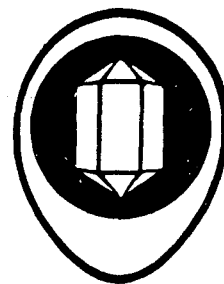


Lanioturdus torquatus
Drosselwürger

MITTEILUNGEN

ORNITHOLOGISCHE ARBEITSGRUPPE



SCHRIFTFLEITUNG: POSTFACH 67, WINDHOEK, S.W.A.

Nr. 5-6

18. Jahrgang

August/September 1982

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THIS BIRD?

(1)

South African Shelduck - - Graukopfgans - - Bergeend

TADORNA CANA (Roberts No. 90)

Identification

This large chestnut-coloured duck occurs at dams and vleis where the water is shallow and there are stretches of wet mud. Adult females have a variable amount of white on the face and a grey neck. Adult males and both the young (less than eight months old) males and females have a grey head and neck.

Shelducks are likely to be confused with only two other species. Most confusion occurs with Egyptian Geese (R 89) which are similar in size and especially in flight pattern. Both Shelduck and Egyptian Geese have black(ish) flight feathers and a white shoulder. They are best separated when standing or swimming when the difference in colour is most obvious. The Egyptian Goose is duller in colour with a greater contrast in colour between the dark back and pale underparts, whereas Shelducks are evenly coloured above and below. The dark brown ring on the neck of Egyptian Geese is a mark that can often be used to distinguish these species in flight. Adult female Shelducks might, because of the white on their face, be confused with whitefaced Ducks (R 100). However, Shelducks are considerably larger, lighter coloured and have conspicuous white patches on the shoulder whereas Whitefaced Ducks are small, dark and have no white on the wings (see Roberts Plate 9 in latest edition.).

General introduction

This harmless species, which feeds largely on vegetable matter, is found only in Southern Africa where it is mainly distributed in semi-arid areas such as the Karro in South Africa and Great-Namaqualand in Namibia/S.W.Africa. The number of Shelducks has probably been considerably increased by man's provision of suitable water bodies - either farm dams or large reservoirs.

These extra water bodies may also have enabled this species to increase its range within Namibia/S.W.Africa.

WE HAVE LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIOLOGY OF THIS SPECIES WITHIN NAMIBIA/S.W.AFRICA. BY MAKING ONLY A FEW QUITE SIMPLE OBSERVATIONS YOU CAN EASILY HELP US TO EXPAND YOUR AND OUR KNOWLEDGE.

The rest of this article, it is hoped, will provide the necessary information and stimulus for YOU to go out and make observations on this species.

Distribution

The accompanying map shows the distribution of positive records of this species submitted for the bird atlas project to date. Note, that the squares on the map are degree squares and each of these contains 16 atlas squares. Placenames and degrees are given for orientation.

So far we have records of this species from only 43 squares yet already we have added immensely to our knowledge of the distribution of this species. According to the map in "Roberts Birds of Southern Africa" and to the account in Winterbottom's "checklist of SWA birds" the northern limit of this duck is about 21° S (near Omaruru). Our records show that this species has been observed in five atlas squares in the Etosha-Kamanjab region at 19 - 20° S. Is this a recent range extension for this duck? Does it occur in between the known areas - say in the Otjiwarongo area?? Possibly at Omatjenne dam? At the moment we just don't know. If anyone has any information about this species between Omaruru and Etosha, please write and let me know.

Within its established range south of 22° S the distribution of this species is patchy but it is generally confined to the Great Namaqualand region where suitable bodies of shallow water occur. It has not been recorded from the Kalahari Sandveld to the east but might occur there on pans after some heavy rains. There is no suitable habitat over much of the Namib yet it is evident from records at Swakopsund - Walvis Bay and at Lüderitzbucht that this duck readily crosses the desert in search for freshwater bodies. Our records are still few and far between. Particularly we need more observations from between Windhoek and Hardap and again from Mariental to Keetmanshoop. The species must surely be more common here than our current records indicate. Another problem is whether this duck occurs in the Karasburg district. It should, but we have no records. Please will anyone knowing of records of this species at their farm or local dam write and tell me about them. We will be grateful for any information.

This species has an uneven sex ratio.

Adult male and female Shelducks are easily distinguishable. Females have white on the face whilst males (and also young birds of both sexes) have an all grey head and neck. Note that young birds of both sexes resemble the male in having an all grey head and neck. This situation is very unusual since in

most species where there is a difference in colouration between the adult males and females the young birds resemble the females not the males.

The African Shelduck is also unusual because, at least in South Africa, wherever large flocks have been observed there have always been far more females than males. Although we would expect a similar situation in Namibia/S.W.Africa this may not be so. I know of no published records of the sex ratio of flocks of Shelduck in Namibia/S.W.Africa. Observers who visit large dams where flocks of Shelduck occur can easily add to our knowledge of this species by counting the number of white and grey faced birds which will give the ratio of adult females to adult males plus young birds. Hardap and Goreangab Dams would seem likely places for such counts. I would be grateful for any data on this topic.

Breeding biology

We do know for sure why there are more females than males in this species. One reason may be that during breeding the female is hidden underground in an antbear or porcupine hole sitting on the eggs whilst the male parades about the territory in the open and may thus be more often attacked and killed by predators. Although with a preponderance of one sex over the other, we might expect polygamy in this species this does not seem to be the case. However, and this unusual among the ducks, the female is more aggressive in courtship than the male - she has to be, since there is more competition. This may be the factor that has led to the development of distinctive plumage in the adult females of this species. Almost all records of breeding in this species come from South Africa. It is possible that with the tendency of later rains in this country the breeding schedule is different. Can readers please let me know when they observe breeding - most easily assessed by finding the attractive downy young swimming on your local dam. Other items of information we need from Namibia/S.W.Africa are - how many eggs are laid? How many chicks reach the local dam and how many survive to fly, and what causes their death? Again if you have any information please write and tell me.

The moult

Each year almost all birds grow a completely new set of feathers. Shelducks during their moult lose so many flight feathers at one time that they become flightless. For safety at such time they move to large bodies of open water where they can swim out, away from the shore to avoid predators. At this time of the year - generally November to January in South Africa, though again this could be different here where rains are later - the largest flocks occur. The largest single flock so far observed in Namibia/S.W.Africa is 240 at Goreangab Dam. This is the best time of the year to assess sex ratios and also for us to census the population although population at our dams may be affected by any influx of birds from South Africa, as records of birds ringed in Transvaal and Southwestern Cape Province and recovered in Namibia/S.W.Africa indicate.

