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Editorial

In a past editorial (Lanioturdus 42-4) I mentioned the changing distributions of certain species. One species which seems to be a lot more common around Windhoek these days is the pin-tailed whydah. When I first moved to Windhoek some 28 years ago this was a species which one saw perhaps twice in five years. Now it is regularly seen at Avis Dam and we are getting more and more reports of these birds from suburban gardens all around Windhoek. Its host species, the common waxbill, is not a terribly common species around Windhoek and I certainly have not noticed any great increase in the numbers of these birds. However, both Roberts VII and Trevor Carnaby (Beat about the Bush *Birds* – Jacana Media 2008), indicate that it is suspected that the red-billed firefinch may be a secondary host although this is not proven. Come on you citizen scientists out there – this is a chance to make a name for yourself in the world of ornithology. We have a burgeoning population of red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek and if they are indeed secondary hosts to pin-tailed whydahs this might just be the time and place to prove it.

In this issue we once again have a report of sightings of tagged vultures in the Namib (see "Rarities and Interesting Observations"). It should be noted that Namibian tagged birds are tagged only on the right wing whereas South African tagged birds are tagged on both wings. Please be on the lookout for these tagged birds and report all sightings to us and to Holger Kolberg (holgerk@mweb.com.na) and Peter Bridgeford (pmbridge@iway.na). Since tagging began in Namibia far more sightings of marked birds have been reported and every report is important as it provides vital information on, inter alia, movements, survival rates and longevity of these magnificent birds. Each bit of information you provide forms part of a much bigger picture.

While on the subject of reporting sightings – please report all blue crane sightings in Namibia (and, as it is possible that these birds may be spending time in Botswana, Zambia or Angola, any sightings from these neighbouring countries as well) to Ann and Mike Scott (ecoserve@iway.na) and to Holger Kolberg at the address above. Some of the Etosha blue cranes are ringed with green plastic rings with white three letter codes on them. Wattled crane and grey crowned crane sightings should also be reported.

Readers are reminded that the Namibia Bird Club now has a new website – www.namibiabirdclub.org Many thanks to Holger Kolberg for setting up this website and be advised that "The Bird Nerd" page on this website is well worth reading.

Some Interesting Observations- Shamvura Camp and Kavango Region

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All photographs in this article are by Mark Paxton

Changing habits.

Over the past years there have been a number of significant changes in the habits of several bird species, particularly noticeable in the northern reaches of Namibia. They appear to

be closely connected to the, now quite obvious, climatic differences experienced all over the world today. Temperature data collected personally from this area over a continuous period of some fifteen years clearly indicate significant rises which presumably contribute to the birds' changing habits. Some now seem to prefer over-wintering here rather than enduring the arduous migratory journey to the northern hemisphere or the warmer regions of central Africa every year around April with the onset of our winter.

Some of the more locally migratory birds such as **Violet-backed Starlings** are now commonly seen here in the woodland areas during the winter months having previously been considered only summer visitors. **Lesser Moorhen, Wood Sandpiper** and **Common Sandpiper** are now equally well established on the river system throughout the year.

Ringed records also indicate some less common, and therefore more easily overlooked, but nevertheless confirmed migratory species, are found here over the colder months. These include **African Golden Oriole** and **Eurasian Reed-Warbler** to mention two. Some other species like **Allen's Gallinule, Southern Carmine Bee-Eater** and **African Skimmer** also showed tendencies to revise their general habits by staying longer than in previous years or by arriving earlier, but this behaviour may also have been influenced by the heavy, or prolonged rains throughout the region improving their preferred habitat. Whatever the reasons may be, it would appear that "things they are achanging," and the birds, as would be expected of them, are adapting to these changes where possible. One only hopes that these adaptations do not include leaving this bird rich part of Namibia.

Western Banded Snake-Eagle, Dickinson's Kestrel and **Dark Chanting Goshawk** seem to still be largely absent from this region, or at least increasingly uncommon and not as easily picked up as in previous years. Not sharing a common prey, habitat or breeding condition factor, I am at a loss as to what the reason is for this change.

Range Changes or Extensions.

With the previous couple of years having enjoyed prolonged or heavy rains, some habitats have either changed or improved such as to suit some bird species which have consequently extended their previous ranges to now include this region.

Cuckoo Finch was recorded in January 2009, when I saw a male and at least two females at a temporary pan about 8 km east of Shamvura Camp. There are isolated recordings from this general area but the closest seems to be towards the east and several hundred kilometres away.

Orange-Winged Pytilia was first seen in December 2008 with some guests. At that location, some 5 km east of Shamvura Camp, we saw what appeared to be a pair. I again saw probably the same birds there on a few more occasions that season and again during May 2009 at the same location.



Male Orange-winged pytilia

Schalow's Turaco. Once quite rare, even within their recognised range around the Katima Mulilo area, they are now quite easy to see in most town properties. During 2008 a single bird was reported some 20 km west of Rundu (Krista Kuehl, pers. comm.) This is a very significant distance of almost 500 km from its original range and there are a number of other pockets of suitable habitat in between where this bird could be establishing itself.

Collared Palm-Thrush as a single bird was first reported to me in Mahango Game Reserve in 2004 (Chris Hines pers. comm.) I confirmed

the sighting myself shortly afterwards and since then I have seen two birds at the same location a number of times. I have seen this species there as recently as March 2009.

Thrush Nightingale was captured in a mistnet in March 2008 at Shamvura Camp.



Thrush nightingale

Collared Flycatcher. A female was first seen at Shamvura Camp with the "Nkwazi Bird Club" in September 2007. This single bird stayed in the area for almost a month before moving away with the onset of a few days of rain.

Greater Swamp-Warbler seems to be restricted by a preferred habitat of papyrus swamp to mainly the Okavango "Panhandle" in Botswana, extending only into some suitable parts of the Mahango Game Reserve. I first reported them here at Shamvura Camp in January 2006 when birds were captured and ringed and where they are now regularly and easily seen in the more mature and undisturbed reed beds along the river.

River Warbler was first reported to me in 2004 from Mahango Game Reserve (Chris Hines pers. comm.) and I found a bird at Shamvura Camp shortly after in December 2005. Some extensive mist-netting in the area

where this individual was seen however did not result in any success and no further sightings have been recorded so it is very likely to have been a “one off” vagrant, but nonetheless worth mentioning.

Souza’s Shrike, previously regarded as a “very rare seasonal visitor to some northern areas of Namibia,” was found to be possibly more than that, when I found a pair of them with at least one fledgling in the vicinity of Shamvura Camp in November 2006 with Rob De Rover and Tisha Greyling. I later confirmed the species as a “Breeding Resident” in October 2007 when I documented the first breeding record of a pair nesting about 7 km east of Shamvura Camp (Africa Birds and Birding, April-May 2008, Vol. 13, No. 2.). Since then I have located about eight breeding pairs, all within 10 km of Shamvura Camp. Previously the only two recognised locations were some 20 km west of Rundu and then again in the Katima Mulilo vicinity with nothing of any real significance in between. That concept seems to now have radically changed with what appears to be a thriving population in the Shamvura area. I am convinced after much experience with these birds that they are habitat specific and are not unduly influenced by the proximity of human habitation and the negative influences normally associated with this situation. This was recently confirmed when I found a pair nesting in October 2009 within 200 metres of a newly established homestead/village near Shamvura Camp. I feel this is a vital adaptation of this species and will undoubtedly assure it’s survival in this increasingly human-influenced region of Namibia.

Birds shown to occur in the area on the distribution map but not seen by me

Hadedda Ibis are large and somewhat noisily obvious birds which don’t generally go unnoticed. Their recognised distribution includes a large part of the region. I have lived and birded in the Kavango Region for over 15 years and I have yet to see one.

Southern Pied Babblers similarly, are by their nature, plumage and call, not birds to be missed or confused with any other babblers here, and yet I have not seen any.

It may be that either of these birds has established smaller “pocket” populations in the more remote areas of the region but this is unlikely.

Birds at the Westernmost Extent of their Distributions and Other Interesting Observations

Although not significantly out of their ranges, some species are worth a mention here as being at the westernmost extent of their normal distribution and therefore in these times of change, possibly in the process of extending their ranges, or merely because they are rarely seen species even within their recognised ranges.

Yellow-billed Duck and **White-backed Duck** are not commonly seen birds anywhere in Namibia, however on the river system at Shamvura Camp we seem to pick up small groups of up to eight individuals of both these species every year with the beginning of the rainy season. Yellow-billed Duck were first recorded here in November 2002.

Cape Teal, although recorded over a wide area of Namibia, is not a commonly seen duck on the Okavango River system and, when seen, as was the case on 10 October 2009, it is worth a mention.

Ayres’s Hawk-Eagle, is not a commonly seen raptor in Namibia and as with most of the larger eagles, is becoming scarcer every year as persecution and other environmental pressures take their toll. We used to have a breeding pair in the immediate vicinity of Shamvura Camp until last year when the nest was disturbed by local inhabitants and the pair was either killed or left the area. However on 11 November 2009 I saw, (and photographed) an adult bird which appeared to be a melanistic morph very close to the camp, so one hopes they will again be establishing a breeding situation.



Ayres's hawk-eagle

Black Sparrowhawk continues to be an irregular but constant sighting in the vicinity of Shamvura Camp.

European Honey-buzzard is a regular visitor to this region every year despite being considered rare in Namibia and at Shamvura Camp we even had them vocalising while involved in display flights in March 2007.

Long-legged Buzzard is seen most years in the vicinity of Shamvura Camp and normally early in the rainy season before the other migratory raptors make an appearance. In 2009 the first one confirmed with a photograph was on 11 November.

African Purple Swamphen is common throughout its extensive range but on the Okavango River system this is not the case. For many years it was particularly difficult to pick up here at Shamvura Camp and completely absent from places like Mahango Game Reserve where it would be expected to be quite common. However in recent years it has become increasingly easier to see here at Shamvura Camp but is still absent from Mahango Game Reserve.

Wattled Crane was first recorded here in February 2003 and remains a rare bird but every year we see at least one or two individuals in the vicinity of Shamvura Camp with the onset of the rains and when the surrounding floodplains are starting to fill up with the rising river levels. The most recent sighting was in November 2008 with Roy

Vincent. During many years of association with the small population of the nearby Mahango Game Reserve it is my contention that these are very habitat specific birds and quite sensitive to human proximity or interference. They also seem to maintain a very small population even in a protected area such as the park where one would expect them to thrive and increase. Yet even here I have never counted more than 10 individuals during my annual wetland birdcounts with extensive observer coverage. At one stage a few years ago I thought we had two distinct pairs; one on the floodplains opposite Shamvura Camp and the other nearer the Cuito River junction about 4 km upstream. I still think that to be the case, but given the vastness of these flood plains and the lack of coverage they get from bird enthusiasts there could be others that have gone undetected. I don't think though, that we will ever find flocks in hidden flood plains in Angola, as I feel they maintain themselves at a low population level, even in ideal situations.

Grey Crowned Crane has not been recorded here, but very recently this month (November 2009) a group of informed guests of ours reported a group of 10-15 birds flying overhead near Shakawe town in Botswana, a distance of a little more than 100 km from here. I reported this to Pete Hancock-BirdLife Botswana, who will no doubt include this in their publication or records. The point of mentioning this here is the close proximity of the sighting and therefore the possibility of a range extension in these times of change.

Sanderling is found every year here at the onset of the rainy season on the river in small numbers of not more than five at a time.

African Skimmer still remains a seldom seen bird along the Okavango River system and outside protected areas. We still however have, at Shamvura Camp, a regular group of now 38 birds which come upriver every year about June when the lowering water-levels start exposing sandbanks. About 15 of this group then remain to breed while the rest of the group carries on upriver and mainly into the Cuito tributary. By the end of the breeding

season in December when the group again gathers before moving back downriver there are usually about 2-8 free-flying immature birds with them. This would constitute the year's successfully fledged young of the group of 38. Over the past four years I have seen two ringed birds from my ringing program in Mahango Game Reserve in 2003. This would presumably indicate that this group originates from there. In the past few years breeding pairs on sandbanks around here have been adversely affected by illegal local fishermen using large "drag nets" and operating from these sandbanks, thereby destroying eggs, nests and chicks. Thanks to some gratifying co-operation between the control inspectors of the Ministry of Fisheries and myself this problem has been radically reduced but sadly not eliminated.



African skimmer

Southern Carmine Bee-eater is not an uncommon species and can regularly be seen every year with the start of the rainy months when they move into the region to resume breeding activities. What is worth a mention and unusual on this river system though is their breeding sites of which there are not many. We have the only site I know of on this river, within Namibia, some 12 km downriver from Shamvura Camp. It is now a colony of about 1500 birds and for the past four years has occupied the same site successfully and with thankfully no persecution from locals destroying their nest tunnels for chicks to be used as bait for fishing. At one stage it was also rumoured that adults were killed for their feathers to be sold to the Chinese.

Southern Ground-Hornbill can now only be found in the very remotest southern reaches of this region around and in the Kaudum Game Park due to human persecution.

Greater Honeyguide is a relatively easy bird to find in the vicinity of Shamvura Camp even though slightly out of its recognised range.

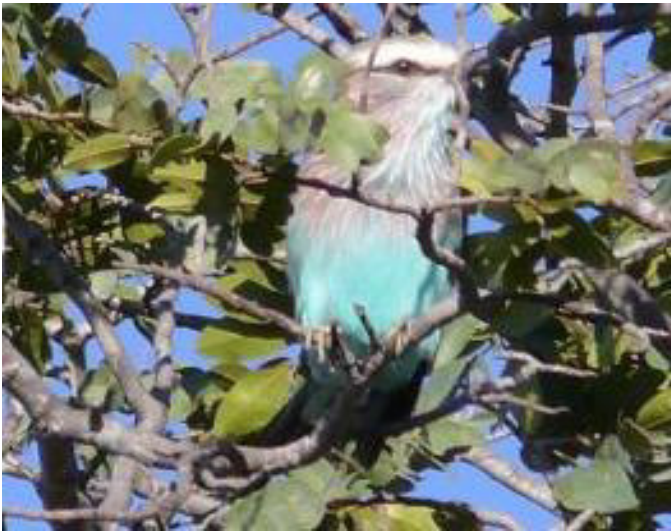
Angola Swallows as individual birds are noted almost every year in the Shamvura area, and more easily so when they appear before the Barn Swallow influx and there can be no confusion.

Arnot's Chat is relatively easy to find in the broadleaf deciduous woodland in the Shamvura area even though this is not regarded as its preferred habitat.

Racket-tailed Roller is a habitat specific bird which prefers untouched mature woodland where large trees offer ideal conditions. With the progressively worsening de-forestation situation throughout this region these habitats are becoming more difficult to find and consequently this bird is becoming hard to see. We are fortunate in having a few pockets of suitable woodland in the vicinity of Shamvura Camp, where we still have some of these birds as breeding residents. We have also recorded some individuals which display the characteristics of the sub-species *Coracias spatulata weigalli*, and which should only occur in "extreme south Tanzania and Mozambique south of the Zambezi". Occasional pink-breasted hybrids are recorded from Zambia and Zimbabwe, west of Victoria Falls, but it appears that this sub-species or hybrid now occurs further afield.



Racket-tailed roller



Racket-tailed roller ssp C.s.Wiegalli, showing more pink chest

Luapula Cisticola continues to be a well-established bird on the river system and quite easy to pick up in its preferred habitat of sparse, disturbed or heavily-grazed reed beds.

Chirping Cisticola similarly is well represented here and in the same habitat but also makes use of the more mature and denser reed beds undisturbed by grazing cattle.

Cape Wagtail of the sub-species *M. c. simplissima* is the more common of the two sub-species found along the river system. It is rumoured that this may become a separate species and therefore is a sought-after “tick” for birders.

Yellow Wagtail is a regular annual visitor to the Shamvura area where it can be located at the many temporary inland pans that appear with the onset of the rains, rather than on the river itself. Here groups of up to six have been found and are easily approachable, presumably because of the constant human presence surrounding these water-sources.

Wood Pipit seems to have adapted to the disturbed situation found in the Kavango Region and can often be easily seen and approached in the stubble found in the harvested mahango fields. They also occur on the road verges and the many grassy cleared

areas in the woodland where trees have been felled. They are quite often associated with African Pipit when the plumage differences become apparent.

Rosy-Throated Longclaw is a regular annual visitor when the rains create their preferred moist habitat in the same disturbed reed beds used by Luapula Cisticola.

Sharp-Tailed Starling is nowhere common within its recognised range in Namibia. In October 2005 I recorded a small group close to Shamvura Camp which seemed to possibly be breeding. Since then we have had several sightings over the years of sometimes up to 30 individuals in a group with young/immature birds indicating a breeding population. They are still not common and seem to range widely, but are not secretive in their behaviour, although being less vocal than other starlings with which they regularly mix. Consequently when they are in the area they are easily picked up.



Sharp tailed starling