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Editorial

This issue of the *Lanioturdus* would have been rather skinny had it not been for Wessel Swanepoel's numerous contributions. The editor is still waiting for the Chairman's annual report delivered to the March 2005 AGM and any trip reports from members on outings.

Peter Steyn and Rob Martin report on the puzzle of Namibia's Booted Eagles. Here is a species that used to be difficult to identify thus adding to the confusion but recent advances in field guides should help even novice birders identify this species. Surely the bird is a more common breeder than we think, people just have to scan likely breeding rocks, kloofs and canyons. Perhaps we can solve the mystery.

New birds have been reported for the country so it is good to see that birders have been active even though it is the dry season. There are two articles on rarities within the country and one from our neighbour, Botswana.

Once again I appeal to all members to help the Namibia Bird Club. If you want to keep the club viable you must also do your part and try and get new members to join.

We mentioned our sighting to Elaine Pryce who was delighted to hear the news as she recalled that one of her previous lodge managers Duncan Pritchard had also sighted the species when he worked at the lodge 5 years ago. His observation though was rejected by the Botswana rarities committee for mysterious reasons, Elaine said.

SABAP regards the species as rare or alternatively elusive throughout its range. The Southern African Bird Atlas has no reports from the atlas period 1987-91 and no mention of D. Pritchard's record but mentions one "pre" SABAP sighting of the species in Botswana by Benson and Irwin in 1972. [Editors note: the Thick-billed Cuckoo parasitizes the Red-billed Helmet-Shrike *Prionops retzii* which are common in the area. The Bird Atlas also states that they thought the cuckoo was overlooked rather than absent.]

Unfortunately, we were all too excited and glued to our bins to even think of taking a picture, nonetheless I would like to submit this record to the Botswana Rarities Committee, if they would be so kind as to post me some rarity forms.

First record of Lesser Crested Tern for Namibia

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On 5 May 2005 whilst scanning a day-roost of terns at Mile 4 Salt Works (2235S 1432E) a single Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna benghalensis* was found. At the same roost were ca.350 Sandwich Terns *S. sandvicensis*, of which less than 10% showed breeding plumage, and some 60 Swift Tern *S. bergii*. A number of Swift Tern were showing full breeding plumage with about 50% of the total being immature birds less than 6 months old. Only one non-breeding Common Tern *S. hirundo* was present. The species and plumage variations present made for a thorough comparison to be made with the Lesser Crested Tern.

The Lesser Crested Tern was showing a full breeding cap extending to the bill and a distinct crest. The bill was not as heavy as that of the Swift Tern and was a much richer yellow with a hint of orange. It was also slightly down-curved over its length. Overall size of the bird was smaller than the Swift Tern – about the same size as the Sandwich Tern. The upperparts were darker than Sandwich Tern. Under parts were white and bill, legs and feet black.

The same bird was re-located by Rod Braby and myself the following day and allowed for a fairly brief sighting before flying out to sea. Despite visiting the same roost site several times shortly thereafter, no further sightings were made. No documented records for Namibia could be found, with the closest record being from Lambert's Bay, South Africa.

I asked Tony Tree to comment on this record and the ensuing is his response. "Following on the record of a hybrid Lesser Crested Tern at the Kromme estuary in the Eastern Cape Province in March 2005 (Tree *in press*), this record is very interesting as it raises several questions and comments. The bird seen at the Kromme was, to all intents and purposes, a Lesser Crested Tern but for the pink flush on its underparts which indicated an ancestry that included the Sandwich Tern. The Kromme River bird had been individually colour-ringed as a hybrid adult of unknown origin at Banc d'Arguin off the western French coast. However, the French suspected that it was hybrid Elegant *S. elegans* x Sandwich Tern and until a satisfactory DNA analysis is undertaken they will leave it at that. However, one of the photos taken at the Kromme was in flight and it showed the underwing pattern clearly as that of the Lesser Crested. This bird bred successfully with its Sandwich Tern mate in both 2003 and 2004 and produced healthy offspring. At this stage it would appear that the bird seen at the Kromme is an F1 hybrid and that its offspring would be a F2 hybrids. It is not totally clear, but is suspected, that these later hybrids are asymptotes and that they, and their later progeny, are in the process of reverting back, with each generation, to resemble one or other of the original parents.

So what has all this to do with the Mile 4 bird noted above? The race of Lesser Crested Tern that breeds in the Mediterranean, off Libya, winters off the extreme west coast of Africa south to about Guinea-Bissau and, apart from limited

vagrancy further along the coast, no further. Odd birds from this population have ended up mated to Sandwich Tern in Britain and France over the years and I would guess that the bird seen by Mark is one of these asymptotes and NOT a pure Lesser Crested Tern. Obviously with Sandwich Tern genes in them one of the inherited characteristics would be that of long-distance migrant.

A rather lost Elegant Tern has been seen on a number of occasions in Western Europe and that, together with the purported longer de-curved bill of the subsequent hybrids seen, has given the impression that the descendants are from this source. That may be so and if that is the case then these hybrids could, therefore, be either Elegant or Lesser Crested tern asymptotes. If the Elegant is the case then do we accept these birds as being a new species to the southern African list?

Birds claimed as Lesser Crested Tern have been reported from the Western Cape Province on several occasions and all probably belong to this hybrid population. This may also include a bird claimed as that species in summer 2003 from the Kromme estuary. This means that all of these birds migrate along the Namibian coast and should be watched out for at migration time. Please also check for the individual colour rings that occur on some of them. If you see the bird in flight make a definitive account of the dark on the underwing primaries and also check for pale pink on the underparts when in fresh plumage.”

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Wattled Crane *Grus carunculata* numbers, habitat use and diet in Bushmanland

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Introduction

Wattled crane *Grus carunculata*, being nowhere common in Namibia, regularly migrate to the ephemeral pan system around Tsumkwe in Bushmanland. The Nyae-Nyae Pan, situated in a woodland savanna approximately 20km south of Tsumkwe with an average rainfall of 400-450mm, is one of the largest ephemeral pans in the area, which hold the greatest number of *G. carunculata* at a time, with a maximum population estimate of up to 150 birds (Hines 1993). The largest numbers previously recorded at any one time in this area were 52 birds in the Nyae-Nyae pan – south area (Hines 1993) and 72 birds during April 2004 (*pers.obs.*). Simmons (2004) estimates a population of approximately 200 birds for Namibia. *G. carunculata* are usually found in pairs or small flocks (up to 40 birds in southern Africa, elsewhere in Africa up to 400 birds (Maclean 1993). Hines (1993) states that they mainly occur in groups of 3 birds – 2 adults and a fully-fledged juvenile – in the Bushmanland area.

The birds are opportunistic feeders (Newman 2003) with the diet including small reptiles, frogs, and mammals as well as insects, grain, tubers and rhizomes (Maclean 1993).

Wetlands disappearing and/or being degraded have resulted in a steady population decline for *G. carunculata* throughout its natural range (Holt-Biddle 2003, Simmons 2004). Being one of the few true wetland-associated birds in Namibia (Williams 1991) they potentially suffer the same fate as wetland birds elsewhere in Africa. This paper investigates the distribution, population size, group composition and size, diet and habitat use of *G. carunculata* in the Bushmanland area.