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STRANGE VISITORS TO THE DESERT

During the last summer months (December 1990 to January 1991) I was fortunate enough to see a handful of strange birds that one would not expect to see in the Namib Desert. It was early December when the first of these "Desert" birds arrived at Sesriem in the Namib-Naukluft Park. It had us all up in arms for a while till we settled down to examine our Roberts'. The bird did not move around much, and therefore we were able to study it in great detail. In the end we all agreed it was a Common Sandpiper Tringa hypoleucos. But that was not the end of the story for that day, because not long there after, its place was taken up by yet another waterbird; a Ruff Philomachus pugnax!

We were at each others throats again, but it did not take us as long to identify this oddity as the first bird; I felt as if we had practised for this moment, and the agreement arrived a lot quicker. Both birds stayed for about a week and then disappeared not to be seen again.

The waterbirds did not let us down in December, as a Little Bittern Ixobrychus minutus and Blacksmith Plover Vanellus armatus were also seen. It was only the Blacksmith Plover which stayed for more than a day at Sesriem during this month. Over Christmas, Namibia has a flood of tourists from all over the world; this seems to go for the birds as well. It took us two days of running around with book and binos to finally catch up with a lovely European Golden Oriole Oriolus oriolus. It was a lot of hard work, but well worth the running.

Down at Sossusvlei over the December holiday period I found that there to were birds that I had never seen there before. They were the Brubru Nilaus afer, Yellow Canary Serinus flaviventris and the Spotted Flycatcher Muscicapa striata, and the January Atlas Card looked good with birds like the Wattled Starling Creatophora cinerea, Yellowbilled Kite Milvus migrans and Richard's Pipit Anthus novaeseelandiae. While in the process of writing this article, I was told of yet another waterbird. This time it was a Spotted Crake Porzana porzana which was rather far out of its known range in Namibia. This little bird stayed for just under a month and then mysteriously disappeared. I think that an owl must have caught it, as it used to walk around the garden till well after sunset.

It was interesting to see these waterbirds in the desert, and it keeps us on our toes with expectation; will we see more of these "desert" birds in the future?

Graeme Austin Wilson, Namib-Naukluft Park, Sesriem.

NOTES ON THE NESTING BEHAVIOUR OF THE WHITETAILED SHRIKE

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Am Nest Des Drosselwürgers Lanioturdus torquatus: Während den ersten Wochen im Januar 1987 wurden insgesamt 9 Stunden am Nest eines Drosselwürgerpaares verbracht. Das Verhalten der Altvögel, und die Beute, die als Futter für die beiden Jungvögel gebracht wurde, ist notiert worden und wird Zusammengefaßt: Insgesamt 66 Fütterungsanflüge zum Nest wurden beobachtet. In 43 Fällen konnte die Beute nicht identifiziert werden. In 14 Fällen wurden Grashüpfer, in 4 Fällen grüne Raupen, in drei Fällen wurden braune Raupen, und zweimal Motten oder Falter als Futter gebracht. Die Altvögel besuchten im Durchschnitt das Nest jede 6.1 Minuten zwecks Fütterung, d.h. jeder Jungvogel bekam alle 12.2 Minuten was zu Fressen. Das Nest wurde nach jede Fütterung durch die Altvögel vom Kot gesäubert, und die Jungvögel sind im Alter von etwa 15 Tage Flüge geworden.

INTRODUCTION

On 3 January 1987, a nest containing two nestling Whitetailed Shrikes Lanioturdus torquatus, was found in the vicinity of Hofmeyr Walk, south of the "Ice Cream Cone" water tower in central Windhoek. During the ensuing two weeks, a total of just over nine hours was spent at the nest site, observing parental behaviour and prey-items delivered to the nest by the adult birds.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The nest

The nest, which appeared more ragged and untidy on the outside than other nests of this species examined to date, was situated about two metres from ground level in a horizontal, forked branch. The nest diameter and height, on the outside, were about 70 and 80 mm respectively.

Another nest of this species was found by Dieter Ludwig on 4 January 1987, about 300 metres north of the one described here. This nest contained one nestling, fully fledged at that stage, since it left the nest on 5 January and did not return. It was situated about two metres from the footpath in a tree growing on a

slope, downhill from the path, so that the nest itself was at the same level of the path, no more than 750 mm above the ground.

The nestlings

When the nest was found, it is estimated that the nestlings were not older than two or three days, judging by the limited feather growth on the spine and wing edges. Their eyes were closed, and only started opening on 9 January 1987, i.e. when the nestlings were about 11 or 12 days old. Feather growth was rapid, with the distinctive black/white pattern becoming apparent on 10 January 1987.

During the first four days of observation, the nestlings reacted to any sound in the vicinity of the nest by begging. The inside of the chick's mouths was bright orange/yellow, without spots. From the fifth day onwards, the chicks spent their time sleeping, with their beaks resting on the rim of the nest. At this stage, they showed no reaction to any normal noise at the nest, but reacted immediately when an adult bird approached the nest, although no audible contact call was given by the adult.

Arrangements were made to ring both chicks on 15 January 1987, but when the nest was inspected on that afternoon, both young had already vacated it. It can thus be deduced that the nestling period of Whitetailed Shrikes is between 14 and 16 days.

Feeding

A total of 66 feeding visits to the nest were observed. When the average time between successive visits was calculated, a figure of 6.1 minutes was obtained. Assuming that both chicks received an equal share of the food, each chick was fed, on average, every 12.2 minutes during the day. Grasshoppers formed 21% of the diet, smooth green caterpillars 6%, brown caterpillars 5%, and butterflies or moths, 5%. The remaining 65% was made up of items which could not be positively identified due to size or the approach route to the nest, but it appeared as though small beetles formed a large percentage of the balance. On one occasion, a very large, smooth brown caterpillar, about 50mm long, was removed from the nest after a chick could not swallow it, in spite of trying to do so for about 30 seconds. A similar, but slightly smaller, caterpillar was fed successfully to one of the chicks fifteen minutes later.

The adults regularly assisted both chicks in swallowing prey brought to the nest by rearranging it whilst it was being gulped down. On the first two visits to the nest, it appeared as though one of the adults was reluctant to feed the chicks, although he (if we assume that this was the male) brought food to the nest. This bird would wait in the vicinity of the nest, calling frequently, until the other adult appeared and fed one of the young. The prey would then be passed to the female (?) who again

fed one of the chicks. This behaviour was observed six times, with the female (?) soliciting the food from the male (?) on three occasions by opening her mouth and fluttering her wings slightly. From the third day onwards, this behaviour ceased.

Other behaviours

Generally, after feeding visits, the adults would fly off and immediately resume foraging for food, on the ground or in low branches of adjacent shrubs or trees. While on the ground, the bird would hop about rapidly, changing direction and taking off frequently in pursuit of prey. On one occasion, one of the adults jumped from the ground to cling upside-down to a low branch for several seconds (reminiscent of a sunbird's behaviour) whilst pecking at the branch.

Mention was made above of the male, who initially was reluctant to feed the chicks. This same bird had the habit of raising his head feathers while waiting for the female to appear; this gave him an impudent appearance. This habit continued right throughout the observation period, and might be ascribed to the male in question only, or even be a general characteristic. On one occasion, the male, if it can be identified by this habit, settled on the nest at sunset to brood the young for the night.

Brooding generally commenced at about 19h30 to 19h45, i.e. at sunset, although it only became dark a while later. Only one bird arrived at the nest for brooding duty, the other presumably spent the nights in a nearby tree.

The adults kept the nest very clean, removing faeces after feeding their young and flying off with it. Towards the end of the observation period, the chicks would actually stand up after being fed to allow the adult to remove the droppings. It appeared, during the last two days before fledging, as though the young would excrete only directly after being fed, to facilitate immediate removal of faeces.

It happened only once during the observation period that a strange bird, in this instance a female Masked Weaver Ploceus velatus landed in the nest-tree. One of the adult Whitetailed Shrikes immediately appeared and chased off the intruder. It was interesting to note that although there were a large variety of other birds observed in the vicinity of the nest, notably Whitebrowed Sparrow-weavers Plocepasser mahali, these birds were never seen to approach the nest-tree, nor did the Whitetailed Shrikes exhibit any aggressiveness away from their nest.

Vocalizations

There seemed to be a few definite contact calls between the adults. Before becoming adept at feeding his offspring himself,

the male (?) would wait in the vicinity of the nest, calling a clear, ascending "cheeuw" at intervals, whilst looking around expectantly. Soon after this call was heard, the female would call a descending "treeuw", and appear with an item of prey.

After having fed their young, both adults would fly off, uttering a metallic "chink-chink" - this call was heard only if both birds were in the same vicinity.

No call was heard from the nest whilst one of the adults was brooding or shading the chicks, although, on one occasion, a "treeuw" reply call was given in response to a "chink" call, but only after the shading adult had left the nest and was flying towards the other. This was on one of the occasions on which food was solicited as described above.

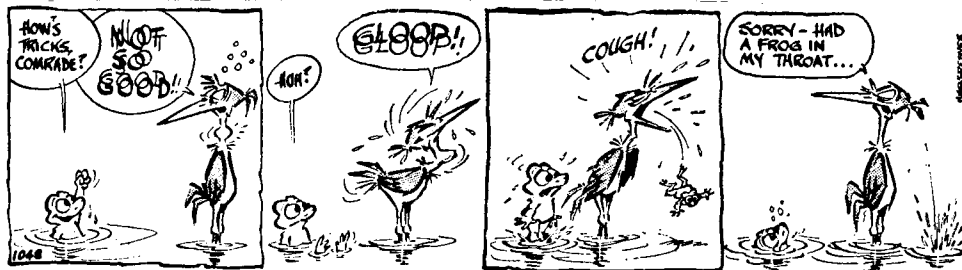
REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON MOUNTAIN CHATS

For the last two years I have been collecting information on the colour phases of male Mountain Chats. The plumage in male Mountain Chats is very variable with the birds falling into two basic types, either grey or black, with a great deal of variation in crown and belly colour.

"Grey" Mountain Chats can have light to dark grey crowns, white to grey bellies, and white to grey shoulder patches. "Black" Mountain Chats usually have white shoulders, and may have black, grey or white crowns and black, grey or white bellies, as noted by Thomson (1990; *Lanioturdus* 25 (1/2):59).

I would be most grateful for records of plumage colour in male Mountain Chats. The information I require is: Locality (1/4 degree square), date of observation, overall plumage colour (black or grey), crown colour, belly colour and shoulder patch colour.

W.R.J. Dean, P.O. Box 47, Prince Albert, 6930, South Africa.



BREEDING-PLUMAGED WHYDAHs: A request for help!

As a follow-up to a previous study, and a prelude to another, I am trying to find a really good study area in central Namibia for the long-tailed whydahs (*Vidua spp.*). I'm interested mainly in Paradise Whydahs *V. paradisaea* and Shafttailed Whydahs *V. regia*, but want to find a site with Pintailed Whydahs *V. macroura* too. Does anyone know of any sympathetic landowners (preferably within easy driving cycling distance of Windhoek) with large numbers of these birds on their land? The ideal study site would be medium-density *Acacia* thornveld in good condition (ungrazed or lightly grazed), with an established water body and a cool thatched hut from which I can observe these birds, whilst sipping Liqui-Fruit in comfort on a 54°C day - but anything will do!

My current, "ad-hoc" study site is Croeser's Garage near the centre of Windhoek. It's an unlikely site, until you realise that the cloud of whirling debris near one entrance is a large flock of seed-eaters alternately approaching and fleeing a pile of scattered manna seed on the tarmac. This "cloud" of birds represents at once the chief advantage and disadvantage of the site from a bird-ringing viewpoint. The advantage: large numbers of whydahs (especially breeding males) and other seed-eaters at a concentrated food source (due to the interest of Mrs Croeser Sr). The disadvantage: constant disruption by every motorist who decides to swing in to make absolutely sure that yes, the petrol station really is closed at 06h30 on a Sunday. Bird-ringing during normal working hours is definitely out of the question, as is peaceful fieldwork uninterrupted by steady streams of curious pedestrians and motorists. The Croeser family have been very supportive of my eccentric interests, but the need for a less disturbed site is obvious. As the upcoming breeding season approaches, I must locate a longer-term site that's more suitable for a PhD study (through Uppsala University, in Sweden).

I did manage to ring about 150 whydahs at various sites in Windhoek in 1990-1991, so please be on the lookout for any colour-ringed whydahs in your garden. If anyone has any ideas, tips or sightings, I would be grateful if they could write or phone (Tel. 061-307-2335 w; 061-3-2313 h). Many thanks...!

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