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Editorial

Normally I would have been tempted to devote a good part of the editorial space to another two species which have allegedly turned up in the northwest of Namibia. These birds were allegedly seen by one of the region's top birders but the validity of these claims appears to be in doubt and hopefully I will obtain more information and will be in a better position to comment in a future edition.

However, my editorial comment concerning previous sightings of Black Skimmers in Southern Africa (Lanioturdus 46 (1)) seems to have raised some lively debate and I think it is only right to conclude this issue now.

I published Tony Tree's response in Lanioturdus 46(2) and this has in turn solicited a response from Joris Komen which I am reproducing here. I am going along with Joris's closing remark that this matter should now be put to rest and I will not publish any further correspondence on this matter.

Joris's response reads:-

Summary of the 2012 Winter Wetland Bird Counts in Namibia

Holger Kolberg
Ministry of Environment and Tourism
(holgerk@mweb.com.na)

Namibia experienced one of its coldest winters for some years but that did not deter the many volunteers who participate in the wetland counts from doing their duty. Nineteen sites were covered with a total of 119504 birds of 98 species recorded. Sadly, several sites that had been counted since 1995 could not be counted due to counters being committed to other projects, leaving a gap in the long-term data series.

Greater Flamingos appeared at the coast in large numbers for the first time in several years but are still not up to the level normally recorded at the coast in winter. This is no doubt due to the fact that there was still water in the pans in Botswana, around Tsumkwe and in Etosha. Very few Lesser Flamingos were recorded. A surprisingly high number of Great White Pelicans was recorded (total = 2582), with 1125 in Walvis Bay and 534 at Avis Dam, apart from the usual high count at Hardap Dam (439). Three White Storks were seen at Avis Dam and one was also seen at Van Rhyn Dam near Keetmanshoop. Saddle-billed Storks were recorded from Lake Oponono (2) and the Mahango core area. A Glossy Ibis was seen at the Walvis Bay sewage ponds. Eight Blue Cranes and two Grey Crowned Cranes were seen at Lake Oponono, whereas five Wattled Cranes were recorded in the Mahango. The low number of birds of prey recorded is a reason for concern, with no African Fish-Eagles recorded from many sites where one would expect to find them. An Osprey was seen at Otjivero Dam. In terms of rarities, a Common Redshank was seen at Mile 4 Saltworks and eight Red-necked Phalaropes at Walvis Bay.

Many thanks to the many volunteers who contribute to the success of this project, your efforts and time are very much appreciated.

Note: See the last page of this edition for a table of the counts by location.

Colour Rings on Sociable Weavers

Neil Thomson
(batqs@mweb.com.na)

Since 2004 Dirk Heinrich has led a ringing project on Sociable Weavers at Farm Wiese some 50 km east of Rehoboth. The initial aim of the project was to try to determine whether individual birds moved between colonies or whether they remained true to a particular colony.

Three colonies were selected and birds were ringed at each colony. From 2007 the birds were colour ringed as well and the three colonies became known as the Red Nest, the Blue Nest and the White Nest with one colour ring (red, blue or white) denoting the colony applied to each bird. To the best of my knowledge only one bird from the White Nest was ever found in another of the nests (Blue Nest) but when birds were trapped at a new small nest in December 2011 and May 2012 a White Nest bird and a Red Nest bird were found among unringed birds indicating that new colonies may be started by birds originating from more than one existing colony.

American PhD student, Gavin Leighton, stayed at Farm Wiese in November/December 2011 and birds were captured at all three nests as part of his study. Blood samples were taken from the birds and all were fitted with unique combinations of colour rings to allow individual birds to be identified in the field.

It had been noticed, however, that when birds were recaptured the colour rings were often missing. The colour rings used were of the plastic split ring type and were applied without using adhesive to seal them closed. When the birds were captured in November 2011 it was noticed that, while a good percentage of the Red and White Nest birds still had their red or white colour rings, not one of the recaptured Blue Nest birds had retained its colour ring.

Gavin later saw adult birds at the Blue Nest trying to remove the rings from the legs of juveniles. With this in mind it was decided to remove the colour rings from as many of the birds that could be recaptured at the ringers get-together held at Farm Wiese in May 2012 and to replace them with metal colour rings that Gavin had sent from the USA.

Before the plastic colour rings were removed from the birds a check was made to see how many of these rings were actually missing. At the Red Nest a total of 26 (12.56%) out of the 207 rings originally applied to those birds recaptured was missing. At the Blue Nest 15 (16.85%) of the 89 rings originally fitted to the recaptured birds were missing while at the white nest it was found that 8 (27.58%) of the 29 rings used were no longer on the birds. Expressed differently this means that 20 (29.85%) of the 67 recaptured Red Nest birds had lost at least one colour ring while in the Blue Nest this was 10 (31.25%) of 32 birds and at the white nest it was 6 (50%) of 12 birds.

While these percentages are lower than many of us expected it is quite obvious that these rings are not suitable for a project where the long term identification of individual birds in the field is required. Whether the metal colour rings will be any better remains to be seen as the coloured paint on some of these rings started coming off due to contact with the jaws of the

ringing pliers the moment they were closed around the birds' legs.

It was subsequently discovered when a sample of these birds was recaptured in May 2013, that the aluminium coloured rings were absolutely useless for the long term monitoring of individual birds. The colours on most of the rings had become indistinguishable with the bird in the hand, much less in the field. Furthermore the edges at the ends of the aluminum rings had started to distort where they had been in contact with either the numbered stainless steel rings or other aluminium rings which will almost undoubtedly necessitate the recapture of as many of these birds as possible for the purpose of removing the rings before they distort further and cause injury to the birds.



Useless "colour" rings (the ring at the bottom right is the numbered stainless steel ring) © Neil Thomson

An Appeal by Trevor Hardaker

Many of you are probably aware that Trevor Hardaker produces a twice weekly Southern African Rare Bird News Report which is sent to subscribers (free of charge) by email and that he also sends out Rare Bird Alerts.

Trevor has put out the following request to subscribers and all those who would like their names added to the distribution list.

“This is a friendly request to all subscribers to SARBN out there to please make sure that you try and report your sightings and updates on rarities as soon as you possibly can. Most of you do that anyway which is hugely appreciated, so perhaps this is considered to be preaching to the converted.

The Southern African birding community is much larger than many of us actually know about and we need to try and encourage as many birders as possible to understand the urgency required in reporting rarities.

There are also so many people out there that are not actually aware of SA Rare Bird News, so perhaps I could request that all of you who are involved with the various bird clubs around the subregion perhaps try and get the word out to all of your various members to inform them of it.

It would be appreciated if you might consider putting a short note in your next bird club newsletters just letting your members know about SARBN and also stressing the importance of reporting interesting sightings as quickly as possible. The sooner news is broadcast of good birds, the better the chance is for all of us to chase them...

As a reminder again, you can report news directly to me either by email to hardaker@mweb.co.za or to my mobile phone at (0027) 82 780 0376. If you have any of your friends that would like to subscribe to SARBN, please ask them to send me an email asking to be added to the subscriber list and I will happily do it.”

Atlas Update

On 11/06/2013 full protocol card number 750 was submitted. This equaled the 750 cards submitted for Swaziland in the six years that the project has been running there although our 750 cards constituted only 32 443 records (average 44/card) as opposed to their 50 248 (average 67/card).

By 25/07/2013 850 full protocol cards containing 36 226 accepted records had been submitted for a total of 375 pentads. Thus 3.5% of the Namibian total of 10 586 pentads had been visited by this date.

What should our next target be? 500 Pentads or 1 000 full protocol cards? Having passed Lesotho and Swaziland in the number of cards submitted we have a long way to go to catch the least atlased of the South African provinces which is the Northern Cape with 4 674 cards submitted.

I have mentioned before the importance of ad hoc lists and incidental records in Namibia where full protocol coverage of many of the 10 586 pentads will be virtually impossible to obtain.

I would like to give an example of the value of ad hoc lists. I have a project in pentad 1835_1705 at Oshivelo. My visits to the site involve flying to the landing strip at Operet, usually having to wait there for transport, driving a short distance to the site and spending a limited amount of time on the site inspecting the progress of the building work and attending a site meeting. Obviously this does not allow for two hours of concentrated birding but after nine visits to this site for which I have submitted ad hoc lists, the lengths of which range from 7 to 25 species, I have managed to record 53 species on that pentad.