

## CONTENTS

VOLUME 36 (3) 2003

OSBORNE, T. O. Editorial .....	1
BOIX-HINZEN, C & M. BOORMAN. Helping behaviour in Gray's Lark <i>Ammomanes grayi</i> .....	2
DANTU, S.& M. BOORMAN. A homing pelican—part II. ....	4
DANTU, S. Ugab birding week .....	5
BOORMAN, M. Bird ringing in Namibia .....	6
PAXTON, M. Some Unusual Sightings at Shamvura Restcamp – Okavango River .....	7
BOORMAN, M. Second coastal record of Buff-spotted Flufftail <i>Sarothrura elegans</i> for Namibia .....	8
OSCHADLEUS, D. National ringing training courses .....	10
HEINRICH, D. Pygmy Kingfisher <i>Ispidina picta</i> at Epupa Falls, Namibia .....	11
OSCHADLEUS, D, BM DYER, RJM CRAWFORD, & L UPFOLD Sociable Weaver roadside nest densities in southern Namibia .....	12
BIRD NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS .....	18

## Editorial

Tim Osborne

The dry season is truly upon us with the east winds howling in the interior and the berg winds affecting the coast. News reports state that the winds at Lüderitz were reaching 140 km/h. I wonder if there were any birders there to look for vagrants to the coastal desert? On our farm we have hardly seen any Queleas or Chestnut Weavers in months. I wonder where they have gone, in search of food and water I presume. The rodent high we have been experiencing for the past three years crashed and now the effects are evident in the form of missing birds. Gone are the Barn Owls, Black-shouldered Kites, Marsh Owls and even the Pearl-spotted Owls are scarce.

For those of you with Internet access you should check out the website for SAFRING. Go to [www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu/safring\\_index.htm](http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu/safring_index.htm). The site has life histories of all the birds that have been ringed. Each week more histories are added to the site. If you have ever wondered how many African Hawk-Eagles have been ringed and where you can check it out. It might surprise you how many have been ringed since 1948. There have been 244 birds ringed and with the start of computerized records in 1975 Namibia has the most birds ringed at 76. There have been 10 recoveries with the longest distance being 795 km and oldest time being 22 years, 9 months and 21 days.

It is nice to see more articles being submitted by members from the coast. Lots of interesting birds with some out of place like Black Kites, Flufftails and breeding Gray's Larks. I have requested the annual Chairman's and Financial reports for those of us who could not attend the AGM and I will put them in the next edition. I, like many of the outlying members, wonder if any of the outings publicized in the Bird Call were attended, as there have not been any reports submitted to the *Lanioturdus*. These are important to write up because those of us who cannot attend meetings in Windhoek and outings close to Windhoek would like to know what is being seen and more about club activities.

## HELPING BEHAVIOUR IN GRAY'S LARK *Ammomanes grayi*

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More than writing this article to boast about one of the most effortless ringing experiences in our lives, we are hoping this article pricks some egos of any birder living near a gravel plain where Gray's Lark *Ammomanes grayi* may occur. On Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2003, after finishing the mid-winter Herero Chat census at Spitzkoppe, Mark Boorman and myself took the D1918 to Henties Bay. Not long after joining this road we picked up the distinct pale silhouettes of Gray's Larks flying across the road. Curious about the fact that only one crossed the road and not several (as they normally move around in small groups) we reversed and scanned the gravel plains.

We watched a very active adult foraging on the gravel plains and in no time his efforts were rewarded with a juicy grasshopper. Full of intent, the small lark belted it through the baking plains and bent over a seemingly barren patch of gravel. It was evidently feeding chicks...in July!!!...And all it took was less than five minutes of observation, a pinch of luck and patience. We believe there are no records of breeding Gray's Lark for July, According to the Avian data base at Ministry of Environment and Tourism there are three records of nests with eggs: 2 in January and 1 in February. There are also three records for young in the nest: 1 each in Feb, April and May. It is obvious that these birds had bred in reaction to a sudden desert downpour...as had several others: White-throated Canary, Fiscal Shrike, Dusky Sunbird, Sabota Lark and Long-billed Lark, Grey-backed Finch Lark and Lark-like Bunting.

A few more minutes looking at the larks revealed another adult, possibly the missing mate, also carrying food to the same patch of gravel and feeding a nestling. We now had managed to landmark the spot and were ready to spring out of the car and inspect the nest...but to our surprise we spotted a third individual

helping the breeding adult pair to gather food. In 1999 Mark Boorman observed a group of Gray's Lark in close proximity to a nest containing chicks. At the time he considered that helping might be taking place but was not able to verify this behaviour. We wondered how many other records exist of "helping" in Gray's Lark?

Christian approached the gravel site where he thought the nest would be, but to his surprise a very energetic "downling" perked up its bulgy head from a depression caused by a donkey's hoof. There was no nest but instead a full-fledged chick!! The chick soon realised he was homing in on it and gapped it, but it was clumsy enough that he was able to grab hold of it. It was a unique experience to sit in the plains and swiftly ring the bird whilst the parents carefully inspected what we were doing and vocalized at us barely 1.5 meters away. Aware of their distress we placed the chick back in its depression and walked away but not without taking full advantage of the photographic opportunity that the birds and their close approach granted us. No sooner we had left the chick on its own the trio continued feeding the newly bangled "downling".

Dieter Oschadleus from SAFRING confirmed with Mark Boorman that the two chicks he and his friend Dries Nel ringed on 29/04/2000 were the only Gray's Lark ever recorded as ringed in Namibia, thus making this one the third on the newly computerised SAFRING records.

As we drove down to Henties we discussed how easily it might be to trap an entire group or feeding unit using netted hoop traps with juicy, wriggly, mealworms. Later, in the solace of the coastal plain road Christian wondered how come in this day and age; a Spaniard on passage through Namibia's deserts gets to record the first breeding Gray's Larks in July; rings the third ever Namibian Gray's Lark and effortlessly stumbles upon an undocumented, exciting and evident behavioral trait such as helping in a species that's a near-endemic in Namibia.

I felt as excited as lonely in my birding passion.