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RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS

Editorial

Pete Hancock, the editor of African Raptor News, commented in the first issue of that publication that it is sometimes easier as editor to write the newsletter yourself than to get contributions from others. Fortunately I have not been in this position during my first year or so of editing Lanioturdus but the one thing that I have found rather disconcerting is that of the 34 articles published in Lanioturdus 41 and Lanioturdus 42 (1-4) 26 have been written by only seven individuals. A very big thank you to those who have contributed but I am sure that many more of you have something to contribute. Remember – if it interests you it most likely interests other birders as well.

In anticipation of an influx of contributions I would like to offer the following guidelines to prospective authors:-

Editorial policy: Lanioturdus publishes articles and notes of broad birding interest for the membership of the Namibia Bird Club. Although preference is given to articles dealing with birds in Namibia, articles dealing with birds in southern Africa and beyond are also acceptable. The editor is allowed wide latitude in the choice of material; thus any views and opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Namibia Bird Club. All material in Lanioturdus is copyright and permission to reproduce material should be negotiated with the editor and the author.

Format of submission: Manuscripts are accepted in English, German or Afrikaans. If papers are submitted in German or Afrikaans a short English summary should accompany the article. For papers in English, summaries in German or Afrikaans may also be submitted.

The preferred method of submission is via an attachment to an email. The preferred word processing programme is MS Word. The editor has MS Word 2007 and can thus open files in earlier versions. Other programmes are accepted but the files must be submitted as text only (.txt) or rich text format (.rtf) files. Typed or hand written submissions are also acceptable but the editor does not accept any responsibility for mistakes occurring from indecipherable handwriting. Photographs accompanying the articles are desirable and as Lanioturdus is now distributed electronically digital colour photographs are preferred. The photographs should be sent as a separate attachment and not be embedded in text files. If photographs are to be used in a specific position in the text this should be indicated. Likewise tables and graphs should also be sent as separate attachments and not be embedded in the text. Authors should however indicate where in the text such tables and graphs should be placed in the article.

Bird Names: The common names of birds should follow the new edition of Roberts Birds of Southern Africa Edition 7. Papers on the biology of species should include the scientific name of the bird the first time it is mentioned in the text. For long lists of species observed scientific names are not required.

References: References should be in the following format:

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Monteiro's Hornbills *Tockus monteiri* Breeding in a Klein Windhoek Garden

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After having had some success in getting acacia pied barbets to breed in prepared sisal logs in my Klein Windhoek garden I decided to go after bigger game. We found a massive sisal stem on the pavement in Olympia and, with the permission of the house owner (and a lot of effort), removed it and cut it up into a number of lengths suitable for barbet nests (most of which were sold off for bird club funds), while retaining the base for use for larger quarry. I set up one of the smaller logs in my jacaranda tree and within a short period of time a pair of acacia pied barbets had taken up residence.

We then hollowed out the base of the stem, cut and inserted a board as a floor, sealed around the edges of the board with sisal fibre, drilled an access hole and, in the early summer, we fixed this nest log in a witgat tree (*Boscia albitrunca*) about 3.1 m above the ground and sat back to see what would happen.



The nest log in the witgat tree

Photo: Neil Thomson

Very soon a pair of Monteiro's hornbills *Tockus monteiri* showed interest in the nest log. They hung about in the area calling often and the male started attacking his reflection in the nearby wendy house windows until I covered them with cardboard. I took this continued presence as an encouraging sign as previously when I had put up a nest box constructed of boards hornbills had inspected it but moved on after a day or two. I did not see these birds visiting my feeding table some 20 m from the nest site during this period though.

The birds were present regularly for several weeks over a dry period and we speculated that they had claimed the nesting territory and were waiting for the rains that would



Doofus – a picture of innocence

Photo: Neil Thomson

bring the increased food supply necessary for a breeding attempt. At the start of the rains in January the male again became very aggressive and started attacking his reflection in the windows of the house. He was soon given the name "Doofus" on account of this seeming lack of intelligence.

On 26.1.2009 ten days after the start of the rains I noticed that the birds had started to seal the entrance to the nest. The birds remained in the area, continued dueting but no further work was done in sealing the nest opening until 28.2.2009 when they were seen carrying sand to the nest from a nearby building site but still the female was not incarcerated.

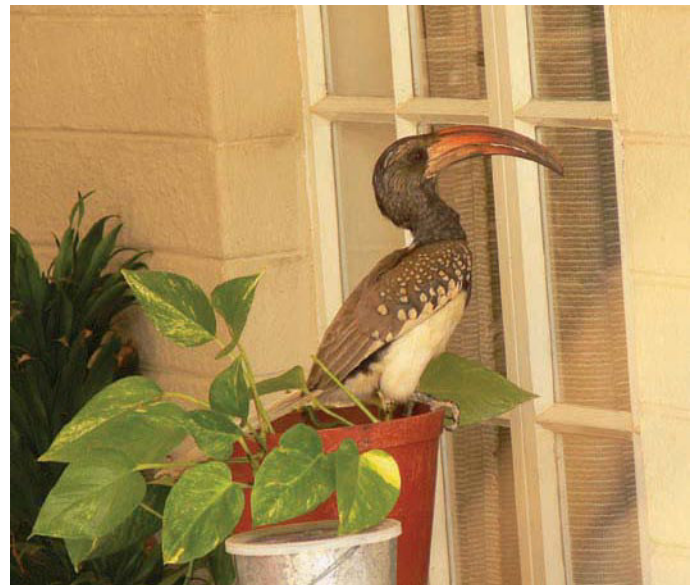
On 7.3.2009 we saw both birds on the feeding table with female carrying a large white grub which she gave to Doofus. He tried to give it back to her but she refused it several times whereupon he swallowed it and then took out his frustrations on the windows again. We assumed that this was part of a courtship feeding ritual but that she was not ready to mate and that Doofus had first given her the grub (unseen by us).

Doofus continued with violent attacks on window glass – it seemed that he had knocked a chip off the tip of his bill and scratches and even bloodstains on the glass became commonplace.

On 18.3.2009 the female was at last incarcerated in the nest.

On 23.3.2009 I saw Doofus perched on the pergola holding a skink in his bill before flying off in the direction of the nest. The next day I saw him flying past with an unidentified prey item and on 26.3.2009 he was again seen flying by carrying what appeared to be a large locust. He was later seen with what seemed to be a praying mantis. All this time Doofus was still giving the windows a good working over and on 30.3.2009 he attacked the windows while carrying a large ant in his bill – ants are not listed as prey items for Monteiro's hornbills in Roberts VII.

Friday 3.4.2009 saw more aberrant behaviour from Doofus. In addition to attacking the window glass he started savaging the cushions on the verandah chairs, chewing on the pot plants and flicking soil out of the pots with his bill. Doofus had become habituated to my presence and I could approach to within about 2 m of him – not quite close enough to catch him to ring him though. I started thinking that the above behaviour might be showing off as he knew he was being watched - or perhaps the continued bashing of his head against the windows had resulted in brain damage. Calle Schlettwein however advised that the breeding pair in his garden also exhibit aggressive and aberrant behaviour with the female being the more aggressive in that case. (Roberts VII indicates that it is usual for the females to be more aggressive than the males at their nest sites). On 4.4.2009 I saw a flight feather near the sealed entrance to the nest suggesting that the female was moulting her flight feathers while on 18 April I noticed that Doofus appeared to be in moult as he seemed to be sporting only two retrices. I had understood that the males moult before the breeding season while the females replace all their flight feathers while incarcerated in the nest. (On 16.8.2009 I saw another pair of Monteiro's hornbills where the male was missing most of his retrices – it would appear that at least one of these birds was moulting unseasonally).



Doofus preparing for an attack on the window glass

Photo: Neil Thomson

We returned home after being away for the Easter weekend to find evidence of more aberrant behaviour from Doofus. The plant in the pot on which he usually perched to attack the window glass had been totally destroyed.

On 19.4.2009 more strange behaviour was observed. Doofus was seen attacking the windscreen wipers of a car parked in neighbour's driveway. The neighbours later told me that they had had to park their vehicles elsewhere due to this behaviour and that Doofus had also destroyed some of their pot plants. Gudrun thought she could hear a chick or chicks in the nest. The time was about right for the chicks to have hatched – certainly commensurate with incubation period per Roberts VII.



The aftermath of an attack on a pot plant
Photo: Neil Thomson

On 26.4.2009 we saw Doofus carrying a small egg to the nest. Roberts VII lists birds' eggs among the food items taken by Monteiro's hornbills. On 5.5.2009 I saw Doofus flying across Berg Street carrying food to nest which must have been some 200 m from there. This left me wondering how far from the nest these birds forage but I have not been able to find any answers to this. I suspect though that the foraging distance would be dependant on the availability of prey items.

On 10.5.2009 I watched Doofus flying shuttle service to the nest. Interestingly only one food item was carried at a time but the frequency of the trips was much higher than that mentioned in Roberts VII which states that several items are carried together to the nest about three times per hour. Inspection of the nest revealed that it was open – presumably the female was now out of the nest. We did not see her so she was probably away foraging. Little bills were seen knocking at the sides of the opening and Doofus fed one of the chicks a large grub while we watched. By the morning of 12.5.2009 the nest had still not been resealed. I had not yet seen the female but Doofus had obviously been enjoying himself in the flowerpots the day before.

Both adult birds were seen on the verandah on 13.5.2009 confirming that the female had indeed broken out of the nest. Doofus demonstrated to his mate that he was still capable of taking on window glass. By that evening the nest entrance was virtually sealed again.

Doofus continued attacking the window glass on a daily

basis and on 3.6.2009 the nest entrance appeared again to be partly opened. Given the date the time was about right for the first chick to fledge. At this stage we still had no idea how many chicks were in the nest but we knew from observing little bills begging at the entrance that there were at least two. We also deduced that because these birds were late breeders the clutch was probably a small one.

On 4.6.2009 the nest entrance was open and only one chick could be seen in the nest indicating that one had presumably fledged. Both adults were on the ground in the vicinity of the nest and flew into a tree when approached but there was no sign of the fledgling.

On 6.6.2009 the second chick had fledged and was also out of the nest. I saw the adults and one fledgling close to the nest but the next day there was no sign of Doofus or his family in the vicinity. However – less welcome tenants in the form of swarm of bees moved into the nest almost immediately. I will now have to have them removed to make the nest habitable for birds before the next breeding season. I wonder whether Doofus and his mate will return to this site for another breeding attempt.....

Post script

On 21.6.2009 my daughter, Maren, was alone at home when she heard thumping and banging on the verandah. Knowing that Doofus and family had gone she feared that someone was trying to break in. On investigation however she found Doofus on the verandah giving his mate another demonstration of his prowess against window glass. Maren did not see the young birds.

Then, on 16.7.2009, Maren, who was again alone at home, heard a commotion on the verandah and went to investigate. Sure enough there was Doofus attacking the window glass again but this time he was accompanied by four other birds, one of which was savaging a pot plant while the others looked on. It would appear that Doofus and his mate raised three chicks and not two as we had previously thought but it seemed that he had started teaching them bad habits.

At the end of August Doofus and his mate came knocking again, this time without the young birds. This made me think that perhaps the time had come to refix the nest log in the tree now that the bees had been removed so on the morning of Sunday 13 September we rehung the nest log after lining the "roof" with cotton wool which I had read prevents bees from nesting there as they cannot attach their honeycomb to cotton wool. After lunch we went for a nap only to be woken by Doofus bashing himself against the verandah window. This went on for nearly an hour and later investigation revealed that he had again savaged a pot plant and had left droppings on the table cloth and on the chair cushions. The following day there was another attack on the pot plant and inspection of the nest log revealed that the birds had started stripping out the cotton wool lining – how's that for ingratitude?

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