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## Editorial

Timothy O. Osborne

I made the appeal in the last editorial for everyone to give out a membership form to people you know who are not members. How many of you have done this? I gave out 2 forms and one has signed up as a club member! So I am batting 50% in getting new members. Hopefully at the next annual general meeting we will see if we are perishing as a club or growing. Certainly birding is growing world-wide and I would hate to think that we are not part of that trend.

The rains have been late as usual and spotty throughout the country but the rain birds have arrived and are doing nicely. On a trip to Windhoek I counted 7200 Yellow-and-Blackbilled Kites along the B1. Fortunately the road was empty so I was not a road hazard as I was alone and watching the sky more than the road.

This issue has a paper written by a school girl who shows what sort of good scientific information can be gathered in your backyard. It also has more of Paxton exploits from the north.

We also observed a pair of Purple Gallinule *Prophyrio prophyrio* with a fully-fledged chick, which must have bred out and left the nest in mid-October. This by all accounts appears to be an early breeding record for Namibia.

A small group of 12 Yellow-billed Storks *Mycteria ibis* of varying ages were noted in a large group of Open-billed Storks *Anastomus lamelligerus* on the same stretch of river on 30 September. They are not regular visitors here and when they are seen on the river they are generally single bird.

### **Mahango Count (July 2002)**

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A preliminary visit to the Game Park about 2 weeks before confirmed the extremely low water on the river and the bad rains were not going to produce a marvelous count this time. I, however, made plans to get a count underway and this tied in with a visit from my good friend Wayne Hanssen who would be only too willing to help.

On 19 July myself, Linda Sheehan and Wayne Hanssen made the necessary preparations and moved off to Mahango Game Park where we made plans with the, as always, helpful Park Officials to set up our campsite. Being quite late in the afternoon, once we'd finished setting up our basic facilities, we decided a quick recce on the river was in order. As usual this would give us an idea of what was going on along on river thereby giving us some direction for the forthcoming count. We did not make allowances for the "Botswana National Fisheries Inspectors!"

These people are the local Tswanas living in Botswana just over the fence line from the Park. As is the case with most Parks these rural people on the

extremities carry out poaching activities in the Park and in this case the river system is their main area of activity. They come into the Park along the river using their watos/makoros (dugout canoes) and illegally use gill nets and other trapping methods for fish. They also set hooks for crocodiles and undoubtedly kill any other game they encounter. The Park Officials are regularly involved in anti-poaching activities to counteract these incursions from Botswana, but they cannot be everywhere all of the time and always ask me for assistance where possible while I am in the Park.

In the boat we came up one of the river courses only to meet four canoes with "Fisheries Inspectors" on their merry way into the Park to set up their nets for the nightly harvest. Seeing our boat suddenly bearing down on them made them collectively change their minds quite radically. There was therefore some chaotic paddling to the shore. These craft are, at best, not the most stable of water-going vessels and are even more unstable in the wake of a motorboat engine. Two made it to the bank and disappeared into the reeds abandoning their canoes. The remaining two decided to abandon ship and took their chances with the crocodiles. They too disappeared and abandoned their nets, canoes and possessions. We tethered the "watos" to our boat (one of which sunk to the bottom of the river) and in shifts dragged them to camp, subsequently loading them on the vehicle and delivering them to the Park Officials at the gate. They were very grateful and took up the follow-up procedures from there, leaving us to hopefully get on with the count. However, the "Botswana National Fisheries Section" was not yet finished with us. The following morning we set out to seriously start the count only to come across a moored "wato" a short distance from our camp. Naturally we tethered the craft and dragged it to camp and then to the gate again. We were beginning to think we were constantly going to be ferrying confiscated watos back and forth and never getting down to the serious business of counting. Wayne at this point was convinced that we were to become a fully operational private law enforcement agency with a subsidiary operation specializing in "wato retrievals and sales". Being an astute businessman and one who seldom misses an opportunity when it comes knocking at his door, I assumed his mind was undoubtedly working in turning this situation into a viable business. I was quite surprised to learn however, that he was not really enthralled with

the situation and was as eager as we were to get the count underway. We eventually made it onto the river and counted the stretch east of our campsite towards the Botswana border.

We returned to camp later only to find further involvement with the "Botswana National Fisheries Section". The owner of the "wato" we'd found moored near camp had obviously been involved in some devious poaching activity unaware of our previous interaction with his colleagues. He'd presumably completed his business and returned to his wato to find it no longer there. Being an astute fellow quite capable of putting two and two together, he'd correctly assumed we were somehow involved in his missing craft and paid our campsite a correctional visit. He'd helped himself to a pair of canvas camping chairs and a lamp, and hotfooted it to the Botswana border and home. Suitably dismayed by our loss we decided to enlist the help of the Park Officials and at the gate we reported the incident to Olafi Mutangara a senior Ranger of the Park. Quite happy to help, as usual, Olafi came back to camp with us and we collectively tracked the culprit to the border fence where he'd taken his new-found lounge furniture over to Botswana. A visit to the Botswana customs officials at Mohembo Gate was therefore required. We decided to leave this until the following day and settled down to a chairless evening meal. Our follow-up anti-poaching tracking exercise with Olafi came up for discussion quite regularly throughout the evening, and a few whiskeys rounded off the rough edges of the tale.

I'd broken some bones in my foot weeks before and was still quite unsteady on my legs. Bravely I'd limped on after Olafi and Wayne trying not to behave or sound like a geriatric on his last legs (so to speak). Being the "Kehla" (old gentleman) of the lot I felt I had to set some example and when crossing one of the many watercourses in the floodplain through which we travelled I decided to go across what appeared to be a narrow, shallow stretch. This little stretch was in fact a hippo channel covered over with reeds which gave way under my weight. I made a powered exit though, convinced that the channel was occupied by a herd of hippos and a few of the huge crocodiles I knew frequented these channels. My foot was temporarily forgotten in my completely undignified scramble to get out and save myself from the jaws of

death lurking in the depths. To add to the indignity I had the cassette tape-recorder in my pocket with the day's count data on it at the time. We had to enlist Linda's help in recovering this information from the soggy tape. This she did with dogged determination and managed to at least save the day (in the true sense). At this point we were all convinced that the count was jinxed and we'd probably have to abandon the whole show.

The following day almost broke the camel's back. It started off early with a visit to Mohembo Gate with Olafi to report the theft to the Customs Officials. They were, however, quite involved with a hi-jacked tourist vehicle in Botswana and a group of Zambians caught red-handed and armed as they tried to cross the border into Namibia. Our little incident could not compare and I ended up going through to Mukwe Police Station to open a case docket and then submitting this to the Botswana Police. This took most of the morning and left Wayne and Linda frustrated and mutinous. By now I was also reaching the end of my usual patient tether. We did however resume the count all vowing that another deviation from our designated goal would result in bloodshed.

With all this preliminary excitement now under our belt we all felt we'd done all that was humanly possible to sort our problems out and establish our presence in the area. We now were quite secure in the knowledge that we now would be free to resume the count in earnest and we prepared ourselves to spend some constructive boat-hours on the river.

As expected the count numbers and diversity weren't all that marvelous. There certainly appeared to be substantially less Cormorant and Darter concentrations throughout the river course and a noticeable absence of any significant roosts or breeding colonies. Black Egrets seemed to be more numerous than before as did Squacco Herons. Open-billed Stork concentrations were less while Sacred Ibis and African Namibia Birding Day 2002.