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LANIOTURDUS

Newsletter of the Namibia Bird Club

Vol.25, Nos. 1 & 2 1989/90

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Printed by John Meinert (Pty) Ltd.

HARTLAUB'S FRANCOLIN NEWS

I began my research on the ecology and behaviour of Hartlaub's Francolin Francolinus hartlaubi (and allied species elsewhere in Africa) in 1983. This work forms a project within the evolutionary biology research programme of the State Museum of Namibia. In 1987 I became convinced that this project was suitable for post-graduate degree research and formally registered as a Ph. D. candidate at the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

The fundamental aim of this project has been to determine the evolutionary nearest 'relatives' of this enigmatic francolin. More than a quarter-century ago, Pat Hall of the British Museum of Natural History suggested that it is related to members of a group of 'vermiculated' francolins, all of which have similar dorsal plumage. Since I have had the opportunity to study most of these vermiculated francolins in the field, I intend to use my knowledge of their ecology, social patterns, mating systems, behaviour and calls to test Pat's hypothesis. I am also very interested in finding out precisely which species-specific communications serve as the signals and responses of recognition between sexual partners.

Despite five years of intensive fieldwork in a relatively small study area (about two km^2) comprising 12 Hartlaub's Francolin territories, I was unable to find any nests during that time. This is a reflection of my inadequacy at finding nests and the cunning secrecy and deception by these birds during incubation. Tantalizing glimpses of downy young rapidly disappearing in the undergrowth of rugged rocky outcrops only served to add to my frustrations - downy chick plumage, growth and ontogeny of behaviour and vocalizations remained undescribed.

In May 1989, I captured three adult Hartlaub's Francolins: one male and two females. Thanks to a generous donation of radio-telemetry equipment by the Fitzpatrick Institute, I was able to radio-tag these birds and closely monitor their activities. In June one of these females laid three eggs - the female and hence the nest were relatively simple to locate by radio-triangulation - and incubation was monitored. Unfortunately this female was killed less than two metres from her nest by an avian predator 18 days after start of incubation, and the three embryos died as a result of exposure. The female paired with the radio-tagged male laid

and incubated three eggs for 23 days, and, within a few hours of hatching, the male took over brooding these chicks.

The last radio-tagged female eventually laid and incubated three eggs in July. A female which replaced the predated female was eventually caught and radio-tagged in August. She laid two eggs in early September; an unusually late laying date for this species. As a result of imprinting on the first three nests, I was able to find an additional three nests without the help of radios. An attempt to replace Hartlaub's Francolin eggs with freshly-laid Redbilled Francolin Francolinus adspersus eggs (sterile; and only slightly larger than the former's eggs) failed when the female abandoned the nest promptly after replacement.

I have successfully reared five chicks to full-grown immature stage in captivity; two males and three females. Except for one chick captured a few hours after hatching, these birds were all incubated artificially from eggs collected shortly after laying. Initial growth took place rapidly, with the chicks able to 'flutter-fly' at three days of age and fledging at twelve days. The birds were full-grown at about 165 days of age, but initially showed some of the characteristic dichromatism of the species from about 100 days of age.

By the end of 1990 I hope to tie up the information on this enigmatic francolin and its 'allies' in order to reveal its evolutionary heritage. One possibility is that Hartlaub's Francolin is a 'living ancestor', exhibiting features possessed by the proto-francolin that gave rise some 5-7 million years ago to the 41 species that occur in Africa and Asia.

Joris Komen, The State Museum of Namibia, P.O. Box 1203, Windhoek, Namibia.

CROWNED CRANES AND OTHER WETLAND BIRDS OF THE EKUMA RIVER AND ETOSHA NATIONAL PARK

The Ekuma River flows from Lake Oponono in southern Ovamboland to the northeastern corner of the Etosha Pan. This area has seldom been visited by ornithologists during the rainy season. On 11 March 1988 a helicopter inspection was made of the Ekuma River area and the entire Etosha Pan.

At this time the river and the "lake" comprised merely a series of separated shallow pools mostly with broad muddy edges and with little emergent vegetation. The adjacent area is a grassy plain which evidently floods extensively in years of good rainfall but which was dry at the time of this visit. Human settlement of the area is sparse and comprises seasonal kraals used when cattle are grazed in the area.

The most notable birds seen were 36 Crowned Cranes Balearica regulorum, four of which were along the river within the Etosha National Park and the remainder, including a single group of 22 birds, were in southern Ovamboland. This is the largest number of this species so far recorded in Namibia. Approximately 3,000 flamingos were counted. Almost all were along the lower Ekuma within the National Park. About two-thirds were Greater Flamingos Phoenicopterus ruber and the remainder Lesser Flamingos P. minor.

Other wetland species seen were Grey Herons Ardea cinerea, Openbilled Storks Anastomus lamelligerus, Chestnutbanded Plovers Charadrius pallidus, a Caspian Plover C. asiaticus, Kittlitz Plover C. pecuarius, Marsh Sandpiper Tringa stagnatilis Greenshank Tringa nebularia, Avocet Recurvirostra avosetta, Blackwinged Stilt Himantopus himantopus, and Whitewinged Terns Chlidonias leucopterus. It was impossible to count these from the helicopter whilst spotting and counting the flamingos and cranes.

At the time of the count the Etosha Pan and most of the adjoining Fischer's Pan were dry and the only large water area in the Park was just north of Namutoni between the bridge on the Andoni road and Fischer's Pan. Here there were flamingos, a number of Glossy Ibis Plegadis falcinellus, and two Whiskered Terns Chlidonias hybrida in full breeding plumage.

In 1968 Lake Oponono supported breeding populations of several wetland species including several thousand Great White Pelicans (Winterbottom 1969, Ostrich 40:27-28). At that time there must have been substantially more water in the lake and in pools in the surrounding plains than there was in 1988.

It is difficult to interpret the Crowned Crane data. The 36 birds seen could represent the entire population which normally visits this area and which had been concentrated along the Ekuma River in this particularly dry year. Alternatively the few birds seen might be only a fraction of

the number which use this area in years of better wetland conditions.

The area between Lake Oponono and the northern boundary of the Etosha National Park is only sparsely used by humans presumably because of the extensive seasonal flooding that occurs there in years of average or above average rainfall. Our count indicates that even in years of well below average rainfall this area supports important populations of some wetland bird species. We know from Winterbottom's records that there may be important breeding populations of wetland birds in the area in years of good rainfall. Because of its evident importance for birds, and so presumably for other biota, and since it is little use by humans, serious consideration should be given to giving some form of conservation protection to the area. Ideally this would be incorporation within the Etosha National Park or creation of a declared nature reserve abutting the national park and with the fence between the two areas removed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge help in observations from C.J. Brown and J. Mendelsohn and are extremely grateful for the expert helicopter handling of J. Lawson.

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EIN KLEINER VOGEL ALS BAUMEISTER

Der Wellenastrild Estrilda astrild (Common Waxbill), der hauptsächlich im unteren Swakoptal in kleineren und grösseren Schwärmen auftritt, ist auch vielen Vogelfreunden in Swakopmund bekannt. Die Astrilde haben sich auch in grösseren Mengen in Swakopmund angesiedelt, wo Vogelfreunde sie und auch andere Vogelarten, in ihren Gärten füttern.