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Editorial

Another hot dry season is upon us and birding is slow as we await the rains. Soon, however, the palearctic and intra-African migrants will arrive to increase the numbers of species. Our drab non-breeding local birds will get dressed up for the ladies and identification of most of the weavers, bishops and whydahs will be a lot easier. Unfortunately, the bird guides usually only illustrate these birds in breeding dress. In Namibia we only see them dressed up for 3-5 months of the year and identification is often frustrating.

Recently I caught non-breeding Shaft-tailed Whydahs in my mist net for ringing. After consulting all the reference books I found it is impossible to sex any of the birds. either in the hand or in the field. It would most helpful if members who know of any special aids or resources for identifying Shaft-tailed Whydahs would publish that information in the *Lanioturdus* for all of us. Another bird I have been trying to sex in the non-breeding season is the Chestnut Weaver. In the hand there is no problem since the male has a larger wing length and is heavier, but free-flying in a tree then identification becomes difficult.

The new Roberts VII will be about 1200 pages and will be out in April 2005 at a cost of R799. It will be nice to have all the up-to-the–date data on the birds but it is obvious from the draft texts on the website that information is missing on many of the species. See www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za/docs/roberts.html. Perhaps after the book comes out I will try and summarize where gaps in information on Namibia birds occur so we can try and fill the gaps.

15% of Gabar Goshawk *Micronisus gabar* are known to be melanistic (Maclean, G.L.1985. Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund). while the Owambo Sparrowhawk *Accipter ovampensis* is also prone to melanism, albeit rarely.

The reason why melanistic individuals are rarely observed is possibly due to them falling prey to predators more easily or that they cannot find mates. The observed melanistic Laughing Dove was continuously being ousted from the feeding area by "normal" pigmented doves, indicating its alienation in the group. Confirming this was the fact that it was most often viewed at the feeding station first, i.e. early in the morning, before most of the other doves arrived, whence it was ousted from the site. After 28 August it was not viewed at the feeding station again.

Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus* breeding in southern Namibia

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On 6 July 2004 I was informed of a Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus* breeding on the farm Velloor between Karasburg and Onseepkans (28°24'50.4"S; 19°08'21.0"E; elevation 915m) approximately 30km (straight line) from the Orange River and the Onseepkans border control point.

On investigation I found the vulture lying low on the nest, flying off on approach, which was located in an *Acacia erioloba* tree, approximately 5m in height in a slight drainage line not far from the gravel road. Very few other similar sized trees were in the immediate vicinity although *Acacia erioloba* is the dominant big tree in drainage lines in the general area. According to Nico Strauss, owner of the farm Velloor, Lappet-faced Vultures have been nesting in the area for as long as he can remember and also known to occur in other drainage lines on adjacent farms as well.Two other nesting sites are known to him on his farm, but on investigation proved to be currently unoccupied, although with visible nests still in place. The areas below the nesting sites were littered with faeces, feathers, bones, pellets and hooves (confirmed by Steyn 1982), etc. mainly remnants of domestic stock – sheep.

According to Maclean (1985), Mundy et al. (1992), Steyn (1982) and Tarboton (2001) this southernmost part of Namibia is not included in the breeding range for the species although a later edition of Maclean (1993) does include this area. The breeding season as indicated by above-mentioned authors occurs between May to September and May to June, respectively, and is consistent with the Onseepkans sighting. The nest sight selection – i.e. *Acacia* species (favoured species) and height – i.e. within 3-15m (7-9m) above ground, is also similar to previous authors.

Lappet-faced Vultures are nowhere common and this southern Namibian breeding site is an additional bonus to the species into which further investigation is imperative. How this breeding population interacts with other breeding populations in the Namib Desert and Kalahari Desert in South Africa is unknown and should also be investigated further. Although White-backed Vultures are more numerous in the general area, breeding is unknown at present, although it maybe possible. All vultures are however viewed as stock killers – especially lambs – by farmers in southern Namibia and are often persecuted for this reason, thus exacerbating their overall plight as a species. Protection of southern Namibian breeding sites as well as environmental extension work regarding vultures and their plight is furthermore suggested for this remote region.

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