



Biodiversity Observations

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IS NAMIBIA ON THE BRINK OF BEING INVADED BY COMMON STARLING *STURNUS VULGARIS*?

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INVASION BIOLOGY

IS NAMIBIA ON THE BRINK OF BEING INVADED BY COMMON STARLING *STURNUS VULGARIS*?

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On 11 September 2016, on a farm approximately 70 km south of Grünau in southern Namibia, I observed a Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* individual in breeding plumage and yellow bill, throughout the day, although initially sheltering at ground level between garden plants (Figure 1). This was after a moderately strong south-westerly wind on 10 September 2016. The bird seemed heat stressed – i.e. open bill thermoregulation – on an averagely warm day of 27°C. This bird was not seen on the following day or thereafter.

Common starlings are known to occur along the Orange River in southern Namibia, being especially abundant from time-to-time in Oranjemund (Anderson 2006). They are known to be commensal with humans (Hockey et al. 2005, Tarboton 2001) with the first known sighting of these birds in Oranjemund in 1970 (Brown 1985) and with limited sightings further upstream – i.e. eastwards (e.g. Hohenfels). According to Chris Brown (pers. comm.) sightings of Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* which were received from Rosh Pinah were probably Common Starling although subsequent searches delivered neither of the two species.

Although Common Starling has been on the southern periphery of Namibia (i.e. Orange River environs) for at least 46 years (Brown 1985) they do not seem to have spread elsewhere although recent sightings from Lüderitz – e.g. sewage works area (March 2015) and

recently in Lüderitz town (August 2016) – north of Oranjemund along the coast (J. Kemper pers. comm.) (Figure 2) indicate their spread along the coast. However, there are no inland records for this species (N. Thomson pers. comm.). This sighting near Grünau of a starling in breeding plumage is disconcerting because it probably indicates that the species could move northwards through the inhospitable dry barrier of southern Namibia and colonise the more fertile inland areas with associated dire consequences to the local avifauna. Southern towns in close proximity to this sighting with potential suitable habitat (e.g. gardens, houses, etc.) include Grünau (c. 70km), Karasburg (c. 80km) and Keetmanshoop (c. 230km) while various vegetated farmsteads could act as springboard throughout the area. Residents of these towns and farmers throughout southern Namibia should be made aware of the potential threat of this species and encouraged to report sightings. Because it is difficult to control these birds once established (Picker & Griffiths 2011), immediate extermination of inland birds, wherever sighted, would be prudent so as to prevent this invasive alien species from colonising inland Namibia (Brown 1985, C. Brown pers. comm.).



Figure 1. Common Starling, albeit overexposed and only picture taken, in *Acacia galpinii* tree on a farm approximately 70 km south of Grünau.



Figure 2. Common Starlings photographed in Lüderitz – August 2016 (©J. Kemper).

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