

CONTENTS

VOLUME 37 (3 + 4) 2004

OSBORNE, T. O. Editorial	1
EDITOR. Authors Guidelines	2
JOUBERT, D. Blue Waxbill <i>Uraeginthus angolensis</i> nesting in exotic fig <i>Ficus microcarpa</i>	4
BISTRİ, H. Monteiro Hornbills <i>Tockus monteiri</i> in unserem Garten	5
JOUBERT, D.J. Marico Flycatcher <i>Melaenornis mariquensis</i> nest in <i>Acacia mellifera</i> shrub. How important are hook thorned <i>Acacias</i> in affording protection to nests and chicks?	11
FRIEDERICH, G.& T. Birding weekend at Shamvura Lodge	13
PATTERSON, J. New Breeding Record for Grey-headed Gulls <i>Larus cirrocephalus</i> at Kunene River Mouth, Namibia	18
SIMMONS, R. Red Data Book Draft	19
FRIEDERICH, G. Uncommon raptor sightings on Farm Tsutsab 1818 CC, Tsumeb district	26
ADANK, W & P. CUNNINGHAM. Melanism in a Laughing Dove <i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	27
CUNNINGHAM, P. & N.STRAUSS. Lappet-faced Vulture <i>Torgos tracheliotus</i> breeding in southern Namibia	28
BIRD OBSERVATIONS AND NOTES	30
ANNOUNCEMENTS	31

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.

Überschlägt man einmal die gesamte Brutzeit – 24 Tage für das Ausbrüten der Eier und 44 Tage für die Aufzucht, dann hat sich das Weibchen am 18. Februar in den Brutkasten begeben und hat erst am 29. das erste Ei gelegt. Die weiteren Eiablagen erfolgte dann im Rhythmus von drei bzw. vier Tagen. Ausgeflogen sind die Jungen jeweils Mittwoch, Sonntag, Mittwoch, Sonntag, das letzte Junge machte dann die Ausnahme und kam bereits am Montag.

Letzter Stand der Geschichte: Fast täglich kommen die Tokos für einen kurzen Besuch zu uns in den Garten, setzen sich auch vor den Brutkasten, stecken ihre Köpfe rein und klappern mit ihren Schnäbeln am Einschluflloch.

Summary

I provided a nest box for a pair of Monteiro hornbills in a Moringa tree in our garden. The female occupied the nesting box on 17 February and immediately started cementing herself in leaving only a small slit in the front opening.

On 10 April I carefully opened the lid on the nesting box to photograph the clutch; however, much to my horror the female flew out of the box. She did not return to the nest. Five chicks were in the nest with the youngest still featherless. For the following eight days I protected the chicks against the cold by covering the nesting box at night. The parents and the chicks immediately attempted to close the lid with their cement. During the day both parents fed the young through the open top.

On 5 May one of the young birds pecked open the entrance hole and left the nesting box. Immediately the other chicks cemented the hole from the inside. The next fledgling left a few days later. Three birds were left in the nesting box; the youngest was by far the least developed.

When the third fledgling left the nesting box the smallest of the five had made great strides. Again the remaining birds closed the opening with cement, however not as tightly as in previous times. Possibly they felt safe enough with their stronger beaks. To fit into the box the young birds simply bent their tails upwards.

Fledging dates were 5 May, 9 May, 12 May, 16 May and 17 May for the 5 young.

After the fourth fledgling left the nest the youngest did not bother to close the opening. The youngest chick left the nest the following day. The birds still visit the garden on a daily basis.

Marico Flycatcher *Melaenornis mariquensis* nest in *Acacia mellifera* shrub. How important are hook thorned *Acacias* in affording protection to nests and chicks?

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Marico Flycatchers *Melaenornis mariquensis* breed in semi-arid savannas throughout southern Africa (Tarboton, W. 2001. A guide to nests and eggs of southern african birds. Struik Publishers (Pty) Ltd., Cape Town). In December 2001, a Marico Fly-catcher nest was found in an *Acacia mellifera* (black thorn) shrub on the Farm Krumhuk, about 30 km south of Windhoek. The shrub was about 1.5 m in height, and the nest was 0.8 m up, and 30 to 40 cm in from the rim of the canopy. The nest was around 7 cm in diameter (outside) and lined with Helmeted Guinea Fowl feathers (Figure 1). Two chicks recently hatched were observed in the nest. The smaller chick was dead. On the following day, on return to the nest, the dead chick had been removed, but the other was still alive. Upon return in the following year, the nest had been removed or destroyed. Tarboton (2001) does state that they recycle old nesting material for new nests.

Tarboton (2001) also states that nests are mostly found 2 m – 3 m high in a thorny tree (although there are records of nests as low down as 0.5 m). Although this nest was close to the ground, I found that it was impossible to see into the

nest without being scratched. This was due to the dense hook thorn cover, for which *A. mellifera* is notorious. The general habitat in the area could be described as a patch mosaic of bush thickets and open grassy areas. There were many taller *A. mellifera* (up to 4 metres high) trees close to the nest bush within 20 m. As there were other tall species such as *Boscia albitrunca*, it is reasonable to assume that the adults selected the small shrub, due to the protection provided by the dense thorns tall *A. mellifera* and other species, although having the advantage of height, have a looser, less dense branch architecture, with fewer or no hook thorns, and thus afford less protection.

If small birds select small thorny shrubs, this has implications for bush encroachment management. Currently, many farmers clear *A. mellifera* extensively, often selling the wood for charcoal to cover costs and make a little money. Many farmers express a desire to totally eradicate *A. mellifera*. Other more conservation conscious farmers try to clear small shrubs and keep more of the larger *A. mellifera* trees. But in general, the shrubs less than 2 m are considered useless for rangeland production and are cleared. Rangeland and forestry managers should pay more attention to the needs of smaller animal species when planning bush clearing.



Figure 1:

I checked nest records to determine whether there was any indication of selection for small *A. mellifera*. A total of 74 nest records were available at the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Directorate of Scientific Services. Although the natural history records regarding the nesting behaviour were extensive, observers paid scant regard to recording the tree species, height of tree or general habitat of the area. Thus, it was difficult to ascertain tree and habitat selection. I recommend that in the future, observers include more botanical and habitat information in nest records.

Birding weekend at Shamvura Lodge

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A Namibia Bird Club event on our farm Tsutsab had been scheduled for the Easter weekend, provided the ephemeral pan had been filled with water. Although we had good rains, the pan did not fill. So we cancelled this event and instead planned to see for ourselves how Mark Paxton's place had developed at the Okavango River, Shamvura Lodge.

We left the farm on Thursday, 8 April 2004, but had to negotiate a catastrophic detour of 20km along the soon to be re-surfaced road to Rundu. It had been raining a few days earlier, so the detour was muddy and potholed, just awful. Cars and big trucks got stuck and blocked traffic for some time. Fortunately by the time we passed, the surface was relatively dry and we negotiated slowly without problems. In Rundu we picked up some fishing gear and had lunch at the Omashare River Lodge. There we could already see the masses of water in the Okavango River.

To the east of Rundu the Omatako Omuramba had a surprise in store for us. Where it crosses underneath the tar road it was a pool of water. This water had been pushed up from the Okavango River, for the first time in 20 years, as we were told later. People were fishing; we saw Bream splashing in the shallows.