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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:-

“I noted the ongoing saga of the **first African record** of a Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) in your most recent editorial of *Lanioturdus* (2013) 46(2).

I was somewhat taken aback by your citation of Tony Tree’s remark “On the strength of t(his) short (!) paper (*Lanioturdus* 2005) 38(1):17-20), there is no reason at all as to why the record cannot be accepted as the sighting is very fully documented” [*without any material evidence*]!

In May 2005, I wrote a letter in response to this particular article by Tony Tree (Komen, J. 2005. Is the Black Skimmer at Walvis Bay another “rarities” record destined to obscurity? *Lanioturdus* 38(2): 6-8). Critically, I was pleased to note that not all my **rejected** records of unusual birds during the 18 years I spent as curator of birds at the National Museum of Namibia had faded into obscurity, or gone altogether unnoticed! I also learned an important lesson by these experiences - as rightly put out to me by John Mendelsohn at the time – “**What is hit is history; what is missed is mystery**”.

While there are some ‘rare’ exceptions to this rule, I guess the bottom line here is that Tony’s **sight** record would also have been destined to obscurity given the absence of a specimen [or photograph, if you’re Trevor Hardaker] to irrefutably prove the point – in spite of a four page treatise in a local newsletter – unless corroborated by subsequent sightings.

In his 2005 reply to my letter Tony tree wrote (unpublished – I’ve edited out some of the potentially inflammatory bits):-

<SNIP>

... Thanks for your letter and comments. Unfortunately when records are rejected or classified as “possible” they tend to be **forgotten**. However, they should always be available for a review at a later date

as additional knowledge acquired with time often leads to a change in circumstance. Incidentally, this sometimes applies to accepted records that should never have been accepted in the first place. The Brits are better at this game than we are.

The position regarding the SA Rary Comm is made clear re your Black Skimmer record which should have been available for reappraisal as should all “rejected records”. **I was rather annoyed that they had lost the original record as well as the SARC comments and for some reason or other nothing was retained at our end either...**

...now that this record has been published in some detail it will not disappear into obscurity but there are those in the birding community who are not happy when I record something exceptional – see rude comments re my recording a Saunder’s Tern in the E Cape.

Thus I believe in publishing records so that they are not forgotten and can be reviewed at any later date.

<SNIP>

Tony’s recent comment cited in your editorial begs the question as to whether a ‘fully documented’ report (*without material evidence*) of my Rundu Sewage sighting in **Lanioturdus** of the day would have usurped a **published decision** by the then Namibia Unusual Bird Sightings Committee and the South African Rarities Committee to put my record in ‘**abeyance**’ until subsequent sightings would support it?

So what is abeyance but a temporary pause until otherwise **corroborated**?

John Paterson has aptly corroborated the presence of an American Black Skimmer in Namibia with a

photographic record. Trevor Hardaker has done likewise for South Africa.

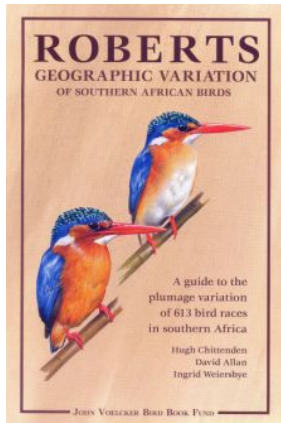
Frankly? Let's put the saga to rest. Liz and I got a thrill out of seeing this wayward vagrant in Rundu so very long ago, but I have no intention of holding this first Africa record to ransom."

Roberts Geographic Variation of

Southern African Birds

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New books appear on the market towards the end of the year, presumably to make the work of Father Christmas a bit easier – and in my case he was very obliging.



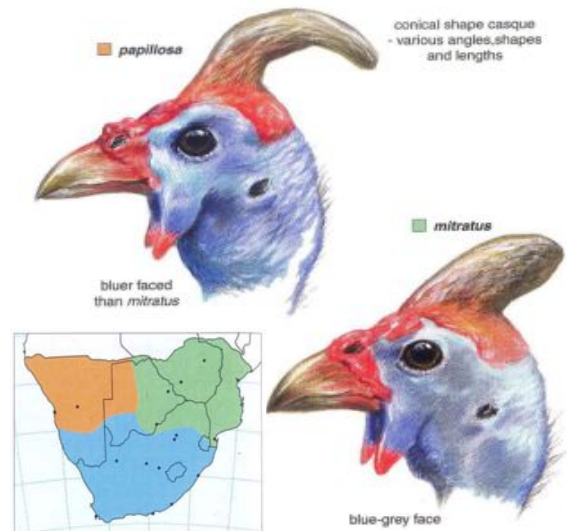
I started reading this new book authored by Hugh Chittenden, David Allen and Ingrid Weiersbye with interest and I found a number of birds with variations that can be seen in Namibia or can be compared with the neighbouring regions.

examples from the neighbouring regions.

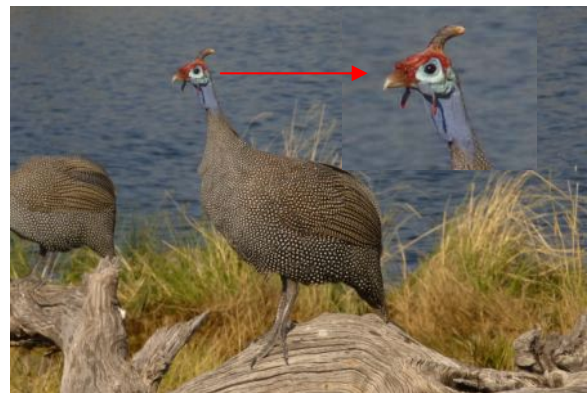
The comparative paintings are exceptionally good and clearly show the variations in colour of the birds. Along with these go clear descriptions of the colouration of the various races as well as distribution maps indicating the distributions of the respective races that can be seen.

Most of us are aware that birds usually appear lighter coloured in the western areas than further east. But how do these variations really show in nature? Well, I thought, let me have a look at some of my photographs.

The Helmeted Guineafowl shows some facial colour variations and it wears a different head dress i.e. the casque on the head in Namibia differs from the southern race.



Comparing this with some of my photographs I found that some of the stated differences are indeed very visible.



Helmeted Guineafowl in Etosha, *Numida meleagras papillosa*, versus