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RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS

Editorial

The winter bird count at Walvis Bay has come and gone and it was extremely gratifying to see the number of Namibia Bird Club members participating in the count many of whom had traveled long distances at their own expense to be there. It is my belief that the bird club can make a real contribution to projects such as this.

Presumably everyone knows by now of the oiled penguins which were rescued at Lüderitz some months ago. What is possibly less well known is that the Namibia Bird Club committee made the decision immediately after the news broke to donate N\$ 5 000 from club funds towards the

rehabilitation of the oiled birds and following this Gudrun Middendorff was interviewed on the German radio service and was able to raise a further N\$ 10 000 as a result of this interview.

Holger Kolberg has put together an index of all the articles that appeared in *Ornithologische Beilage* (a supplement to the Scientific Society's newsletter) and *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe*, the forerunner of *Lanioturdus*, for the period 1963-1984. This index lists the articles published in chronological order and also by author and is a very useful tool for anyone writing articles and seeking references. The index can be obtained from the Namibia Bird Club at N\$ 40.00 per copy and all issues of *Ornithologische Beilage* and *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe* are to be found in the library of the Scientific Society.

In this issue we feature two articles on red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek, one written by Peter and Janke Cunningham who had seen a firefinch in Windhoek for the first time and the other by myself who had been aware of their presence for some time. Both come to the conclusion that these birds most probably did not arrive in Windhoek unassisted.

In an earlier issue of *Lanioturdus* I asked for readers' comments on the new electronic format of this journal. To date the comment received has been overwhelmingly favourable with only one member saying that he preferred the printed booklet format.

Diary of a Successful (?) Breeding Attempt of Gray's Larks

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Saturday, 28 February 2009

- On the afternoon of 28 February 2009 my wife found the nest of a Gray's Lark, *Ammomanopsis grayi* containing two eggs, east of Kramersdorf, whilst walking the dogs.
- The cup-shaped nest was located on the southern side of an *Arthraerua leubnitziae* bush.
- The nest was not constructed in typical fashion but with lots of pieces of cotton string.
- No adult bird was in the vicinity.



Sunday, 15 March 2009

- Arrive at 10h30 at the nest to find it empty and the lining removed from the depression in the ground.
- Two adult birds were close by searching for and collecting food.
- I followed them in the hope of finding the young birds but to no avail.
- Soon there were three adult birds collecting food.
- The young birds could not be found during the hour I spent in the area.

Sunday, 15 March 2009

- Shortly before lunch I went out to the site.
- An adult bird appeared, this time without food in its bill.
- I monitored the bird for 30 minutes hoping it would go to one of the chicks, but it flew off.
- After lunch I returned and found no Gray's Lark in the area.

Conclusion

- Unfortunately this breeding attempt ends inconclusively as it is not clear whether the young birds survived.
- Although the adult birds were still collecting food in the late morning, no chick could be found.
- Later sightings of an adult bird with no food items although it appeared to be looking for something.
- Young Gray's Larks move quite a bit once they leave the nest and blend in extremely well with the surrounding area making it very difficult to locate them.

Narrative of a Journey into the Hinterland of Etosha in Search of the Elusive Blue Crane

Holger Kolberg

Ad hoc ornithologist and government appointed beer tester.

During the last week of March, just in time to recover from the excesses of yet another Independence Day celebration, we embarked on an unprecedented adventure to the wilderness of Etosha. The aim of the operation was

to count the number of cranes, especially the blue ones, in and around Etosha but also to try and capture and ring as many chicks as possible. The latter objective had good prospects of success because Wilferd and I had spotted a pair with a teensy chick near Salvadora during the summer wetland count in January.

The esteemed members of the Crane Working Group gathered in Okaukuejo on 23 March for a strategizing and action planning workshop. Fuelled by copious amounts of enthusiasm (and prize-winning amber liquid) it was decided to try and capture the Salvadora chick the next morning on the way to Namutoni. Thus said and done, Tuesday morning found us eagerly scanning the plains near Salvadora for the objects of our desire. After several false alarms (the standard of ornithological knowledge of Namibian tour guides leaves much to be desired!) and annoying interruptions ("What are you looking at?" "Blue Cranes!" "Oh!" bus disappears in a cloud of dust), Hanjo eventually spotted the suspects quite far away. Pursuit by car was the best option and we were off, bumping our way across the plain (isn't it ironic that plains are never flat when you drive over them). Wilferd did his best to emulate Ginie! "Dakar" de Villiers and the people on the back of the bakkie had to hang on for dear life. Once we had closed in on the target, Holger hurled himself off the back and pursued the suspect on foot (only to discover that a 5 kg chick can run a lot faster than a lithe, superbly fit athlete). Wilferd in the meantime executed a precisely timed pincer movement and it wasn't too long before we had the object in custody. Whilst Holger was still trying to catch his breath, the extremely efficient team ringed, measured and bled the chick. Just to complete the mission, the boy (or girl?) was then equipped with a neat little backpack that will allow us to track his/her movements by means of a radio signal for the next couple of years.

The convoy then moved on to Namutoni to await the arrival of the aerial support. On the way there, two adult Blue Cranes were spotted at the Halali seepage and on the plains near Chudop another pair with two chicks attracted our attention. We set up camp and received the message that our aerial support would be a bit late due to a small mechanical issue. With nothing better to do we decided to look for more cranes around Fischer's Pan but all we saw was lions and other such boring creatures. When the plane eventually arrived a short recce was flown over Fischer's Pan and the Chudop plains and four Blue Cranes were spotted (3 adults, 1 chick). Another strategizing session that evening resulted in the decision to try and catch the two Chudop chicks the next morning whilst the aerial crew would survey the area around Lake Oponono for more cranes.

Wednesday dawned and we were up at sparrows (or in this case roosters!), ready for yet another day of excitement and adventure. Soon the aerial crew was on its way and we made our way to Chudop. But alas! Them thar cranes are dang clever critters! Our subjects had positioned themselves strategically between three roads so that either a) they would get run over by some rampant rent-a-car whilst being pursued, b) the pursuers would be run over by a rampant rent-a-car whilst pursuing or c) the

cranes and pursuers would be pursued by a rampant rent-a-car trying to find out what we were doing. Dejected and morally scarred for life we decided to look for the chick that was spotted at Fischer's Pan but the crane gods were definitely not smiling upon us as all we could find was a pair of adult Blue Cranes. When the aerial team returned we found out that they had been equally unsuccessful, having only seen eleven Wattled Cranes and one Grey Crowned Crane.

With our morale at an all-time low, the afternoon could only get better. The flyers would look at the Andoni plains more intensively whilst the ground crew would go after "those" chicks once more. Without going too much into the gory details of it all, suffice it to say that neither team fared much better in the afternoon than they did in the morning. "Those" chicks had disappeared, *pak, sak en alles*, nowhere to be seen and the aerial survey raised the grand total of two Blue Cranes on the Stinkwater peninsula.

OK, so we were in trouble, our reputations and bonuses at stake, we needed to come up with a plan to deliver the goods. That evening we consulted the oracle of amber liquid extensively and decided to have one last full go at "those" chicks the next day. The gods were with us because as we approached Doringdraai on Thursday morning we saw a huge traffic jam which could only mean one thing: Blue Cranes! Rats bollocks! Only a small pride of fifteen lions attracting the attention of every single visitor to the park. We weaved our way through the traffic with every person in every car gesticulating and pointing out THE LIONS to us but obviously we were blind! But what was this? Lo and behold not 100 metres down the road were "our" cranes coolly resting on the edge of the pan. This called for quick thinking and after a hasty brainstorming session it was decided to wade into the pan and herd the cranes onto the plain. Being the youngest (almost) and fittest (debatable) I was democratically elected to do the wading whilst the others would keep an eye on the lions. An hour later I was still wading and the cranes showed no inclination to head for dry land (we would later discover that these specific birds belong to a rare subspecies of wading cranes) and once again we had to admit defeat. We left the cranes where they were, hoping that they would wander away from the water by themselves.

That afternoon we returned to find the birds more or less where we had left them. Recalling the perfectly executed pincer movement from earlier in the week, Wilferd and I approached the group from opposite sides. Now we had them! They had to go onto the plain, surely they wouldn't head into the water! Ja, and the Pope is not a catholic! The next thing we see they are in the water with a lead of about a hundred metres and growing! Overcoming my severe allergy for cold and wet water I surged after them, hand net in hand, ready to pounce. Some 600 metres further I was still surging, sinking into ankle deep mud with every step. Ah, but for the genes of a Phelps or a Thorpe! Those birds definitely had them! The little voice in my head kept telling me to not give up and even threatened to bring out the big shambok at one time! Summoning my last reserves of energy I put in a tremendous spurt and managed to catch up to the chick closest to me. Eureka! One down, one to go!

I quickly handed the chick over to Wilferd who had been in my slipstream the whole time and set off in pursuit of the second chick. Man those little @#@%\$ can swim! It took another Herculean effort to chase down the second sibling and finally even this one got caught. By now I was just about out on my feet and spent about five minutes just standing there. It must have been quite a funny sight – this person in the middle of a vast expanse of water, clutching a fluffy grey chick in one arm, a fish catching net in the other hand and wearing a T-shirt that says: "Do something with your life – get me a beer!".

Anyway, once I had recuperated a bit I attacked the return journey with the same gusto as I had the chase and eventually made it back to the cars. Here the first chick had already been processed and I could hand over "my" chick, which I had christened Oscar during our long walk back (because it put in such a good performance), for similar treatment. After the obligatory photo session (how else do you prove that you did what you did?) we released Oscar and his mate, hoping that they would be re-united with their parents before the fall of darkness. The return journey to camp was livened up by an incident involving a *bockschpülls* rhino (they seem to like green Landcruisers!) but that just raised the adrenalin levels enough for that first celebratory beer to go down really well.

Friday signaled the end of our adventure and we quickly checked on our Doringdraai family. They were back together and seemed to show no ill effects of their aquatic exercise the previous afternoon. On the way to Okaukuejo we paid a courtesy visit to the Salvadora group and here too everything seemed in order and the transmitter was still functioning (hold thumbs Namibia!...). Secure in our knowledge that Etosha's blues would live to fight another day we returned to Windhoek, grateful to have had the opportunity to experience the amazing natural history that makes this country of ours so special.



You can see quite clearly who has had kids and who not!

Holger later sent this follow up report on the Etosha blue cranes:-

Our visit to Etosha at the Easter weekend turned out to be a bumper one. Although our main reason for visiting was to show Claire the pan full of water, we also looked for cranes and other birds. On the Saturday we drove to Namutoni looking for cranes all the way. At the Salvadora road junction we spotted our radio bird with her/his parents quite close to the road near the gravel pit. A quick check with the receiver confirmed that this indeed was "the" bird. At the Halali seep we saw two birds but could not see any rings because of the high grass (it was actually quite funny to see the park from the tourist perspective i.e. from our low little Golf rather than a high Landcruiser!). To the west of Doringdraai we spotted two more birds, probably the same two we saw two weeks previously. Then we did the Doringdraai and found our group of four at more or less the same place close to the edge of the pan where we had seen them two weeks before. This made it eleven cranes for the morning and we weren't done yet. We drove along the northern edge of Fischer's Pan and had already turned around when Gudrun and Neil (who just happened to be there!) pointed out four more cranes to us. This is a pair with two smallish chicks, perhaps those spotted from the aircraft during our survey. Satisfied that we had done our bit regarding cranes we took the scenic route back but the best was still to come! Later that afternoon at the Salvadora road junction we spotted a group of birds and to our delight it turned out to be ten Blue Cranes! Marconi (the radio bird) was amongst them so this made it either five or seven new birds (we couldn't tell whether the Halali birds were amongst this group) and a total of twenty to twenty-two Blue Cranes for the day.

Red-billed Firefinch *Lagonosticta senegala* Observed in a Windhoek Garden

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Red-billed Firefinch *Lagonosticta senegala* are known to occur throughout northern Namibia from the Kunene River in the west throughout the Oshana areas in north central Namibia, Okavango River and western and eastern Caprivi regions and also the Orange River bordering Namibia in the south (Hockey *et al.* 2005, Tarboton 2001).

On three occasions (26/2; 23/3 & 6/4/2009) a single Red-billed Firefinch was observed in our garden in Klein Windhoek, unmistakable with its red bill. (The sightings were made at 07h00, 13h00 and 08h30 on the abovementioned dates respectively with only one sighting involving accompanying birds when two House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and one Blue Waxbill (*Uraeginthus angolensis*) were

seen together with the Red-billed Firefinch on 6 April 2009. The bird was not ringed.

Although known to have localised movements throughout their range, these single sightings probably of the same bird in Windhoek is likely to be an escapee from a local aviary or trader. The individual observations support an escapee scenario as they are generally viewed as being gregarious, especially when not breeding, and often join mixed flocks when foraging. They are known to be trapped for the cage-bird industry (Nuttall 1997) and although not labelled with an exceptional conservation status, such escapees especially when from outside the range of the accepted southern African subspecies may result in genetic pollution. The survival outside of its natural range is problematic, but the recent good rains and associated food (e.g. grass seed) may result in it becoming established especially if small viable breeding flocks managed to escape. Another, albeit unlikely scenario under the current observed circumstances, is that certain species are extending their range due to exceptional rainfall and food availability or due to more global climate change issues. Such serendipitous sightings should be monitored more closely so as to determine range extensions of species over time.

It is recommended that the aviaries of legitimate bird keepers be inspected regularly by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism to ensure the quality of the cages so as to prevent accidental escapees and that the veterinary road-blocks in northern Namibia also be used to prevent the illegal traders from moving birds.

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