

Flushing Flufftails out of Vleis

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We first became interested in flufftails in 1981, when some Redchested Flufftails *Sarothrura rufa* were found in the Stainbank Nature Reserve in Durban. The birds were in reeds at the head of a small dam and playback by tape of their trilling calls elicited vociferous responses. If you were lucky, you sometimes managed a fleeting glimpse as they dashed across a gap in the reeds. There seemed then little we could do about getting to know the other species for, even though one species, the Buffspotted *S. elegans* is obviously common in Natal, flufftails just don't seem to be birds that can be seen predictably or repeatedly.

On 25 October 1982, we visited the Franklin Marsh in East Griqualand, Natal, not really expecting anything but just there to have a look. JMM had visited this marsh many times over the past ten years, and had only occasionally flushed and heard Redchested Flufftails. We stopped at the edge of the reeds and watched a pair of African Marsh Harriers *Circus ranivorus* carrying nesting material to a site several hundred metres into the vlei. Having roughly marked where they were going, we started walking through the reeds in that direction. After only about 30m, suddenly a little black bird with white wing patches appeared out of the vegetation, flew across in front of us, and disappeared again into the reeds. "Whitewinged Flufftail" was the scream that rang out immediately across the vlei as we rushed after the bird to where it had vanished. However, like all flufftails, it never rose again.

There was immediately some doubt in our minds as to what this sighting of Whitewinged Flufftail *S. ayresi* meant. Was it just another "one-off" record like the others for southern Africa? There have been only five specimens (Wolff & Milstein 1976) and several (disputed by Keith *et al* 1970) sight records for southern Africa since its discovery in 1876. In Zimbabwe, Hopkinson and Masterson (1977; *in litt.*) had a few sightings in one place, but all others were incidental records of birds pitching up, usually dead.



Whitewinged Flufftail in flight over marsh near Belfast.
Transvaal W. Tarboton

However, doubts soon turned to questions about this bird's biology when, ten minutes later, we had seen two more and, after three days, had seen twelve birds, six males and six females. What were they doing here, and why so common (over the same period we flushed two Striped Flufftails *S. affinis* and eight Redchested Flufftails — the common species in vleis in South Africa)? Why had they never been seen in this marsh before? What was so special about this year? One question loomed above all others — were they breeding? Most people had suggested that the species breeds

in Ethiopia (where they were found breeding commonly in the 1940's, but never again) and migrates to southern Africa. In an attempt to answer this question, we collected one of the twelve, but this adult female showed no reproductive activity. So we didn't have an answer, at least then.

We made several more visits to Franklin up until mid January 1983 (the time of writing), and we intend going back again. On 31 October, JCS returned for the day with two other birders and saw three Whitewinged (two males, one female), three Redchested and one Striped Flufftail. Then, on 21 November, he found only two Redchested and one Striped. At least three other parties of birders visited this area during November, but no Whitewinged Flufftails were sighted. During the period 19–22 December 1982, JMM took another look and this time saw two Whitewinged, ten Redchested and two Striped Flufftails. Finally, between 4 and 7 January we flushed 18 Whitewinged and 12 Redchested Flufftails. The tally from these trips is 35 Whitewinged, six Striped and 29 Redchested Flufftails.

One thing became certain; flufftails are difficult birds to study. All that you can go on is their call (if they call) and sightings of them as they flush (if they flush) and dive into the reeds several seconds later. Obviously a good number of birds don't fly at your approach because they never get up again after having been flushed once. Also, with the playback of a tape we have often called birds up until they were only a few metres away, and then walked towards or over them without seeing anything. In spite of such frustration, we probably did get some vague ideas about what they were up to.

The apparent absence of Whitewinged Flufftails in November may have been because there was then much more water around than on both previous and later visits. Whenever JMM visited the vlei in previous years, there had been more water than recently. This summer has been exceptionally dry and, although the ground in the vlei is always sodden, there were very few areas with standing water. We also tended to see most of the Whitewinged Flufftails rise from areas without standing water. Redchested Flufftails, on the other hand, seemed to be commoner in areas close to standing water. During our visits, we covered an area about four km long and up to one km wide and this contained a number of different

vegetation zones. In some areas tall *Phragmites* dominated, while, in others, there were vast beds of *Typha* bulrushes and yet others consisted only of short sedges and water grass scarcely more than 0,5m tall. Whitewinged Flufftails were seen in all these areas and we could never really identify any habitat preference.

One feeling that arose repeatedly was that Redchested and Whitewinged Flufftails appeared to occur in pockets with little mixing of the two. We would thrash through one area for several hundred metres, putting up birds of one species, and then enter another area, looking no different from the first, and see the other species.

The call of the Whitewinged Flufftail is undescribed and we had no idea what to listen for in the vlei, especially when so many Redchested Flufftails were calling their variable "poop" and trilling calls. However, very early one morning, on our last visit, we heard a call quite unlike any other bird call yet heard in the marsh and a Whitewinged Flufftail flushed directly from where the call was booming. No other birds were heard calling on that day but, at first light on the following morning, we heard three different birds calling and managed to record one sequence which sounded like a duet. Flufftails usually respond to a tape recording of their call yet, on playback of the Whitewinged Flufftail call, we elicited no response during one session at Franklin. We hope to follow this up during future visits.

WRT, after hearing about the Franklin Whitewinged Flufftails, decided to thrash a few vleis in his study area in the Transvaal and, on walking through a small vlei near Belfast on 9 December 1982, he flushed at least two different birds. The vlei is ca 0,2 km wide by two km long and is a dry *Carex* spp. marsh with a shallow drainage line down the centre. The Whitewinged Flufftails he flushed were concentrated around the drainage line and were seen five times (probably five different birds) of which one was positively identified as a female. Subsequent trips to the vlei by R. Cassidy and T. Salinger on 17 December turned up three birds and, on 9 January 1983 by R.C., T.S. and J.C.S., produced one male and one female.

On 19–22 December 1982, when JMM was tramping through Franklin, he flushed several partly grown Redchested Flufftails which were identifiable by their partly grown

wings, small size and weak flight. When White-winged Flufftails flush, they scramble to the reed tops and take off at considerable speed on 'whirring' wings and fly some distance before crashing back into the reeds. On 6 January, two small Whitewinged Flufftails flushed together and, after a short 2m flop, crashed back into the reeds. A frantic search on hands and knees in the tangled growth failed to turn up anything. Although the two birds were in view for only a moment, the impression was that they were only part grown, appearing to have stunted wings and this, combined with their apparent inability to fly far, indicated they were young birds. This is the only indication, although not substantiated, that Whitewinged Flufftails might breed at Franklin or, indeed in southern Africa.

After the discovery of Whitewinged Flufftails at Franklin, we decided to look closely at similar vleis throughout Natal and were disappointed to see how few reasonably large vleis were still in existence. We visited one of the famous historical vleis near Cedarville, an old haunt of Finch-Davies, but were shocked to find the whole area drained and under crops and grazing. Old maps showed extensive marshy areas. Now, there is nothing more than grassy plains and drainage ditches. A local farmer told us that during exceptionally wet years the fields become flooded for short periods. Other vleis we investigated were very different in structure to the Franklin vlei and held only Redchested Flufftails.

Looking at the distribution of Wattled Cranes *Grus carunculatus* in Africa, we found that their known breeding areas coincided with recorded localities of Whitewinged Flufftails and this held true for the birds found in Natal and Transvaal. In both the Franklin and Belfast vleis, several pairs of Wattled Cranes were present and breeding. The importance of these remaining vleis cannot be overstressed from the conservation angle and all efforts should be made to proclaim as reserves as many of these wetlands as possible. They are the last strongholds of many marsh dwelling species, three of which are on the Red Data List (Brooke in prep.), Wattled Crane, Whitewinged Flufftail and Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*. Regular grazing by cattle can flatten large areas of reed beds. Building of dams upstream from the vlei and the draining and pumping of water from the vleis all disrupt the area and the birds in it. Also, marshes are

regularly burnt but, to our knowledge, no one knows the effects of burning, or how often vleis should be burnt.

If you have a vlei near you, no matter how small, try walking through the reed beds and marshy grass, preferably with one or two other birders. You may get your feet wet but the sight of any flufftail leaping out of the reeds in front of you, especially if it shows white wing patches, will more than compensate for muddy, wet feet. Our short trips into marshes this summer have been exciting. They have also shown how little we know about this habitat which is limited in extent, overlooked and probably has a precarious future.

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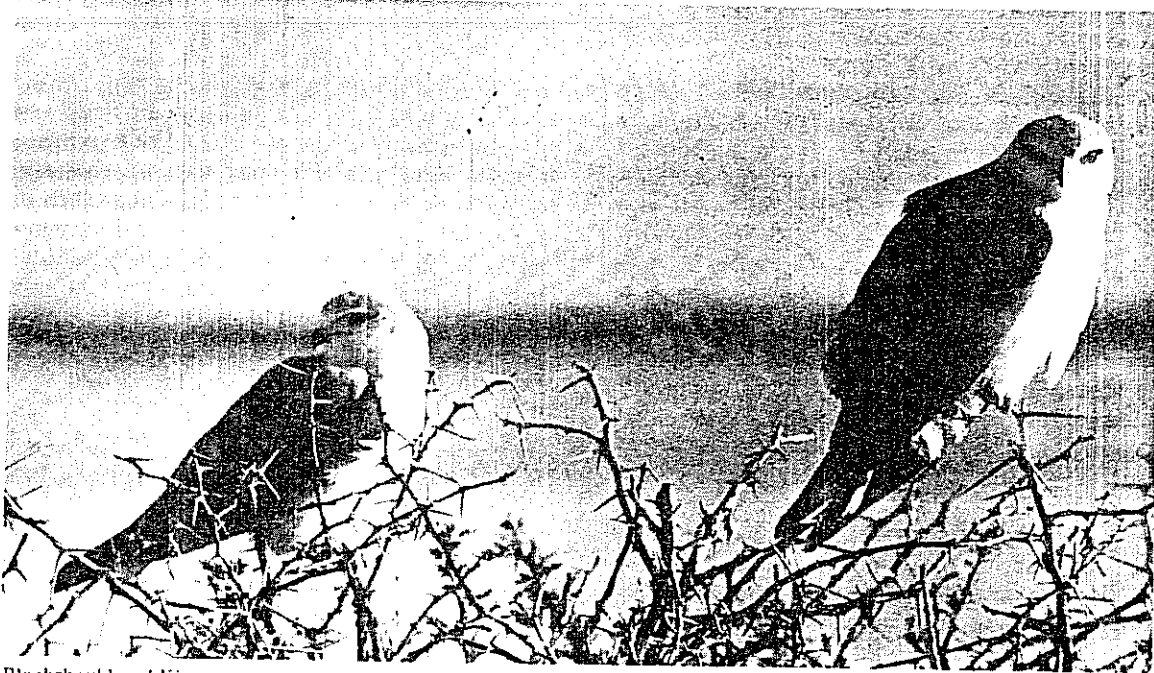
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Causes of mortality in Blackshouldered Kites

JOHN MENDELSON

There have been several extensive surveys of death among European and North American raptors. Ian Newton (1979) has reviewed these thoroughly. Little, however, has been recorded on this subject for African birds of prey. Most observations have been of an incidental nature and have been published anecdotally. During



Blackshouldered Kites

a study of Blackshouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*, I recorded occasional deaths and noted several factors that probably contribute to mortality. Most observations were made in the Settlers area of the Springbok Flats, Transvaal, where I studied the birds during 1977 and 1978.

Six kites were found dead after being hooked or spiked by *Acacia* thorns. *Acacias* are the dominant trees in the Springbok Flats, and the common and appropriately named "haak-en-steek" *A. tortilis*, is the most hazardous for kites. One adult female, found dead on her nest, had several punctures through the dorsal thoracic wall into her lungs. Kites were seen struggling to free themselves from thorny thickets about 25 times. "Branching" chicks, disturbed from their nests, often clambered into the thicket of the nest tree and became entangled.

Instances are known of predation of kites by Tawny Eagles *Aquila rapax*, Spotted Eagle Owls *Bubo africanus* and probably Peregrines *Falco peregrinus* (A.C. Kemp and P. Stidolph pers. comm.; Longrigg 1981). The remains of a colour-marked male were found eaten below its roost tree, but, whether it had been caught or scavenged by a small carnivore, was unknown. Alan Kemp (pers. comm.) recorded

a similar death of a roosting male. Lanners *F. biarmicus* in the Springbok Flats often attacked flying juvenile kites, but adult kites usually chased Lanners passing through their territories.

Many specimens now in museums were found killed by motor vehicles on roads. Kites are most susceptible to collision during strong winds and while carrying heavy prey items. Their flight is then laboured and low over the ground.

Many farmers claim that kites take poultry, and lots of birds are probably accordingly shot. The farmers probably react to kites hunting near farmyards which, in the Settlers area, are good hunting areas. However, kites are rodent specialists and are attracted to the frequent abundance of rodents in rank vegetation around farmyards (Mendelsohn 1982).

The following injuries were found on kites caught for ringing and those found dead: a deformed lower mandible, a 10mm-hole in the patagium, five adjacent secondaries missing, a fractured but healed radius, and a fractured tarsometatarsus. The last injury was found on a fledgling of the marked male found eaten below its roost. This fledgling was found dead below the same tree two days after its father had died. The chick had a very full crop the

day before it died, which suggests that it did not starve.

Most of these injuries were probably sustained by kites striking obstacles while they attacked prey. Kites attacking mice in Balchatri traps often did so in full flight, hitting the trap with impressive force. I watched one hovering kite drop vertically towards prey and then hit the strands of a barbed-wire fence.

Three kites were caught with growths on their gapes. A similar growth found on a dead bird (caught in a thorn tree) was malignant (Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Station report). One marked adult probably died from some other disease. During the last week before it disappeared, it often perched with drooped wings and closed eyes, and was then abnormally tame compared with previous reactions.

The Springbok Flats is an area of intensive cultivation and great quantities of pesticides are applied. However, most of these are organophosphorous compounds which are not residual. I found no evidence of kites being poisoned directly, although that must occur occasionally. Similarly, there were no indications of contamination by the residues of other chemicals. Mammals do not accumulate high concentrations of pesticide residues, so kites probably seldom suffer from these effects. However, kites hunting along busy roads could accumulate high levels of lead, where rodents pick up substantial quantities of lead from petrol exhaust fumes.

These causes of death may often be linked to food shortages, which is probably the most important ultimate mortality factor. One incident illustrates such a link clearly. Female No. 6, when first caught as a resident on a territory, had a mass of 273g, relatively high for an adult female which, on average, has a mass of 258g. Three days later she was recaptured on the same territory, and this time her mass was 231g. Although substantially lower, this was still within the lower range for females. Then, 12 days later, I found her hunting about 20 km from her territory and, in fact, trespassing on the territory of another resident. She was hunting very intensively and made a strike into a road verge. There, she became thoroughly caught in clinging heads of "klitsgras" *Setaria verticillata* (anyone foolishly wearing socks in the veld will testify to the extreme "stickiness" of these grass heads). She was unable to escape from the

grass and, after several minutes work, I was able to free and release the bird. Her mass then was 209g and her flight was weak and laboured. In spite of being released, her prospects of survival were probably poor. The mass of this bird had dropped by 23% between initial and final capture.

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HOW MANY DID YOU GET?

(Answers to picture quiz from December issue).

- 1) Obviously, by its rounded wings and tail, one of the buzzards. Dark head, contrasting with paler underparts and boldly patterned black and white underwing point to Jackal Buzzard. (Crowned Eagles have dark underwing