linda on to the boat, not at all concerned with sharing this inky, murky water with the crocodiles. As I lifted her legs over the side of the boat I realized the true extent of the damage. The propeller of the engine had sliced her thigh several times across the muscle and her calf several times along its length from the knee to the ankle. The cuts were excessively deep and I had to physically hold the tattered muscles together as I lifted her on to the boat. Carol, who helped me, turned a transparent shade of white and her eyes grew unusually large. I thought momentarily that I might have two casualties. Fortunately, Linda didn't have her glasses and I was easily able to convince her that she had only a few scratches.

Carol gave me her shirt off her back (so to speak) and we wrapped up Linda's leg to secure the muscles and I made her lie down breathing deeply to reduce the shock that would set in. We didn't waste time with birds from then on: to camp! At camp we transferred Linda to the back of my Land Cruiser and Carol stayed behind to look after camp. The rest of the crowd was on their way so she wouldn't be on her own too long. I then wasted very little time with the arduous 3-hour journey back to the main road and to Katima Hospital. We met Dick Sharpe *en*

route and he came with us to the hospital, where we admitted Linda under the supervision of the Doctor in Charge (Dr. Martina Phoenief). I had some opening disagreements with the hospital staff regarding the disinfecting of the extensive wounds, and I was later proved absolutely correct. Dr. Phoenief attended to her wounds and assured us that a follow-up visit the following day was required. We returned Linda to the Fish Farm under the expert care of Helen Priest and then went out again to the Chobe River campsite to resume our interrupted count assured that Linda was okay. All the forces were gathered there and naturally we had to have a social gathering around the fire to recount the tensions of the day. Carol seemed to have survived the ordeal as well, and by the following day everybody had regained their confidence in the skipper and accepted their seats in the boat.

We attempted the remainder of the river section to the South-west of the camp but could only progress a short distance before sandbanks and vegetation on the mainstream made navigation more of a hassle than it was worth. We did, however, add a few more species to the list, as these shallower areas were more suitable habitat for the smaller waders. We found a large crocodile which had taken down a full-grown ox a short distance from the campsite and quite close to Linda's accident scene. This gave us some further sobering thoughts as to what could have happened had Linda disembarked near this monster.

Yellow-billed Egrets seemed to make up the larger portion of the Egrets and herons. Openbilled Storks were well dispersed in with single birds or small groups of up to 20 birds along the riverbanks. Egyptian Goose seemed to concentrate in areas and Knob-billed ducks were seen in groups of up to 50 birds. Almost all the Water Dikkops seen were in a single group of 21 birds.

Most of the birds were well dispersed along the river course giving high diversity but relatively low numbers. There were no separate pools along the river course and everything was thus confined to the main river.

After our mopping up day on the river, we all went our separate ways and concluded the count on a high and somewhat relieved note. On our return to the Fish Farm we found Linda's leg in an awful state even after her second visit to

the doctor. We decided to get her flown to Windhoek the following morning, where she received some proper medical care by Dr. Weimann. He has seen me through numerous mishaps over the years, including three snakebites. He quite clearly was appalled at the state of Linda's leg and the level of care given by Dr. Phoenief from Katima State Hospital. After some really drastic measures and severe surgery Linda retained her leg with some truly impressive scars. Sadly, however, Linda will have to re-think her modelling career. In remembrance of Linda's ordeal we have subsequently named the aluminium boat the "Silver Slicer".

Table 1. Species recorded during Chobe River count, 9 February 2002. Total of 42 species and 1224 birds.

Species	No.	Species	No.
58 Reed Cormorant	29	116 Spur-winged Goose	24
60 African Darter	4	148 African Fish Eagle	3
62 Grey Heron	5	164 European Marsh Harrier	2
65 Purple Heron	1	167 Pallid Harrier	1
66 Great White Egret	44	223 Purple Gallinule	1
67 Little Egret	5	227 Lesser Moorhen	1
68 Yellow-billed Egret	250	240 African Jacana	34
69 Black Egret	3	245 Ringed Plover	1
71 Cattle Egret	30	249 Three-banded Plover	1
72 Squacco Heron	60	258 Blacksmith Plover	66
74 Green-backed Heron	5	260 Wattled Plover	4
75 Rufous-bellied Heron	1	264 Common Sandpiper	7
81 Hammerkop	1	266 Wood Sandpiper	12
87 African Openbill Stork	132	270 Greenshank	2
89 Marabou Stork	5	274 Little Stint	2
91 Sacred Ibis	2	284 Ruff	76
93 Glossy Ibis	1	298 Water Dikkop	26
102 Egyptian Goose	47	338 Whiskered Tern	120
107 Hottentot Teal	6	395 Marsh Owl	1
108 Red-billed Teal	17	428 Pied Kingfisher	31
115 Knob-billed Duck	160	431 Malachite Kingfisher	1