

Namibia Bird News



No 7, December 2013

Holiday time...

Yet another year is coming to a close and it is time to reflect on the happenings and achievements of the past twelve months. I certainly have no reason to complain about the year I've had and all the things I've done and experienced made this a bumper year for me.

We have faced some serious challenges this past year but thanks to a group of committed people we managed to overcome most if not all of them. No doubt 2014 will throw further challenges at us but I'm confident that the experience gathered in 2013 will help us face up to them after all, what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

I want to wish everybody good holidays, plenty of rain for our farmers and a good start to the new year!

Happy birding!
Holger



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Somebody thought it would be a grand idea to put up a camera trap whilst ringing vultures in the Namib. This interesting specimen (species?) was captured one night.

Saving vultures, and having a ball!

In September two fundraisers were held in Swakopmund and Windhoek to collect much needed money for VulturesNamibia. The function in Swakop was held on International Vulture Awareness Day and was attended by over 80 people. Apart from the usual good food provided by the Alte Bruecke Resort and the foot-stomping live music provided by G-String George we were also treated to an entertaining talk by Piti Sander and, a first for all involved, the premiere of "Aag please Peter".

The function in Windhoek was limited to 50 people although double that amount of tickets could probably have been sold. This was a much more demure affair held at the River Crossing Lodge with a sumptuous three course meal and an entertaining talk by Holger Kolberg.

Both dinners were extremely successful, not only in terms of the fun had by all, but also in terms of the money raised for Vultures Namibia. The money has already been put to good use with the purchase of three camera traps which will be deployed in the Namib and which will hopefully lead to many tagged vultures being identified.



My favourite time of the year...

September and October are the months I really look forward to every year because that's "vulture time"!

This year was, of course, no different and for weeks in advance I had been polishing the ladder, checking the equipment, re-checking the equipment, washing and starching the overall, amongst other things. Finally D-day arrived and no sooner was the ladder secured to the bakkie and the Engel stocked that I headed east. It did feel a bit strange though, because my good friend, mentor and long-time traveling companion Uncle Peter could unfortunately not join me this year.



Frikkie's Jeep, complete with anti-theft device.

My first stop was farm Rietfontein where I picked up *mein Schutztroup* Hanno who had volunteered to accompany me for the first week. Our first farm was Lauwater Suid where Frikkie and his aardvarkgat-proof Jeep were already waiting for us. Frikkie had GPSed all the nests on his farm and this made life very easy for us and in no time we had ringed nine chicks. We then moved to farm Garib where we ringed five chicks and then farm Autabib where we had six chicks of which two were Lappet-faced Vultures.



Some trees on Smalhoek were quite high!

On Thursday Hanno had to attend a farmers union meeting (some people's priorities are just wrong!) and I went to farm Rainhof on my own. On the way there I already had difficulty keeping the vulture mobile in a straight line because of the strong wind and after ringing only three chicks I had to abandon because I had no desire to *bliksem* out of a tree. It is amazing how something (a ladder) that consists mainly of holes can catch so much wind!

So, with my tail between my legs, I met up with Hanno again and, joined by Hilke and the kids we drove to farm Smalhoek. On Friday morning we made a quick detour to farm Heimat to ring a chick there before tackling the plethora of chicks on Smalhoek—the Stehns had found 45 nests! We managed to visit 23 nests, ringing 15 chicks, before I unfortunately had to leave but I had to, because I had a date up north.

On Sunday we quickly ringed four chicks on farm Teufelsbach as part of a Namibia Bird Club outing and early on Monday morning I made my way up north, toward Grootfontein. I had given a talk about vultures to the Rietfontein Farmers Union last year and they promptly invited me to come and ring some chicks on their farms. And just to make it that little bit more appetising to me they claimed that here vultures nest in palm trees. This was something completely new to me so I jumped at the opportunity.

My first port of call was farm Omambonde-Tal where there were plenty of vulture nests but most trees were so blooming high that we only managed to ring six chicks. Next were farms Schaffeld and Okatjiva where I encountered my first palm-nesting vultures. Apart from the fact that the palms are a lot higher than they look this was really cool. The nests are really neat and resemble a woven basket because they

are made entirely out of palm leaves. Farm Klein Huis was the final destination on my northern sojourn and here the thick sickle-bush made for some interesting driving and ladder *schlepping* and probably accounted for the two slow punctures that I had to deal with since.

My “vulturing” was interrupted by my real job for a few days but just to get back into the swing of it I visited farm Aris with my friend Hanjo to ring our stock vulture there. This made it a total of 56 White-backed and four Lappet-faced Vulture chicks ringed on the farms I visited.



White-backed Vulture chick in a palm tree nest.

I barely had time to dust off the ladder and re-stock the Engel before it was time to hit the Namib for some real vulture ringing. First stop Ganab to start with the aerial survey looking for the nests. My surprise couldn't be bigger when I arrived at Ganab airstrip to find it looking busier than Heathrow in the

peak holiday season—not one, not two but three planes were on the runway!! There was Gustav and Adrie in the Maule, Paul and Kermit in the Wilga (a plane which resembles a *koringkriek* on steroids) and Peter and Amy or Telanie in the Cessna. Needless to say it was *tjoef-tjaf* and the northern part was done and we translocated the next day to Sesriem and

finished the southern part in equally record time. It came at a cost though—on landing for the last time the *koringkriek* decided to buck the reins and go off-roading a bit. Fortunately nobody got hurt but the end result was a slightly bent aircraft and we trust the insurance gods were kind to the owner.

All that remained now was to go out there and ring those chicks! For the first time in a long time we had several nests in the Tsauchab River (five) and hopefully this is a sign that the birds are returning to that area. We started early on Friday and ringed four chicks in the river, the fifth one was, at about 14:00 hours and temperatures touching 40 degrees, unfortunately too high. We ringed a couple more in the Tsamsvlei area before retiring to Namibwater where we would meet up with some of our friends and sponsors to continue ringing in earnest over the weekend.

Saturday morning started off well with a bird that was variously identified as a Palmnut Vulture, juvenile African Fish-Eagle or “Eish, I don't know”. Finally the bird was identified as a partly leucistic Lappet-faced Vulture. With a start like this, things could only get better and we ringed the chicks



Busy times at Ganab airfield.



Partly leucistic Lappet-faced Vulture at Namibwater.

around Namibwater with the added fun of checking who got stuck on the dunes—a fate all but one of us suffered. Next we moved into the Tsondab River where we were greeted by a mother giraffe and her freshly born calf as well as the mother of all dust storms! Of course, this doesn't deter any vulture ringer worth their salt and we continued on our merry way only being briefly halted in our mission by a flat tyre to the GReeN mobile. Alas, Sunday afternoon came too quickly and we said goodbye to most of our company in Solitaire.



Fixing a puncture—farmer style!

On Monday we ringed four chicks in the Saagberg/Kamberg area before going on to Ganab for the next major ringing stint. On the way to Ganab we still ringed two chicks, one of which was a real feisty character that managed to get its claw properly into my finger. This in turn resulted in exclamations which made one of our company comment that she didn't know I could speak three languages sooo fluently! After this incident I was justifiably grumpy and we retired to our campsite so that some medicinal alcohol could be administered to my bruised finger and ego.



One of about a dozen tagged vultures at Hotsas.

By Tuesday the ringing party had shrunk to four people but we still made good progress until Wednesday lunchtime. By this time we had discovered that you could count our supply of full bottles of Namibia's finest on one hand so it was time for an emergency run to town. This task duly completed, I returned to Ganab and spent Thursday and Friday morning at Hotsas trying to spot and identify tagged vultures. This I did with moderate success but after the so-manyeth vulture flew away when I was just about to read the tag, I became determined to invest in some camera traps which will hopefully increase the success rate manyfold.

Friday afternoon and evening the next bunch of friends and sponsors arrived and on Saturday we split into two groups to tackle the remaining nests. Both groups fared extremely well and on Sunday we joined forces to visit the few nests that remained. There were now only a few nests left in the Mirabib area and I planned to visit them during the week once I'd picked up my next helper.

A quick trip to town and we were back at Mirabib and it is here where one of the biggest surprises of the whole trip awaited us. We were approaching a nest near Bakenkop: "Confirm, two birds on the nest?" "Yes, one must be the adult, it'll probably fly off just now". I kept my eyes to the ground as we bounced our way to the nest (it has happened too many times that I look at the nest and just then there's a huge rock in front of the car!) so imagine my reaction when I got to the top of the ladder and still found two birds in the nest! I would have been the envy of many a pole dancer, the way I slid down the ladder to

grab my camera. After all, this was a historic moment—only the second time ever that two chicks had been found in one nest. I raced back up the ladder and fired off a few shots. One chick was hissing and goose-stepping around the nest whilst the other one adopted the “don’t touch me I’m dead” attitude—this immediately earned them the names Feisty and Lethargy. Of course, now I was faced with another challenge—two chicks and only one bag (and a sore finger to remind me what a Feisty could do to one)! But as they say a *boer maak ’n plan* and soon there were two chicks on the ground, ringed, tagged, measured, *alles!* What an exciting way to end the vulture ringing season!



Feisty and Lethargy on 24 October 2013

We did re-visit the twins a week later just to make sure that we hadn’t been sniffing too much disinfectant or been in the sun too long. Both birds were alive and well and this gave us the opportunity to collect blood from each one for DNA analysis.

In total we ringed 64 chicks and found another seven that were too small to ring.

Holger Kolberg



One very happy vulture ringer!



Feisty and Lethargy on 2 November 2013.

Bird Atlas Update

Another three months have passed and still the atlas cards and ORFs keep coming in. I am really impressed by the enthusiasm shown by the many participants.

Here I need to single out Dave Ward who has submitted 207 full protocol cards and seems to have made it his mission to single-handedly atlas the entire eastern Zambezi Region! Well done Dave and keep 'em coming.

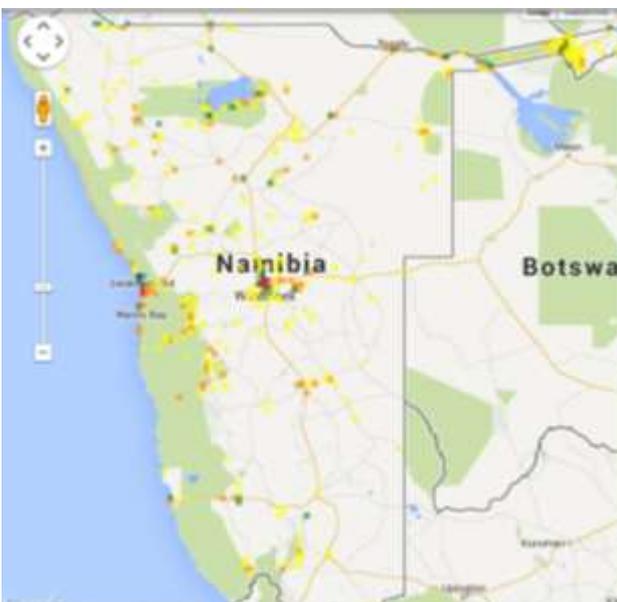
Two other birders are, however, responsible for the bulk of records submitted: Eckart Demasius has submitted 181 full protocol cards and 1198 ad hoc and incidental records and Neil Thomson is not far behind with 80 full protocol cards and 1135 ad hoc and incidental records. Stuff legends are made of!

With the holidays upon us I'm hoping to receive many ORFs from virgin pentads and would like to challenge all atlasers to visit at least one virgin pentad before the end of the year. We only need 75 more pentads to reach 5% coverage, so come on, give it a go!

Keep atlassing!

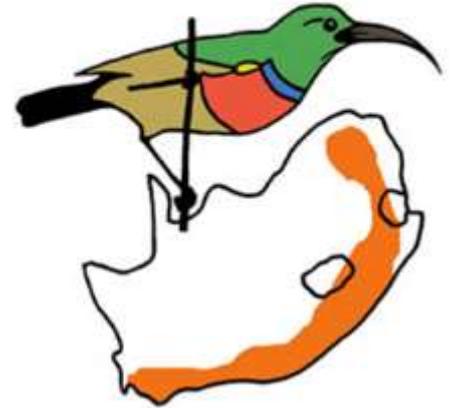
Holger Kolberg

Regional Atlas Coordinator for Namibia



Full protocol coverage as on 6 December 2013.

SABAP2



The Atlas to date:

455 pentads

79 active observers

1126 cards submitted

4.2929% coverage

Black Flamingo

A black Greater Flamingo, spotted and photographed recently in Israel, made for lively discussion on the Flamingo Specialist Group list server with some people even suggesting that it may be a new subspecies *photoshopsis*. However, it turns out that this was not the case as more photos of the same bird surfaced and it was then also seen in the UAE. Most people commented that this was the first time ever that they had seen something like this so it certainly is not a common occurrence. With the thousands of flamingos at the coast currently, one wonders what the chances are that there is a melanistic one amongst them.



See <http://www.ornithomedia.com/breves/flamant-rose-entierement-noir-dans-sud-israel-01055.html> for the original post.

Calendar of Events

8 December 2013: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at Gammams Sewage Works (07:00 at entrance gate).

2 February 2014: World Wetlands Day www.ramsar.org

15 and 16 February 2014: Walvis Bay wetland bird count

13 to 16 March 2014: Flock in the Berg, BirdLife South Africa AGM contact Nikki McCartney events@birdlife.org.za

18 to 24 August 2014: 26th International Ornithological Congress, Tokyo, Japan, website ioc26.jp

