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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.

Uncommon raptor sightings on Farm Tsutsab 1818 CC, Tsumeb district

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On the morning of the 21st August 2004 I went for my usual rounds checking up on the cattle posts. On the second one in the row a Brown Snake Eagle was perched on a dead tree. As I drove on, two White-backed Vultures took off out of a Makalani Palm, *Hyphaene petersiana*. As this one also had a nest of Red-billed Buffalo-weaver, I suspected a vulture nest and went to inspect. No nest, but this Makalani was regularly used as a perch by some big birds, as the old leaves on the ground were whitewashed with droppings.

Approaching the next cattle post, another raptor took off a green Tambotie, *Spyrostachys africana*, and perched nearby in a dead tree. The markings of this bird were so obvious, it could only be an Osprey. We have seen this bird only on two previous occasions, once on farm Finkenstein near Windhoek in October 1998 and in the Kaudom Game Park at Tsoana waterhole in May 2001.

I approached the bird cautiously under cover and had a good look at it. The diagnostics were obvious: I had an Osprey in front of me, a first record for this square, 1818 CC.

This bird is a non-breeding Palearctic migrant to southern Africa. It arrives at the southern coast late October, so I suggest this bird was taking a break on its migration route, although a bit early in the season. However, it could also have been a first-year bird, over-wintering in the Southern Hemisphere. Records from the Southern African Bird Atlas are very patchy, the closest one to this square being 1917 DA & DD, in the Kombat/Rietfontein area east of Otavi.

Then something interesting happened. As I was busy doing my things, I noticed the Osprey taking off. Immediately I heard more raptor calls. I spun my head around a few times in search and while unwinding again I saw one raptor flying

away from me, showing only his silhouette. It could have been a Bateleur, according to the wing form. The other two I identified as African Hawk Eagles. They both made their flying path towards the circling Osprey, which was trying to gain height. They circled around the Osprey a few times. Then one of the hawk eagles made a mob-attack onto the Osprey. This happened a few times but the birds did not make contact. It looked more like a playful act, as if the African Hawk Eagles were investigating this strange newcomer's presence.

All three birds disappeared in the distance, leaving me full of thoughts. At the last cattle post I found two more African Hawk Eagles, probably our resident breeding pair. This concluded an eventful Saturday morning.

Melanism in a Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

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Laughing Doves *Streptopelia senegalensis* are common throughout their natural range, which includes not only the entire width and breadth of Africa, but also Arabia and central Asia. In Namibia they are ubiquitous, being one of the most common garden birds, especially at feeding stations.

Between 20 July and 28 August 2004 an adult melanistic (in this case excess black, but could also be excess brown) Laughing Dove was observed at a feeding station in a Windhoek garden. The chest and head as well as the primary feathers were black in colour whilst the rest of the bird had the distinctive greyish-blue coloration.

Melanism as opposed to albinism (caused by an absence of pigment), erythrism (excess red) and flavism (excess yellow) seem to be genetically influenced. This is however generally not a common phenomenon with most birds although up to

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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