

Notes on the Damara Rockjumper, *Achaetops pycnopygius*

by
C.F. Clinning
Division of Nature Conservation and Tourism,
South West Africa Administration.
and
W. R. Tarboton
Witwatersrand Bird Club

I. INTRODUCTION

Comparatively little is known of the general biology of this bird. It is restricted in range to the central plateau of South Western Africa, from about Windhoek northwards to Southern Angola. In the east it extends as far as the borders of the Kalahari and in the west to the escarpment base but not into the Namib desert.

II. TAXONOMIC HISTORY

The Damara Rockjumper was originally described in 1852, by Strickland and Scater, under the name *Sphenoeacus pycnopygius*, indicating that they regarded it as a relative of the Grassbird, *Sphenoeacus afer*. Subsequent to this original classification, the bird has been variously placed by different authors. Hoesch and Niethammer (1940) assigned it to the genus *Chaetops*, containing the true Rockjumpers. Roberts (1940) placed it in a genus named by him *Achaetops*, in the family Timaliidae, containing at that time the babblers and true rockjumpers. Delacour (1946) in a review of the Timaliidae states simply that *Achaetops* belongs in the family Sylviidae. McLachlan and Liversidge (1970) in their second revision of "Roberts Birds of South Africa" make no change from the original. White (1962) fuses *Achaetops*, *Melocichla* and *Sphenoeacus* into the genus *Sphenoeacus*, fam. Sylviidae. MacWorth-Praed and Grant (1963) place the bird in the family Sylviidae, near to *Melocichla*, but retain the generic name *Achaetops*.

The South African Ornithological Society List Committee (Second Report 1958) remove the genera *Pinarornis*, *Chaetops* and *Achaetops* from the family Timaliidae and place them in the family Turdidae. In a subsequent Report (No. 8, 1964) this same committee remove *Achaetops* to the Sylviidae. In the recent S.A.O.S. Check List (1969) no change is made and *Achaetops* is assigned a position in the Sylviidae between *Sphenoeacus* and *Melocichla*.

While neither of us are taxonomists, we have some evidence, particularly of the breeding biology of *Achaetops*, that indicates its affinities with *Sphenoeacus*.

III. HABITAT

In the Windhoek area the species frequents the rocky slopes of hillsides, particularly the lower slopes bordering dry watercourses. In this respect it resembles *Sphenoeacus*, which inhabits similar areas in the moister eastern parts of Southern Africa.

IV. BEHAVIOUR

Both McLachlan and Liversidge (1957) and MacWorth-Praed and Grant (1963) mention that the bird is shy. This is to a certain extent true, although the nature of the habitat and the bird's cry-

CONTENTS

I. Introduction	57
II. Taxonomic history	57
III. Habitat	57
IV. Behaviour	57
V. Voice	59
VI. Nest	59
VII. Eggs	59
VIII. Chick	60
IX. Summary	60
X. Acknowledgements	61
XI. References	61



Plate 1. Typical Rockjumper habitat. The nest is situated on the grassy scree in the left centre of the photograph.



Plate 2. Adult Damara Rockjumper. The nest is situated in the grass behind the bird, to the right.

tic colouration make it difficult to see. MacDonald's (1957) observation that by watching the skyline one will eventually see the bird is true, and by following this method it is easy to locate and thereafter to keep the bird in view.

When singing from call posts in the early morning and evening the birds are not at all shy and will permit very close approach. Birds disturbed in the vicinity of their nests make no attempt to hide themselves but rather choose prominent perches from which to give their alarm call, as do most species of birds.

We can in no way give credence to MacWorth-Praed and Grant's statement that its general habits appear to be those of a chat.

When feeding young in the nest, the adults make use of a standard route to and from the nest. This extends even to the use of particular perches on each trip. Mr. P. J. Buys has succeeded in photographing the birds by stripping all the branches from a bush used by them on such an approach route to the nest, leaving only one perch for the adult bird. Such drastic action did not cause the birds to stop using this bush as a perch. Despite this fixed route to the nest, it is not easily located.

V. VOICE

Both standard South African reference works refer to a beautiful warbling song. This is most frequently heard at dawn or dusk, although not exclusively at these times. The song is a clear, liquid, bubbling whistle, which can be given as: "tip, tip, tootle, ti, tootle, tootle, too" with varying numbers of "tootles" before the final "too". This call has been admirably recorded in Daan Viljoen Game Park by Martin (1971). The bird is adept at mimicry and various calls of several other species are interspersed in its own song.

When mildly alarmed near the nest or with fledglings the bird uses a phrase of the song "tootle tootle", somewhat muted, or louder sounding almost like "hoo-boy, hoo-boy".

The true alarm call is a harsh, drawn out "cheer' r'r'r". This was seldom heard from a pair of birds that had a nest containing one chick. It was however frequently heard when searching areas for nests which were not found. It is thought therefore to be primarily a warning call to flightless young out of the nest.

Winterbottom (1964) draws attention to the similarity between the songs of *Achaetops* and *Sphenoeacus*. In our opinion this is true in that both species utter bursts of a warbling type of song. Whereas that of *Sphenoeacus* in the Transvaal is a jumbled, bubbling series of notes uttered in rapid succession, that of *Achaetops* is a more measured and deliberate utterance of clear whistling notes. Mrs. M.K. Rowan of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, in discussing *Achaetops* with

the senior author concurred that the song of the Grassbird in the Western Cape was also very similar to the song of *Achaetops*.

VI. NEST

One nest of this species was found at Daan Viljoen Game Park on 23/III/70. Mr. P. J. Buys was kind enough to show us another nest in the collection of the State Museum, Windhoek. Neither of these nests is at all like the descriptions given in the standard South African reference works.

Both these works describe the nest as a thick walled structure of dry leaves and stalks, lined with rootlets. The South African Ornithological Society has no nest record cards for the Damara Rockjumper on its files.

The Daan Viljoen nest was made entirely of grass. It was thick-walled with an outer rim of coarse grass blades which got thinner and thinner until the lining of the cup, composed of fine soft grass. The nest in the State Museum is similar but has a few fine rootlets in the lining.

McLachlan and Liversidge (1970) record the nest as being placed low down in weeds and undergrowth and MacWorth-Praed and Grant (1963) say close to the ground in low bushes. Both the nests described above were situated in the centre of large grass tufts, in each case the grass being *Digitaria dinteri*. Both nests were extremely well concealed. Nest site and nest construction are similar to descriptions given by McLachlan and Liversidge for Grassbird nests and are indeed similar to Grassbird nests found on the Witwatersrand by the junior author.

The Daan Viljoen nest had a prominent "verandah" but the Museum nest did not show this so markedly. Dimensions of the Daan Viljoen nest are as follows:-

	mm
Internal Diameter,	
Side to Side	63
Back to Front	76
Outer Diameter,	
Side to Side	89
Back to Front	140
Length of Verandah	51
Overall Height	89
Depth of Cup	57

VII. EGGS

When found, the Daan Viljoen nest contained one chick and two addled eggs.

Both McLachlan and Liversidge and MacWorth-Praed and Grant describe the eggs as white in ground colour. Eggs from Daan Viljoen and those



Plate 3. Damara Rockjumper chick in nest.

in the State Museum, Windhoek are pale buffy pink in ground colour. Markings are small spots of dark red-brown to light red-brown with underlying slaty blotches concentrating to form a ring above the thickest diameter. Measurements of 14 eggs are as follows:-

Daan Viljoen Clutch

21.8 x 16.3 and 22.7 x 16.1

Windhoek District

20.9 x 15.0; 21.5 x 15.5; 21.3 x 15.9; 21.4 x 15.4;
21.0 x 16.2; 21.5 x 15.5; 21.0 x 15.0; 21.2 x 15.0

Waterberg District

21.0 x 15.0; 21.3 x 15.8; 21.6 x 15.3; 21.4 x 15.5
The average measurement of these eggs is 21.4 x 15.5 and the range 20.9 — 22.7 x 15.0 — 16.3.

VIII. CHICK

It was not possible to weigh the chick in the Daan Viljoen nest; it was, however, fairly well feathered and about half adult size. The tail and wing feathers were about 20 mm long and enclosed for almost half their length in their sheaths. The chick was generally brown in colour and the rufous of the rump and belly was not as marked as in the adults.

The black and white streaking of the head and neck, although clearly visible, was also not as marked as in the adults. Bill was brown, the gape light yellow, the iris brown, legs light brown but distinctly darker than the legs of the adults, which are greyish brown.

McLachlan and Liversidge and MacWorth-Praed and Grant state that the chick leaves the nest at an early age, while still flightless. Dr. R. A. C. Jensen (pers. comm.) has found flightless young out of the nest in the Erongo Mountains. The chick described above crouched in the nest and remained still as shown in the photograph. When removed from the nest for photography however, it would not sit still but attempted to escape into the grass, indicating that although still flightless it was almost at a stage when it would be ready to leave the nest.

XI. SUMMARY

- i) An outline is given of the taxonomic history of *Achaetops pycnopygius*.
- ii) The habitat preferences of the bird are discussed.
- iii) Some field observations of habits are given.
- iv) Various calls are described.
- v) Nest and nest site are described.

- vi) Descriptions and measurements of eggs from various localities in South West Africa are given.
- vii) The feathered, flightless young is described.

X. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks are due to Mr. C. G. Coetzee, Director of the State Museum, Windhoek, who permitted us access to material in that institution. Mr. P. J. Buys, Ornithologist at the Museum put his field notes at our disposal and much valuable information was extracted from them. Mrs. M. K. Rowan of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology was extremely helpful when the senior author visited the Institute and our thanks are due to her as well.

XI. REFERENCES

- DELACOUR, J.
1964 Les Timaliines. *L'Oiseau* 16: 7-36.
- HOESCH, W. and NIETHAMMER, G.
1940 Die Vogelwelt Deutsch-Südwestafrikas. *J. Orn. Sonderheft*, 88.
- MACDONALD, J.D.
1957 *Contribution to the Ornithology of Western South Africa*.
British Mus., London.
- MACWORTH-PRAED, C.W. and GRANT, C.H.B.
1965 *African Handbook of Birds*. Series 2, Vol. II. Longmans, London.
- MARTIN, R.B.
1971 Journey Across Africa (Sound Recording) PCSJ(D) 12079 E.M.I. Johannesburg.
- McLACHLAN, G.R. and LIVERSIDGE, R.
1970 *Roberts Birds of South Africa*. (3rd Edition) C.N.A. and Trustees S.A. Bird Book Fund. Johannesburg.
- ROBERTS, A.
1940 *The Birds of South Africa*. C.N.A. Trustees S.A. Bird Book Fund. Johannesburg.
- WHITE, C.M.N.
1962 A Checklist of Ethiopian Musicapidae (Sylviinae), Part II, *Occ. Pprs. Nat. Mus. S. Rhod.*, 26B: 653-94.
- WINTERBOTTOM, J.M.
1964 Results of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute - Windhoek State Museum Joint Ornithological Expeditions: Report on the Birds of Game Reserve No. 2. *Cimbebasia* 9.
- SOUTH AFRICAN ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY, LIST COMMITTEE
1958 Second Report. *Ostrich*, 29: 25-46.
1964 Eighth Report. *Ostrich*, 35: 45-54.