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EDITORIAL

Once again this edition of *Lanioturdus* has been considerably delayed in its production as few articles have come in over the past six months. The rush of articles in July and August have been gratifying and I hope that this will continue in the future.

This is the last edition of *Lanioturdus* I will be editing for a while as I am no longer in a position to give the magazine the attention it needs to be successful. When I started as editor about six years ago, I had had no previous active involvement with the bird club up to that time. I got involved because I (and many other members) felt that a small informative and interesting local magazine was absolutely integral to making the club a success and birding in Namibia the pleasurable pastime it should be. I think we succeeded to a large extent and I would like to thank all of those individuals who contributed so much to making *Lanioturdus* a success. Special thanks must go to Carole Roberts who has done the layout of every copy to go out in the last six years and has done so with unfailing good humour. Coleen Mannheimer contributed the vast majority of the artwork for the magazine over the years and deserves a special mention. A special word of thanks also to Hartwig Dedekind, Dieter Ludwig and others who did the german editing, often at short notice. Willi Peters and the staff at Typoprint were always helpful and quick to get the magazine out on time. I would also like to thank the Bird Club Committee and the staff at the Scientific Society who did the posting and packaging, set up exchange agreements and answered many queries.

Tim Osborne has volunteered to take over the editing of the magazine from October onwards. I would like to wish Tim (and I am sure Laurel) well with the editorship in the future and encourage all of the contributors of the past to continue to support the magazine.

Some of the highlights were:

1. Some movements of flamingos became apparent from monitoring by staff based in Etosha. No breeding took place there despite some flooding of the eastern half of the pan. The birds appeared to be moving to Sua Pan, Botswana, where Graham McCulloch recorded breeding by mainly Lesser Flamingos. The movements occurred in January and involved a few thousand birds at a time. The same phenomenon was apparent in April for which a separate report is being produced
2. The highlight for the region and my parting gift as the regional coordinator for southern Africa (Doug Harebottle of the ADU in Cape Town takes over) is to have obtained the first ever count from Angola. Dr Alison Sakko counted the southwestern corner of that beautiful country, centred on the beaches and bays of the Baia dos Tigres. This 'Bay of Tigers' is so named because the Namib Desert dunes that meet the sea are striped with residual minerals. She counted 150 km of this coast, recording 5848 birds of 25 species for an average of 39 shorebirds per kilometre. Some of the more interesting finds were Royal Terns (239) rarely reported from southern Africa, Ospreys (3) and Black Oystercatchers (38) not usually found this far north. Damara Terns were expected and numbered 160. Kelp Gulls were seen breeding on the uninhabited sand island which is now cut off from the mainland.
3. Highest species totals in Namibia occurred at Walvis Bay (where 43 Rednecked Phalaropes was surely a record number of this rare visitor), Mahango Reserve on the Okavango River (52 species), and the Orange River mouth counted in collaboration with our South African colleagues with 57 species.
4. The largest single number of birds occurred at Sandwich Harbour on the central coast which boasted half the total number of birds counted in Namibia (121, 500 birds). Large flocks of Common Terns boosted this figure beyond the hundred thousand mark as it did in January 1998.
5. Black Egrets were found in some unusual places including a farm river just outside Windhoek and on the Swakoppoort Dam as well as the more expected areas of the Zambezi River.
6. Wattled Cranes occurred at Oshituntu (21) in the flooded grasslands north of Etosha National Park, together with five Crowned Cranes, and at

Nyae-Nyae Pan in Bushmanland (9 birds).

7. Black Tailed Godwit and good numbers of Lesser Moorhen were recorded at Fischer's Pan in eastern Etosha, while 2700 Redwinged Pratincoles were resident on the Zambezi River.

Thanks are due to all the wetland counters, particularly those that have been on the rack for ten years now, particularly the Namibian Bird Club and Nature Conservation officials who have given long term service. Special thanks to Keith Wearne for organising the Walvis Bay counts and providing monthly counts for Walvis Bay Sewage Works (the third Namibian wetland to be counted monthly), to Val and Dan Sparg for a second count of the Zambezi River, and especially Alison Sakko for the first ever count from Angola.

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JULY WETLAND BIRD COUNT – MAHANGO GAME PARK

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The month of July in the Kavango Region started with a general lull in the unrest situation throughout the area, with only localized pockets of action and disturbance. Army and Special Field Force activities in the area were stepped up and their presence was everywhere with varying degrees of effectiveness. I'd had six months of living on the river and only being able to look at it, without being able to put a boat on it. I made up my mind to consider the Mahango Game Park bird count the goal of the month and risk life and limb to bandits now and not only to crocodiles.

The hierarchy of the local MET had changed considerably lately and I had to get to know the new lot all over again and explore the pros and cons of time in the park, and obtain permission to conduct the bird count. The all-important question of finance was also considered and very quickly dealt with after a phone call and letter to Peter Le Roux (Caltex Oil Namibia). Linda Sheehan as always was ever ready to participate as scribe and general moral support. The boat (Red Bitch/ Red Robyn/ Mahango) was tested and spruced up and we were ready to roll, after a quick weekend on the river at Shamvura to be sure that everything was shipshape. Some general talks with NDF and Police confirmed that the unrest in the Mukwe area didn't often extend to the area in which the Park was situated. Again, getting volunteer help was a mission and it was up to Linda and myself (with Sukela, the dog, as back up) to get the count done. We hit the road in high spirits with visions of flocks of Shoebill storks seeking shelter from their war-torn country. We even talked about the possibility of finding hidden caches of rare birds from the DRC brought in by one of our enterprising politicians. We were mentally gearing ourselves for breaking records.

Our camp was the usual place amongst some impressive old trees on the edge of the marshy land bordering the river. Setting up our meagre camp didn't take us too long and then we put the boat in the water. After a short run over a stretch of the river to judge the reflexes of the local crocodiles and hippos we got the boat to the campsite and bedded down for the night. Our vehicle had decided that it was time to contribute a few problems to the ensuing count, and that required some gentle adjustments before we settled into the regular night chorus of owls and the occasional hyena.

The following morning started with a trip to the main gate and to Divundu to sort out the vehicle problem and to find out where the Park rangers were to possibly enlist some help. They seemed to have their own vehicle problems to attend to and we were left on our own to conduct the count. We systematically quartered the one bank slowly to the Botswana border with the intention of returning along the opposite bank in the afternoon. However, we saw a wato (canoe) with a furiously rowing Botswana local in one of the inlets and knowing he was illegally in the Park we went over to inquire of the nature of his business. Our local friend however was very aware he was

being naughty, and was in no mind to discuss the situation when we reached him. He promptly disembarked and dived under some papyrus lining the bank, rather risking the crocodiles than a confrontation with us. We were left with the wato containing his nets; some spears and dead fish. We towed the wato to a prominent point on the mainland to be recovered by the Park authorities and resumed the count.

On passing the insignificant inlet leading to the ranger camp, Nova de Marche we decided to go in for a quick look-see. This little detour revealed the 'Duck Inn' where all the good ducks with any sense of sociability hang out. The inlet proved to be quite a challenge both from a boat navigational and counting point of view. The waterway was clogged with free-floating vegetation, which didn't agree with boat propellers and seemed to come out of nowhere to impede our progress as often as possible. The flocks of ducks around us taking off and landing ahead and behind us seemed to be hell-bent on frustrating us further. A large flock of Open-billed Storks stood in open-billed amazement while we progressed erratically to the end of the inlet, while most of the time I was bent over the boat engine, feet in the air, while freeing the prop of vegetation. Linda was meanwhile desperately trying to keep track of my constant vocal barrage of abuse at the engine interspersed with counts of ducks either flying overhead or just landing.

On our way out we saw a herd of elephant from the 'Buffalo' side of the bank coming down to drink. It was almost a relief to see the main river again. We resumed counting the remaining bank, moving somewhat faster now that the sun was going down and the hippos were starting to move closer to the banks prior to moving into the marshy areas for their nightly feeding activities. The day ended with no other earth shattering discoveries.

The sandbanks and islands of the previous year had changed substantially. All the regular Cormorant and Darter roosting/nesting trees had been washed away by this year's river flow and the river appeared to be showing more extensive sandbanks than the previous year. The river was however still high enough to allow flow into the surrounding marshland so the sandbanks were not showing their true extent above water yet. The deepwater channels frequented by the hippos were certainly narrower than

the previous year, and some adroit manoeuvring of the boat was required.

The night in camp was hardly restful, however the vociferous Barred Owls kept on trying to reassure us. The hyenas had discovered our presence and one persistently patrolled the area in search of some reward. The following morning found me bleary-eyed but eager to be on the river again. A lone Yellow-billed Stork overhead and a large group of Open-billed Storks convinced us that 'time was of the essence' and Watson and I embarked on another day of hopscotch on hippo heads on the river. A stop over at Ndhovu Lodge just outside the Park before doing the opposite bank provided us with a hot shower and a cup of tea. By mid-afternoon we had completed the main river course and we then decided to cover the occasional little inlet where we spent some fruitful hours freeing fish from some nets laid by locals who decided to make themselves inconspicuous in the surrounding reeds and bush.

During the weekend we were visited by Kevin Kibble, Mark 'Schnitzel' Held and my wife Charlie, and we spent some time on the river looking for additional species we'd missed previously. The nights in camp proved none too restful with visits by hyenas, civets and foraging hippos. We'd also heard lion in the early morning not too far from camp. After the weekend when everybody else had left Linda and I finished off by spending a full day on the roads in the riverine areas covering areas not visible or accessible from the main river. Some newly made roads along the marshlands near the Botswana border, previously inaccessible, proved very fruitful and we added a few more species and numbers to the count without having to tramp waist deep through crocodile infested marshland.

Reed Cormorants and Darters previously making up the bulk of the count were actually scarce, the bulk of the population being found in a new nesting site near Kwetche. Here a group of 25 birds on nests with eggs and young chicks were found. Goliath Herons were also quite scarce, as were Purple Herons. Both Great White Egrets and Little Egrets were located mostly on the edges of the banks where the inlets into the shallow marshy areas presented good foraging opportunities. With them would be found occasional Slaty Egrets, Black Egrets and Yellow-billed Egrets.

Surprisingly few Cattle Egrets were encountered. There was a good coverage of Squacco Heron throughout the area on the main riverbank as well as on the many inlets to the marshy areas. Green-backed Herons were a regular occurrence along the main riverbanks, whereas Rufous-bellied Herons were not. The usual location or roost of White-backed Night-Heron near Kwetche was washed away, however, a single bird was located upstream a fair distance away. Only a few Little Bitterns were sited in the inlets and Hamerkops were found in occasional groups of up to three birds. Open-billed Storks were found either in large flocks thermaling high overhead or settled in the marshy areas away from the main river, together with the occasional Saddle-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Stork and Sacred Ibis. White-faced Whistling Duck made up the bulk of the count and were concentrated in mixed flocks of Spurwing Goose, Knob-billed Duck, Red-billed Teal and Fulvous Whistling Ducks. These flocks were found mostly in the inlet near Nova de Marche. African Fish Eagles were as usual evenly distributed with one bird incubating on a nest near Kwetche. Very surprisingly we struggled to find African Marsh Harriers, eventually locating one bird in the marshy area near the Botswana border. Wattled Crane were also difficult to find this time presumably because they were now nesting and therefore prone and well hidden. Disappointingly few Black Crake were seen, however, a Baillon's Crake and a Lesser Moorhen were good sightings. African Jacanas as expected were regular sightings on both the main river and the adjoining marshy areas. One Lesser Jacana made a welcome change, as did two single White-fronted Plover. A few Crowned Plovers were found well inland and a good coverage of Blacksmith Plovers. Long-toed Plovers were not easy sightings in the adjoining marshy areas. Two unexpected Common Sandpipers were found and a few overwintering Greenshanks. Two single Black-winged Stilt were also seen. Only occasional Water Dikkops were seen on the main riverbanks. The absence of any large numbers of Red-winged Pratincoles can probably be ascribed to the water still being too high to leave any suitable sandbars and dry stretches in the marshy areas. There was a surprising lack of any numbers of White-winged Terns. African Skimmers were on the other hand common, given the height of the river and the lack of suitable sandbars, and they were seen in both large flocks and pairs. Pied Kingfishers and Malachite Kingfishers were found in good numbers, together with an occasional Giant

Kingfisher.

General comments

The hippo concentrations were still mostly in the diminishing adjoining marshy areas and only a small percentage making use of the main river system. We counted a total of 25 large crocodiles on the main river system. A noticeable lack of Wattled Plovers, a normally regular sighting, and a noticeably large increase in the duck populations, particularly White-faced Whistling Duck. Our coverage of the area was greatly increased by the newly made and well-placed road system near the Botswana border marshy areas. A noticeable decrease in illegal fishing activities was probably be due to the improved vigilance of the park authorities.

Species	Thu	Fri	Mon	Total
Reed Cormorant	127	26	5	158
African Darter	45	3		48
Goliath Heron	5			5
Purple Heron	1			1
Great White Egret	8	1	17	26
Little Egret	24	5	7	36
Yellow-billed Egret	1		1	2
Black Egret		1		1
Slaty Egret	5		6	11
Cattle Egret	4	1		5
Squacco Heron	62	30	7	99
Green-backed Heron	33	16		49
Rufous-bellied Heron	3	1	1	5
White-backed Heron	1			1
Little Bittern	3	1		4
Hammerkop	10	3		13
Open-billed Stork	111	45		156
Saddle-billed Stork		1	1	2
Yellow-billed Stork		1		1
Sacred Ibis	1	4		5
White-faced Whistling Duck	405		11	416
Fulvous Whistling Duck		4		4

Species	Thu	Fri	Mon	Total
Red-billed Teal			3	3
Knob-billed Duck		2	6	8
Spurwing Goose	101	3		104
African Fish Eagle	10	4		14
African Marsh Harrier		1		1
Wattled Crane			2	2
Black Crake	7	5		12
Baillon's Crake	1			1
Lesser Moorhen		1		1
African Jacana	26	8	8	42
Lesser Jacana			1	1
White-fronted Plover	1	1		2
Crowned Plover		4	2	6
Blacksmith Plover	22	8	11	41
Long-toed Plover	5		5	10
Common Sandpiper		2		2
Greenshank	4	4		8
Black-winged Stilt		2		2
Water Dikkop	17	3		20
Red-winged Pratincole	5		60	65
White-winged Tern		1		1
African Skimmer	110	22		132
Pied Kingfisher	65	21	2	88
Giant Kingfisher	4			4
Malachite Kingfisher	12	3		15
TOTAL	1239	238	156	1633

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