

## CONTENTS

VOLUME 36 (4) 2003

OSBORNE, T. O. Editorial .....	1
THERON, T. CUNNINGHAM, P. & E. SIMATAA. Notes on the breeding of White Pelicans <i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i> at Hardap Dam, Namibia. ....	2
CUNNINGHAM, P., ADANK, W., MULISA, C. & B. SIMATAA. The diet of Barn Owl <i>Tyto alba</i> from the Otjivasando area, Etosha National Park .....	7
DEMASIUS, E. Damara Terns and the upcoming holiday season ..	12
DEMASIUS, E. Fourth Gray's Lark Ringed in Namibia .....	15
DEMASIUS, E. Another nest in the road .....	19
BIRD OBSERVATIONS AND NOTES .....	22
ERRATUM .....	24

## Editorial

Another year is about over and we have produced four issues of the *Lanioturdus*. The Namibia Bird Club would like to thank all those who contributed. Your articles are what keep the club informed and active. As you read the articles you will see that some people were prompted to write because of an article they had read in the journal. It either confirmed an observation they had made or pointed out the rarity of such observations. That is the reason the journal is published to inform readers about club activities and to stimulate members to report on their observations. I am still waiting for the Chairman's annual report as given at the Annual General Meeting in March 2003. Regretably no reports of club outings in 2003 have been submitted. Perhaps if the club would undertake outings to the remote and exotic areas of Namibia participants would be impressed enough to share the results.

Once again it is the time of the year when everyone is wishfully looking into the sky for clouds that can build up into something bigger to convert the parched landscape into green vistas. The Red-crested Korhaans are calling but whether they breed or not will depend on the amount of rain. Last season they called but no breeding took place in northern Namibia. As of late November there have been reports of rain but not in all regions.

Once again I appeal to all members to try and sign up a friend as a member of the Namibia Bird Club. It would be nice to see the club membership double this year.

few White Pelicans from time to time". The mortality of chicks and eggs not hatched is similar for both Islands A & B and it would thus seem that neither anglers and boat users nor the joint breeding of Whitebreasted Cormorant (Island B) influences the breeding success of *P. onocrotalus* at Hardap Dam. This will have to be monitored further. Berry (1972) states that *P. onocrotalus* nesting could have influenced the breeding success of Flamingo's at Etosha Pan during the early 1970's thus indicating that allied breeding species could affect each others success under certain circumstances.

A clutch usually consists of 2 eggs (1-3) with an average size of 93 x 61 mm (Range: 89-95.6 x 53.6-64.5) (Berry *et al* 1973, Maclean 1985, Tarboton 2001). This study indicates that 65% of the nests contain 2 eggs, similar to Berry *et al* (1973), Maclean (1985) and Tarboton (2001), although the size of the eggs was considerably smaller (length 76-80mm & width 46-50mm). The reason therefore is unknown, but could be related to time of the year and/or diet.

The increase of *P. onocrotalus* from 800 birds during early 1999 (Pelepele 1999) to 1187 (789 adults & 398 juveniles) birds during early 2001 (Mamili 2001) to 4,024 birds counted during the first half of 2003 indicates the growing importance of Hardap Dam as a breeding and feeding site. Further monitoring of the breeding success is suggested.

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## The diet of Barn Owl *Tyto alba* from the Otjivasando area, Etosha National Park

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## Introduction

The diet of the Barn Owl *Tyto alba* was studied by students studying for a diploma in Nature Conservation at the Polytechnic of Namibia whilst conducting their in-service training at Otjivasando in the western part of Etosha National Park.

Barn Owls are widespread throughout Namibia and probably one of the best known, and easiest to recognize, owl species in Namibia. Although various people throughout the world have investigated their diet, very little work has been conducted on the species from Namibia, especially the far-western regions of the Etosha NP.

This paper looks at some of the results of their studies.

## Methods

Barn Owl *Tyto alba* pellets were collected during July-October 2002 and February-June 2003, thus effectively covering one season – i.e. February to October, excluding November, December and January. Pellets were collected at the following four sites from the western – Otjivasando area – in the Etosha NP: Khoabendes, Okawao, Olifantsrus and Etosha Fontein.

Pellets were soaked in water and teased apart to reveal the prey remains. Prey remains were sorted and identified. A total of 199 pellets were collected and analysed, 160 during 2002 (total of 405) and 39 during 2003 (total of 39).

## Results

Figure 1 indicates the number of pellets found at the various sites during 2002 and 2003. A total of 404 pellets were collected at the various sites during 2002 compared to 39 pellets collected during 2003.

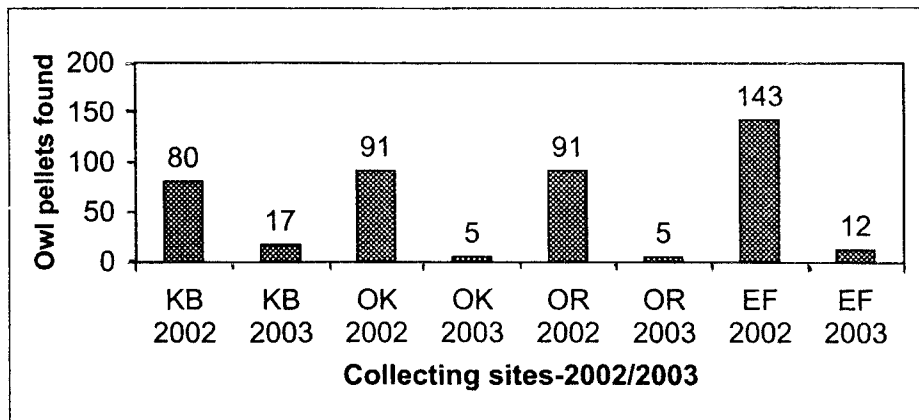


Figure 1. Owl pellets found (404 pellets collected) observed at the various sites during 2002 & 2003. KB – Khoabendes, OK – Okawao, OR – Olifantsrus & EF – Etosha Fontein.

Figure 2 indicates the various prey items as identified from pellets from the various sites during 2002 and 2003. During 2002, 99% of the prey remains were that of *Tatera leucogaster* (Bushveld Gerbil) and 1% of unidentified bird remains, while *T. leucogaster*, *Elephantulus intufi* (Bushveld elephant shrew), unidentified bird remains and unidentified arthropod remains accounted for 60%, 30%, 5% & 5% during 2003, respectively.

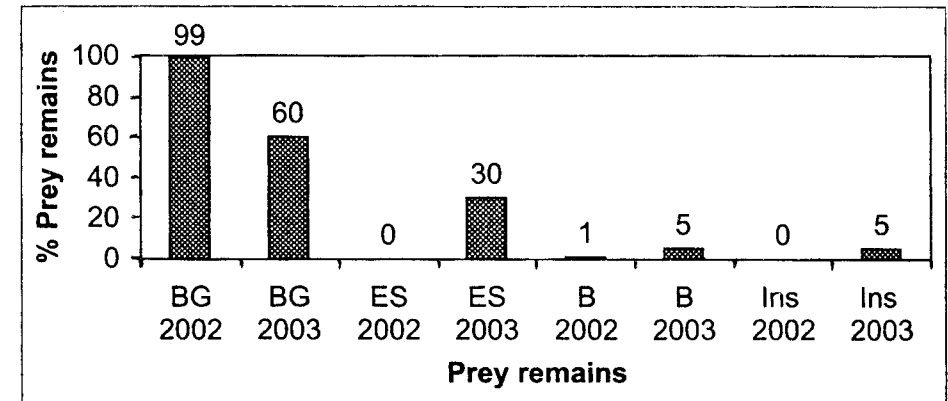


Figure 2. Prey remains as identified at the various sites during 2002 & 2003.

BG – Bushveld Gerbil, ES – Bushveld elephant Shrew, B – Bird remains & Ins – Insect remains.

Figure 3 indicates the total number of pellets collected and the average rainfall as measured at the four different sites during the first half of 2003. With the exception of 2 pellets collected at one site on 3 May 2003, no pellets were collected after 22 March 2003, which coincides with rainfall showers during the following four consecutive weeks. No further pellets were collected after 3 May 2003 until the end of the study on 21 June 2003.

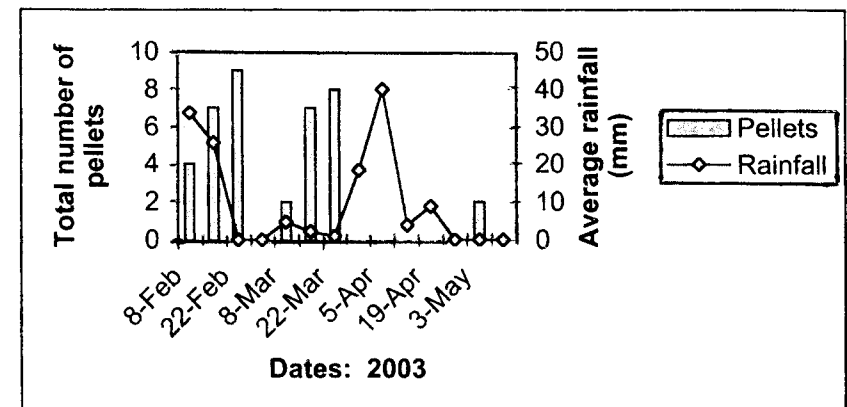


Figure 3. Total number of pellets and average rainfall as measured at the four different sites in the western part of the Etosha NP.

## Discussion

A study conducted by Dixon (1991) in the Etosha National Park indicates that rodents make up 90% of *T. alba* prey with *T. leucogaster* one of three species most selected. According to Maclean (1985) the diet of *T. alba* consists mainly of rodents (75-97%) while Cunningham & Aspinal (2001) indicate that rodents comprise 80% of *T. alba* diet from the United Arab Emirates. *Gerbillurus* species comprised the most important prey, both numerically and in terms of biomass in the Namib Desert (Tilson & LeRoux 1983) while *Gerbillus paeba* accounted for 45.8% (62% attributed to small mammals) of the diet as determined at Sandwich Harbour (Stuart 1975). Little data is available on the predators of *Tatera leucogaster* (De Graaff 1981) although Dean (1977) includes *T. alba* as a predator from the Transvaal in South Africa. Dixon (1991) furthermore states that avian (generally <10%) and reptilian prey (0.2%) is low in *T. alba* pellets from Etosha NP. Our data indicates that rodents, especially *T. leucogaster*, are indeed the most important prey from western Etosha NP. However, this preference was not compared to the available species in the area (i.e. trapping to confirm small mammal species diversity).

Although the value of identifying small mammal remains from owl pellets is appreciated, the use of the habitat and factors influencing this use may even be of more interest. From July to October 2002 (i.e. dry season), 404 pellets were counted at the four sites while a total of 39 were counted from February to June 2003 (i.e. including most of the wet season). No pellets were located at any of the sites from 3 May 2003, until the end of the study on 21 June 2003. Rainfall seems to influence the presence of *T. alba* (See Figure 3) as no pellets were collected at any of the sites during the following four weeks that experienced local downpours. This would indicate that fewer *T. alba* were present (when using pellets to determine presence or absence) during the rainy season in the western Etosha NP, than during the dry season. It is speculated that *T. alba* move into the area when conditions are favourable – i.e. during the dry season when small mammals (main source of food for *T. alba*) are more conspicuous – due to less dense grass cover. Where they move to during the rainy season is not currently known and requires further investigation. *T. alba* are known to have been present, and had bred in a chimney, at Otjivasando as early as 1977, during a period of

exceptional drought (pers. obs.). Kreiner (pers. com.) mentioned that *T. alba* numbers increased in the Kamanjab area during the last few years (2000 & 2001) due to higher than average rainfall. From the above-mentioned data it would seem prudent to assume that *T. alba* have local migrations in Namibia. Further research into the seasonal use of habitat and prey selection by *T. alba* is suggested for future studies of this kind.

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