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Editorial

Once again in this issue we are able to report on species new to Namibia. Er, well, perhaps one of them is not really new to Namibia, but none of the previous records was accepted.

The species concerned is the Black Skimmer, a species native to the Americas and for which, as far as I can determine, there were no confirmed records on this side of the Atlantic Ocean.

A single bird suddenly appeared at Rietvlei near Cape Town in October 2012, stayed a few days and then disappeared. A couple of days later a single bird (believed to be the same individual) appeared in Walvis Bay, stayed for a short period and again disappeared.

There have been two previous unconfirmed records of this species in Namibia of which I am aware. The first is Joris Komen's record from the Rundu Sewage Works in the mid 1980's which was not accepted by the then rarities committee on the grounds that it was just too unlikely that this species had found its way there - I don't think that Joris has forgiven that committee to this day.

The second record is Tony Tree's sighting of a single bird at Walvis Bay in February 1998, which, as far as I am aware, was also shot down by the rarities committee.

For more on the Walvis Bay Black Skimmer see Otto Schmidt's article and John Paterson's stunning action picture in the "Rarities and Interesting Observations" section of this issue.

KOAR Winter (July) Wetland Water-bird Counts, Okavango River 2012.

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All photographs in this article were provided by Mark Paxton ©.

The Okavango River system, about 480 kms of which constitutes the border between Namibia and Angola, has previously been largely neglected in the annual wetland water-bird counts programme conducted throughout Namibia. The exceptions have been the Mahango Game Reserve and a section of the river at Shamvura Camp where voluntary wetland water-bird counts have however been conducted over a consecutive period of 15 years and 11 years respectively. The remainder of the river had been left uncounted until 2012.

KOAR (Kavango Open Africa Route) which is an Open Africa initiative, was formally established in May 2011 with the formation of an association, run by an elected committee and governed by a constitution. The group established a tourist route along the Okavango River from Katwitwi on the Angolan border to Mohembo on the Botswana border. There are now over 40 establishments as members along this route all committed to the conservation principles of the KOAR Association. One of these principles, and indeed a requirement for membership, is the monitoring of the five flagship species. Two of these species are birds and one, the primary species, is a water-bird, the African Skimmer. It was therefore a natural progression for the group to get involved with the annual wetland water-bird census programme.

Consequently, a series of four training courses was conducted by Mark Paxton amongst the member establishments which were suitably situated along the river, and were naturally the tourism operations. The course concentrated specifically on water-bird species and included a formal and strenuous power-point lecture covering all the aspects of a Wetlands International Water-bird Census, together with bird identification exercises. This grueling "classroom session" was followed by a most welcomed practical session on the river to identify water-birds along defined sections of the river while conducting a trial count. After the completion of the course six areas were defined, with a coordinator chosen for each. Thirty two guides/coordinators from ten tourism establishments completed the course, but the defined count areas incorporated a total of thirteen lodges. Once the course was completed, the various coordinators conducted their own individual counts and their data was submitted through the MET (Ministry of Environment and Tourism) channels to the Netherlands based organization, Wetlands International. These counts now covered over 50 km of the Okavango River previously neglected and unknown.

The schoolmaster

It should be remembered that before this the participants were totally unaware of the wetlands water-bird counting techniques. Their bird identification skills were limited, and the process of data collection an unknown to most.

The turnout for the courses was nevertheless extremely positive, with all being involved in the demanding tourism industry having to go to a fair amount of effort to accommodate the courses and the counts in their extremely busy guest and work schedules.

These counts were a new and welcome change for many of the participants and gave them new insight into the additional values of this

dynamic river system. Some had not appreciated these values before and also got to know their own stretch of river a lot better and in a different way. On the boat they braved the icy cold winter winds bobbing around on waves large enough to surf on, while trying to identify as many obscure "little brown/grey jobs" as possible. Some of the defined areas were in rocky island areas, where the newly emerging rocks, invisible just under the water surface, posed some significant and expensive threats to boat propellers.

Wetlands water-bird count Samsitu June 2012

All have benefitted from the experience and there is a growing appreciation amongst the membership for the value of water-bird counts along this river system. These counts will hopefully be continued and also expanded on to incorporate other areas and members, adding to the coverage of the river.

The results from the counts revealed a total of 3 346 birds of 67 water-birds species.

Some comments and observations:

At this time of the year the water levels are dropping steadily and the floodplains rich with the fruits of the aquatic life breeding season are emptying into the main river system. This creates ideal hunting opportunities for the many heron and stork species which are attracted to the fish and other aquatic life now stranded in the many isolated pools in these drying and diminishing floodplains, or concentrated at the various inlets along the river banks.
Ospreys which should be migratory during the winter months were nevertheless counted in five of the areas. In the Nunda area during the training course we even saw three birds interacting and spiraling in the air. This may be a consequence of climate change.

African Marsh-Harriers and Marsh Owls were very scarce, only appearing in very low numbers in one and two areas respectively. Both species are dependent on a healthy reed habitat, and uncontrolled fires consistently inthis region every year may be destroying habitat and causing a decline of these two sensitive species.

A surprisingly good total of 46 African Skimmers was recorded in four of the six areas and even in the vicinity of Rundu where one would expect human disturbances to exclude them.

African Skimmers

Ducks, normally very threatened by illegal hunting throughout the region, were well represented with relatively large numbers of White-faced Duck and Spur-winged Goose.

White-backed Night-Heron, normally considered a rare or illusive bird and seldom seen was however recorded from five of the six areas.

Other specials particularly for these areas, being communal areas and subjected to a range of human disturbance factors, included

Saddle-billed Stork, Goliath Heron, Slaty Egret, Rufous-bellied Heron, Fulvous Duck, Southern Pochard, African Spoonbill, Lesser Jacana, Lesser Moorhen, Long-toed Lapwing, Half-collared Kingfisher and African Fish-Eagle. Wattled Cranes were recorded in the Nunda area prior to the counts. This is well out of the protection of the Mahango Game Reserve where they are resident in small numbers.


White-backed Night Heron

	BIRDS	SPECIES	DISTANCE km	PARTICIPANTS	HOURS
Ndhovu Area (including Ngepi)	647	34	7	3	4
Nunda Area (including Divava, Shametu and Rainbow)	178	25	5	7	5
RiverDance Area (including Mobola)	102	22	4	4	5
Shamvura Area.	1374	56	15	1	4
Kaisosi Area (including N'Kwazi and Hogo)	236	27	10	5	8.5
Samsitu Area.	807	48	12.5	4	5.5
TOTALS:	3344	n/a	53.5	24	32

	Ndhovu Area	Nunda Area	RiverDance Area	Shamvura Area	Kaisosi Area	Samsitu	TOTALS
1.Little Grebe			8	6	14	9	37
2.Reed Cormorant	153	33	5	504	1	8	778
3.African Darter	15	7	2	87		4	115
4.Grey Heron	2	2		7		1	30
5.Black-headed Heron		1		4		1	6
6.Goliath Heron	1	1					2
7.Purple Heron	1			7		1	9
8.Great Egret	12			23		5	40
9.Slaty Egret				3	2		5
10.Black Heron				1			1
11.Yellow-billed Egret	5	2		5			12
12.Little Egret	39	10	2	57		1	127
13Cattle Egret	19	4	5	28	6	2	83
14.Squacco Heron	69	3	1	87	7	1	177
15.Rufous-bellied Heron	5			5	7	8	25
16.Green-backed Heron	29	12	2	10	6	3	94
17.Black-crowned Night-Heron	1	23		1	13	7	111
18.White-backed Night-Heron	5		2	2	4	2	15
19.Little Bittern	3		1	3	3	5	15
20.Dwarf Bittern			2		3		5
21.Yellow-billed Stork				8		2	35
22.African Openbill				5	26	5	81
23.Saddle-billed Stork	1						1
24.African Sacred Ibis	20			8	2	1	31
25.Glossy Ibis				3			3

	Ndhovu Area	Nunda Area	RiverDance Area	Shamvura Area	Kaisosi Area	Samsitu	TOTALS
26.African Spoonbill	18					4	22
27.Hamerkop	1	3	2	2	1	4	13
28.Fulvous Duck						2	2
29.White-faced Duck			46	270		1	416
30.White-backed Duck			1			2	3
31.Spur-winged Goose	56			2		1	77
32.Comb Duck		2		6		9	17
33.Egyptian Goose	2						2
34.African Pygmy-Goose				8			8
35.Red-billed Teal	2	14		2	20	3	77
36.Southern Pochard						2	29
37.African Rail				2		1	3
38.Black Crake	20	7	2	3	21	2	77
39.Common Moorhen				1		4	5
40.Lesser Moorhen				1			1
41.African Purple Swamphen				10		1	11
42.Lesser Jacana		3		1	4	3	11
43.African Jacana	26	3	2	42	13	6	151
44.Black-winged Stilt		4	2	15			21
45.Water Thick-knee	11	2		4	17	8	42
46.Collared Pratincole				12			12
47.Long-toed Lapwing	3			2		5	10
48.Blacksmith Lapwing	29	16	1	18	14	2	98

	Ndhovu Area	Nunda Area	RiverDance Area	Shamvura Area	Kaisosi Area	Samsitu	TOTALS
49.African Wattled Lapwing	5		4	10		4	23
50.Common Ringed Plover						1	1
51.Kittlitz's Plover				2			2
52.Three-banded Plover				2	4		6
53.White-fronted Plover				2			2
54.Common Greenshank	1			5		1	7
55.Wood Sandpiper				3			3
56.Common Sandpiper				2	4	1	7
57.African Snipe				1		1	2
58.Whiskered Tern				6			6
59.African Skimmer	7	3		24		1	46
60.Osprey		1	1	1	1	1	5
61.African Fish-Eagle	7		2	5	2	3	19
62.African Marsh-Harrier				1			1
63.Marsh Owl		4				2	6
64.Pied Kingfisher	59	15	7	37	27	4	194
65.Giant Kingfisher	2	2	2	1	6	1	25
66.Malachite Kingfisher	18	2		7	8	9	44
67.Half-collared Kingfisher						1	1
TOTALS:	647	179	102	1374	236	808	3346