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RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS

Editorial

The winter bird count at Walvis Bay has come and gone and it was extremely gratifying to see the number of Namibia Bird Club members participating in the count many of whom had traveled long distances at their own expense to be there. It is my belief that the bird club can make a real contribution to projects such as this.

Presumably everyone knows by now of the oiled penguins which were rescued at Lüderitz some months ago. What is possibly less well known is that the Namibia Bird Club committee made the decision immediately after the news broke to donate N\$ 5 000 from club funds towards the

rehabilitation of the oiled birds and following this Gudrun Middendorff was interviewed on the German radio service and was able to raise a further N\$ 10 000 as a result of this interview.

Holger Kolberg has put together an index of all the articles that appeared in *Ornithologische Beilage* (a supplement to the Scientific Society's newsletter) and *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe*, the forerunner of Lanioturdus, for the period 1963-1984. This index lists the articles published in chronological order and also by author and is a very useful tool for anyone writing articles and seeking references. The index can be obtained from the Namibia Bird Club at N\$ 40.00 per copy and all issues of *Ornithologische Beilage* and *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe* are to be found in the library of the Scientific Society.

In this issue we feature two articles on red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek, one written by Peter and Janke Cunningham who had seen a firefinch in Windhoek for the first time and the other by myself who had been aware of their presence for some time. Both come to the conclusion that these birds most probably did not arrive in Windhoek unassisted.

In an earlier issue of Lanioturdus I asked for readers' comments on the new electronic format of this journal. To date the comment received has been overwhelmingly favourable with only one member saying that he preferred the printed booklet format.

Diary of a Successful (?) Breeding Attempt of Gray's Larks

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Saturday, 28 February 2009

- On the afternoon of 28 February 2009 my wife found the nest of a Gray's Lark, *Ammomanopsis grayi* containing two eggs, east of Kramersdorf, whilst walking the dogs.
- The cup-shaped nest was located on the southern side of an *Arthraerua leubnitziae* bush.
- The nest was not constructed in typical fashion but with lots of pieces of cotton string.
- No adult bird was in the vicinity.

- After waiting for more than an hour no adult bird had made an appearance at the nest.
- The weather was fine.



Sunday, 1 March 2009

- I went out early in the morning and was relieved to see an adult bird sitting on the nest.
- The bird left the nest as I approached, pretending to be injured to draw my attention.
- The bird was not shy and soon started to feed or pretended doing so, but then flew off.



- Only after one hour the bird returned to the nest after securing the area very meticulously.
- In all instances only one adult bird was observed to be present, no other birds were seen in the vicinity.

Monday, 2 March 2009

- Late Monday morning I visited the nest again.
- The adult bird was sitting on the nest incubating.
- The bird's behavior did not differ from the day before.



Tuesday, 3 March 2009

- Not wanting to cause too much interference I did not visit the nest.

Wednesday, 4 March 2009

- After work I visited the nest, eggs still in place but no adult bird to be seen.
- Generally the temperatures for the time of the year were very high, weather was unusually humid.

Thursday, 5 March 2009

- Great excitement as both eggs had hatched.
- Two naked chicks greeted me with necks out-stretched and little bills wide-open in the hope of receiving food.
- No adult bird was in attendance or seen in the vicinity.



Friday, 6 March 2009

- East wind storm over Swakopmund with dust and very high temperatures.
- Visited the nest at 11h00 in the morning, temperature at the nest was 41 degrees Celsius.
- A Fiscal Shrike was photographed very close to the nest.
- I could not take more photographs as there was too much dust.
- Had to leave for Windhoek after the short visit.

Saturday, 7 March 2009

- On return from Windhoek I visited the nest and was relieved to see that the Fiscal Shrike had found some other food source.
- Weather still very humid and hot, east wind had declined. Amazing how chicks survive the heat!!
- Both chicks greeted me in normal "give me food" position.
- Single adult bird was photographed feeding the chicks later.
- No other adult birds were noticed in the vicinity.



Sunday, 8 March 2009

- Late afternoon visit to the nest.
- Little chicks in normal "give me food" position.
- No adult bird was noticed.
- Weather still oppressively hot and humid.



Monday, 9 March 2009

- Late afternoon visit to the nest
- Chicks getting bigger, constantly in "give me food" position.
- No adult bird seen at the nest or surrounding area.
- Weather still unusually hot and humid.



Tuesday, 10 March 2009

- First overcast day.
- Visited nest at 18h30, both chicks fast asleep.
- Worried that one had died as it did not move at all.
- After 30 minutes search found the single adult feeding the chicks.
- Subsequent visit to the nest revealed that both chicks were well and alive and noticeably bigger.
- Chick's eyes open for the first time.



Wednesday, 11 March 2009

- Very misty and wet weather for most of the day.
- Around 18h00 I visited the nest, chicks very active, now in "give me much more food" stance!
- First feather growth noticeable, eyes now wide open.
- One bird clearly bigger than the other.
- Skin of chicks starts to get much darker.
- No adult bird to be seen.



Thursday, 12 March 2009

- Overcast weather, relatively cool.
- Birds in nest fast asleep, would not be perturbed by my presence.
- Waited for adult bird, after 30 minutes one appeared and for the first time a second bird was in attendance.
- Both chicks very hungry, immediately asleep after being fed.
- Heard chicks call for the first time shortly before one adult returned 30 minutes later.
- Another 30 minutes later another adult fed the chicks.



Saturday, 14 March 2009

- Weather cool and overcast.
- Late morning visit to the nest, on arrival one adult was busy feeding the chicks.
- Every 15 minutes for one and a half hours the birds were fed again, second adult in attendance.
- At times adult birds searched for food in a radius of only 50 meters.
- Appears as if only the bigger of the chicks is growing as it receives most of the food.
- Larger chick attempting to get out of the nest when adult bird arrives for feeding.
- Larger bird has feathers well developed already.



Friday, 13 March 2009

- Visited the nest after work, weather cool and overcast.
- For the second time two adults were seen at the nest.
- Feeding intervals reduced from about 30 to 20 minutes.
- One adult was searching for food very close to the nest during one feeding opportunity.
- Chicks nearly get out of the nest when fed.



Saturday, 14 March 2009

- Visit nest at 14h30, sun breaking through.
- On arrival the chicks are being fed and again twice within ten minutes.
- Only 45 minutes later chicks were fed again, then three times within five minutes.
- Adult birds always call with food in their bills when approaching the nest.
- The smaller chick was only fed once during the period of my visit to the nest.

All photographs in this article were taken by Eckart Demasius



Sunday, 15 March 2009

- Arrive at 10h30 at the nest to find it empty and the lining removed from the depression in the ground.
- Two adult birds were close by searching for and collecting food.
- I followed them in the hope of finding the young birds but to no avail.
- Soon there were three adult birds collecting food.
- The young birds could not be found during the hour I spent in the area.

Sunday, 15 March 2009

- Shortly before lunch I went out to the site.
- An adult bird appeared, this time without food in its bill.
- I monitored the bird for 30 minutes hoping it would go to one of the chicks, but it flew off.
- After lunch I returned and found no Gray's Lark in the area.

Conclusion

- Unfortunately this breeding attempt ends inconclusively as it is not clear whether the young birds survived.
- Although the adult birds were still collecting food in the late morning, no chick could be found.
- Later sightings of an adult bird with no food items although it appeared to be looking for something.
- Young Gray's Larks move quite a bit once they leave the nest and blend in extremely well with the surrounding area making it very difficult to locate them.

Narrative of a Journey into the Hinterland of Etosha in Search of the Elusive Blue Crane

Holger Kolberg

Ad hoc ornithologist and government appointed beer tester.

During the last week of March, just in time to recover from the excesses of yet another Independence Day celebration, we embarked on an unprecedented adventure to the wilderness of Etosha. The aim of the operation was

to count the number of cranes, especially the blue ones, in and around Etosha but also to try and capture and ring as many chicks as possible. The latter objective had good prospects of success because Wilferd and I had spotted a pair with a teensy chick near *Salvadora* during the summer wetland count in January.

The esteemed members of the Crane Working Group gathered in Okaukuejo on 23 March for a strategizing and action planning workshop. Fuelled by copious amounts of enthusiasm (and prize-winning amber liquid) it was decided to try and capture the *Salvadora* chick the next morning on the way to Namutoni. Thus said and done, Tuesday morning found us eagerly scanning the plains near *Salvadora* for the objects of our desire. After several false alarms (the standard of ornithological knowledge of Namibian tour guides leaves much to be desired!) and annoying interruptions ("What are you looking at?" "Blue Cranes!" "Oh!" bus disappears in a cloud of dust), Hanjo eventually spotted the suspects quite far away. Pursuit by car was the best option and we were off, bumping our way across the plain (isn't it ironic that plains are never flat when you drive over them). Wilferd did his best to emulate Ginie! "Dakar" de Villiers and the people on the back of the bakkie had to hang on for dear life. Once we had closed in on the target, Holger hurled himself off the back and pursued the suspect on foot (only to discover that a 5 kg chick can run a lot faster than a lithe, superbly fit athlete). Wilferd in the meantime executed a precisely timed pincer movement and it wasn't too long before we had the object in custody. Whilst Holger was still trying to catch his breath, the extremely efficient team ringed, measured and bled the chick. Just to complete the mission, the boy (or girl?) was then equipped with a neat little backpack that will allow us to track his/her movements by means of a radio signal for the next couple of years.

The convoy then moved on to Namutoni to await the arrival of the aerial support. On the way there, two adult Blue Cranes were spotted at the Halali seepage and on the plains near Chudop another pair with two chicks attracted our attention. We set up camp and received the message that our aerial support would be a bit late due to a small mechanical issue. With nothing better to do we decided to look for more cranes around Fischer's Pan but all we saw was lions and other such boring creatures. When the plane eventually arrived a short recce was flown over Fischer's Pan and the Chudop plains and four Blue Cranes were spotted (3 adults, 1 chick). Another strategizing session that evening resulted in the decision to try and catch the two Chudop chicks the next morning whilst the aerial crew would survey the area around Lake Oponono for more cranes.

Wednesday dawned and we were up at sparrows (or in this case roosters!), ready for yet another day of excitement and adventure. Soon the aerial crew was on its way and we made our way to Chudop. But alas! Them thar cranes are dang clever critters! Our subjects had positioned themselves strategically between three roads so that either a) they would get run over by some rampant rent-a-car whilst being pursued, b) the pursuers would be run over by a rampant rent-a-car whilst pursuing or c) the