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Editorial

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Bird distributions are on the move with ranges both expanding and contracting. I have noticed in the short time that I have been editing this journal that there have been a number of sightings of various species in areas where they have not previously been recorded. Some examples of this are blue waxbill and African harrier-hawk sighted at the Spitzkoppe, great spotted cuckoo east of Lüderitz (although I suspect that this one might be a case of reverse migration), lesser jacana and rufous bellied heron at Farm Tsutsab etc. I was recently browsing through old issues of *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe*, the predecessor of *Lanioturdus*, and came across an article by S. M. Seftel wherein the writer was commenting on the disappearance of fiscal shrikes and southern white crowned shrikes from the Avis Dam area back in the 1974. I have also heard Dieter Ludwig comment that chat flycatchers and capped wheatears are no longer to be seen in the Windhoek area and that ant-eating chats have also disappeared from the Avis Dam area. I have myself noticed that white-tailed shrikes, which were regular visitors to my Klein Windhoek garden in the late 1980's, are now very seldom seen there while until about three years ago I had never seen a southern red bishop in my garden and now they come in droves. A new species moving into an area is probably far more noticeable than the gradual disappearance of an established species. While the Atlas of Southern African Birds and Roberts VII still contain the most accurate information available on species distributions in Namibia it must be remembered that data collection for the Atlas ceased some 16 years ago in 1993 and that there have been changes in the relatively short period since then although it must also be remembered that coverage for each individual species was not 100 %. Seven of the last ten rainy seasons have brought above average rainfall (at least to central Namibia) so changed climatic conditions may well be a factor in the extended ranges while disturbance and changes in habitat probably play a role in the contracting ranges and disappearance of species from some areas. Please continue sending in your observations of species new to an area or unusual in an area and also of species that may have disappeared. You never know – maybe someone who reads this journal in 35 years time will say “Oh wow – species X was already present in that area way back in 2009.”

Bar-tailed Godwits. Whilst scanning the waders I picked up a colour-ringed Sanderling. At that very moment somebody walked up to me and said "Are you....." "Hold on a minute", I said, "I'm looking at a colour-ringed Sanderling". As quick as a flash he had his scope out and said, "That bird was ringed in Greenland!"

After this excitement it turned out that this was one of the researchers I was to meet. Astonishingly, it later transpired that this researcher, Bernard Spaans, was the very person who had seen this bird in Griend. It was again seen at Walvis Bay on a few subsequent days and was last seen by myself on 17.2.2009.

Imagine my surprise when I received an e-mail including a photo of this same bird taken on 17.7.2009. This bird had been seen again on southerly migration. However, this time it was at the Sillon de Talbert reserve in France.

Knowing that most waders are very site specific I decided to mount a search for the bird back at Walvis Bay. Bingo! On 23.9.2009 Johan Lotter and I spotted a Sanderling which was colour-ringed. Although it was carrying a green flag, (a ring with a small tab making it more visible) which placed it as having been ringed in Greenland, we were not able, due to distance, to get a full reading of the colour combinations. However, I was sure this was it.

On 9.10.2009 John Paterson joined Faansie and Ronel Peacock and myself for a bit of birding. We stopped off at the Sanderling's hang-out and within a couple of minutes John picked up the bird and read out the magic colour-combination. This was verified by the rest of the party. What a great sighting.

So ... if you're at the last parking area before Lover's Hill on the lagoon please keep a special look-out and let me know if you've seen (and preferably photographed) our intrepid traveller again.



*"The" Sanderling in Brittany
Photo: Gert-Jan Cromwijk*

Chronicles of a bird-ringing and botanical tourism trip to Namibia in May/June 2009.

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(Imagine this being compiled accompanied by the distant sound of the waves from the warm Indian Ocean, the gentle breeze in the wild banana trees and the call of a Purple-crested Turaco).

When I retired from my working career at the end of August 2008, I had the firm intention of pursuing my hobby of bird ringing more actively. My wife, Kate, co-ordinated her retirement with mine and had the intention of devoting more time to her interests in botany and botanical art. Towards these ends we decided to participate in the ringing workshop held by SAFRING at Wakkerstroom in Mpumalanga in South Africa in December 2008.

At that workshop, we met Neil Thomson and Gudrun Middendorff from Windhoek and we were able to enjoy with them their pleasure in being exposed to species new to them. Meeting them awakened an interest which had long been in my mind, in visiting Namibia to see more of the country than had previously been possible during fleeting work-related visits to Windhoek that both of us had made in the past. And what better way to justify the trip than to add a ringing element to the visit.

Neil and Gudrun provided fantastic support for this idea with a range of suggestions. However the proposal that won the day was that of first participating in the Namibian ringers' get-together scheduled for May at Farm Wiese near Rehoboth before travelling further to see more of the country. This idea had the advantage of giving us the opportunity of meeting ringers from other parts of Namibia, which would optimise opportunities for ringing along the route. We decided that we would focus our attention during this trip on the southern half of Namibia only.

During the planning process we managed to sell our house in Pretoria and this precipitated our intended move to our "retirement home" in Munster on the far KwaZulu-Natal south coast. Unfortunately this had the unintended consequence of increasing the travel distance for the Namibian trip as we now had to travel westward below Lesotho before heading northwards to the Namibian border. However, we decided to use this as the opportunity to see more of South Africa as well, with overnight stops at Dordrecht and Upington in SA and Grünau in Namibia before the final leg to Wiese.

The overnight stop at "The White House" near Grünau provided us with the first detailed exposure to Namibian flora and fauna as we arrived early enough to walk around and explore. It was good to get a feel for the local flora; we could recognise some of the families present but did not know the species – that would have to wait until we managed to find suitable reference books in Windhoek.

At that stage it was already becoming clear that the distances between population centres are much greater than in SA; this and the lower population density result in – for us – surprisingly (and gratifyingly) little traffic on the roads.

Ringling at Farm Wiese

We arrived at Wiese in mid-afternoon to find most of the Namibian ringers busy ringing, so after a brief flurry of introductions and quickly unpacking, I put up a couple of nets. It was not long before I had ringed my first two lifers for the trip – a Shaft-tailed Whydah and a Red-headed Finch. Of course these are relatively common in the western part of southern Africa, but I am sure my pleasure at ringing these matched what I had seen Neil experiencing with some of his birds at Wakkerstroom. I managed to ring 11 birds on what remained of the afternoon, with no further specials. Then it was time to socialise before dinner and a chance to get to know my Namibian counterparts and their families. It did not take long to sort the extroverts from the introverts with perhaps more of the former than the latter.

After the well-catered dinner and a series of announcements about the proceedings during the following days there was a move to a vehicle for an evening drive and attempts at catching birds with a hand net, suitably fortified with liquid rocket fuel to ward off the cold. It was not long before Dirk Heinrich was demonstrating his expertise, but interestingly, while Dirk was busy processing his bird, Werner Bader would wander off with light and net and would soon return with another candidate for ringing. We saw an interesting selection of larks and a Buttonquail amongst the birds caught.

The next morning nets were opened and a busy morning followed. It did not take long before further lifers cropped up – a Yellow Canary and a Chestnut Weaver closely followed by a Lark-like Bunting. Although the last species is commonly ringed in Namibia, it is only rarely encountered as a vagrant in the eastern side of Southern Africa. I was then lucky enough to ring my 4th lifer for the day with a beautiful female Pririt Batis. That evening after dinner Werner, Dirk and some other stalwarts set off again to try more hand netting with apparently a similar level of success to the previous evening apart from the fact that they managed to get themselves lost for a while.

The next morning, having prepared for this the previous afternoon, there was a group effort to ring as many Sociable Weavers as possible, at three nest sites, starting on this occasion at the 'red nest'. This was part of a project started by Dirk to assess what degree of nest site interchange was being experienced between three nests in fairly close proximity. Each nest's birds were previously ringed and colour-ringed with red (the biggest nest), blue or white. There were several controls of previously ringed birds, some of which had red rings as well. Not all the historical data were available so it was not possible to determine if any interchange had occurred by the controlled birds without colour rings, but no other colour rings were seen. This was the third occasion these nests were being netted, but on the first occasion only metal rings were used. I ringed 26 Sociable Weavers on this occasion as well as a Red-headed Finch with an identity crisis. The Sociable Weavers were all ringed with metal and colour rings supplied for the project by Dirk.

Then it was back to the Wiese house to continue with "normal" ringing. I was now being ably assisted by trainee ringers Maren Thomson and Gudrun. That evening we went out again, and this time I was determined to try my

hand at what seemed so easy when Dirk or Werner did the hand netting. I did manage to get a Kurrichane Buttonquail (another lifer) but that was about the only success for the night unless you count the five Red-billed Queleas which Dirk picked like ripe fruit from a thorn bush (do you get other kinds of bushes without thorns in Namibia?). Kate, in the meantime had been spending time familiarising herself with the plants on Wiese and had done some drawing and painting of interesting specimens, despite being hampered by a lack of suitable reference books.

The next morning was the turn of the blue and white Sociable Weaver nests. In the case of the blue nest which I was at, we found no controls, although some were found at the white nest. More conventional ringing followed at the house for the rest of the day up to the point when Werner took us out for a game drive and to show us other aspects of his farm, including a red dune. Around the campfire some of the extroverts were really coming out of their shells, egged on by an appreciative audience; much of the banter was carried out in what I believe has become termed Germafrickenglish. And then off for the customary night hunt – on this occasion I was the beneficiary of birds like Spotted Thickknee, Kurrichane Buttonquail and Sabota Lark donated by Dirk.

On the last morning at Wiese there was further ringing while generally things were being packed away. Thanks must go to Ursula Bader for the entire organisation, to the family Bader for hosting and supporting the event and to the caterers who kept the mob well fed. This was a really excellent event which made us many new Namibian friends.

Ringling in and around Windhoek

Neil had kindly agreed to host us in Windhoek and the next few days were spent learning more of the cultural history of the country as well as giving us a better exposure to the botany of the area. We visited the Botanical Gardens and managed to stock up substantially with botanical reference books covering the areas we were to visit. I also took the opportunity to use Neil's walk-in trap to do further ringing, and Gudrun arranged for us to visit Farm Frauenstein where we set up nets near Schumannndam, the site of the first Namibian ringing activities many years ago – there we caught a fair number of birds, but no new lifers for me. Thanks to Neil, Maren and Gudrun for their hospitality and guidance on what to visit in the Windhoek area.

Swakopmund

After a few days of exploring the surroundings to Windhoek (and adding a birding lifer – White-tailed Shrike) we set off along the C28 to Swakopmund. This gave us the chance to see some of the desert-adapted plants like Cyclothemmas and Commiphoras, and the very special Welwitchias on the flats close to Swakopmund.

Once we had settled in our accommodation near the beach, we contacted Mark Boorman and it was not long before we found ourselves driving through the salt works and Mark was pointing out Chestnut-banded Plovers – an-

other birding lifer. But this was not enough as a short while later we saw a Chestnut-banded Plover chick and Mark was out with his hand net and presented the chick to me for a ringing lifer as well! A little later he wisely handed over the hand net to me and I set off staggering over deep (and smelly) mud to catch my first White-fronted Plover chick. This trip was cut short by a recurrence of the mechanical problem with the vehicle that had delayed Mark's participation at Wiese, but after a visit to the mechanic a temporary solution was found to the problem and Mark arranged to pick me and Marc Dürr up for a shot at catching terns that evening despite the probability being low as most of the terns would have moved northwards.

I was interested to see the process of putting up nets and loudspeakers, but to my intense embarrassment, I realised I had left my rings back in Swakopmund, necessitating a return trip to fetch them. However, it was just as well that we went to collect the rings as we did manage to catch three terns; one Common Tern and two Sandwich Terns. Up until the stage where we caught the second Sandwich Tern, Mark Boorman's reputation was up in flashing neon lights as he had delivered for me four lifers in four birds. Four lifers in five is still no mean performance – the fact that the evening included the best hot chocolate in the salt works was the cherry on top!!

The final bit of assistance Mark Boorman gave me was to donate some meal worms; I had brought some flap-traps but my worms were sitting patiently on my workbench back in the "republic" – more of how I put these to use later. So a big thank you to Mark and Sandra for helping make our visit to Swakopmund a memorable one.

Barchan Dune Retreat

We then travelled via Walvis Bay and the Kuiseb and Gaub passes to Solitaire where I enjoyed some of their famous Apfelstrudel. We had booked to stay two nights at Barchan Dunes Retreat, and once we saw the place decided we would rather spend time exploring the farm than fight the other tourists for space at Sossusvlei. This gave me an opportunity to do some further ringing and we also had the chance to climb into the hills surrounding the retreat and do some botanising. We saw our first *Moringa ovalifolia* trees up close as well as the two common kannedood species, *Commiphora glaucescens* and *Commiphora glandulosa*, but the walk emphasised the fact that Namibian grass seeds have a very mean streak despite being very photogenic!!

Mark's mealworms came into use here and it was not long before I had my next lifer – a Mountain Wheatear. Mark's worms also produced another Mountain Wheatear and a Bokmakierie. With one net up near a small pond it did not take me long to find out why the ringers at Wiese were happy to pass on Larklike Buntings to me and I ended up releasing some so I could keep up.

Lüderitz

We elected to travel to our next stop at Lüderitz via the C14 through Maltahöhe and Helmeringhausen and then on

the C13 to Aus where it was a relief to get back onto a tar surface. After seeing the "wild horses" we were amazed to see how we had to travel nearly 70 km across a plain to reach the distant mountains we saw after descending from Aus. The stark surroundings to Lüderitz were a little daunting but we did not have much time to explore as it was already getting dark when we reached our accommodation in Lüderitz, the very comfortable Haus Sandrose.

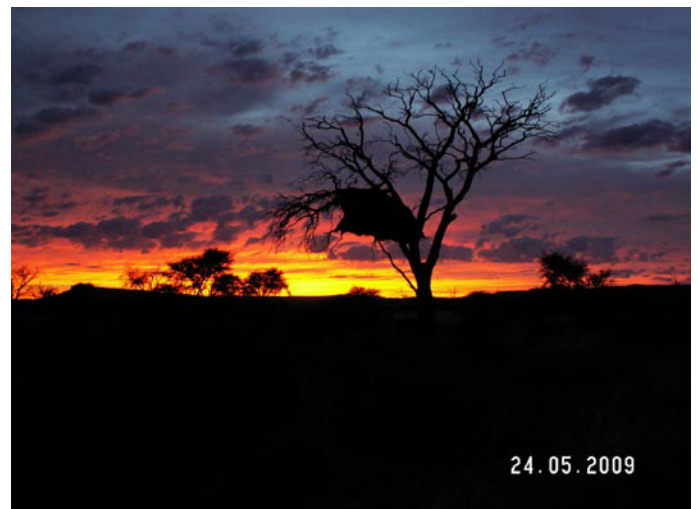
However, the next morning, armed with some suggestions and a map of the area, we set off to explore the peninsula. It did not take us long to realise how many specialised succulent plants were secreted on the apparently barren rocks and we spent some time searching out and photographing plants we had before only seen in books.

Crossing one of the tidal flats on this trip, we were approached by a very inquisitive Tractrac Chat and Mark's mealworms were put to use again producing a further lifer for me.

The return trip

After getting advice from the information office in Aus, we decided to return via Rosh Pinah using the C13 through the Richtersveld along the Orange River. Once again we were awed by the stark mountains flanking the river. After passing through the gate at Noordoewer our stay in Namibia had unfortunately come to an end – for this occasion at least. The next ringers' get-together sounds very tempting.

We had a great time during our visit. We met great people, the scenery and clear skies are amazing, the botany is so different to what we are familiar with and the birds were fantastic. Excluding the 42 Sociable Weavers I ringed on Dirk Heinrich's rings, I ringed 284 birds from 44 species as well as four controls. 14 of these species were new to me. Thanks to all of you who helped to make this trip a success – we hope to see you again whether this be through us coming back to Namibia in the future or if some of you would like to try for some more tropical species in SA, we would love to see you here.



The "blue" nest at sunrise
Photo: Graham Grieve