

LANIOTURDUS

Volume 47 No 4

November 2014

Namibia Bird Club



since 1962

Journal of the Namibia Bird Club
www.namibiabirdclub.org

On Big Foot's trail through the Hoanib River, September 2013

Eckart Demasius
e-b.de@iway.na

All photographs in this article are © Eckart Demasius

I had not visited the Hoanib River in many years and when the opportunity arose to do so I jumped at it. The main purpose of the trip was not to go bird watching, instead we wanted to see Big Foot.



Figure 1: Desert adapted elephant in the Hoanib River.

However, as a birdwatcher one looks around and having taken to atlassing I find I look more intensely than before and so I ended up seeing more birds than I actually expected to see.

Our five day trip commenced on 10 September taking us along the coast via Springbokwater over Dopsteekhoogte to Bergsig and Palmwag. The first birds we recorded were at the mouth of the Uniab River and then the first Ostrich was seen when travelling over Dopsteekhoogte.



Figure 2: Ostrich in the dusty plain.

Damaraland was dry, very dry, and no blade of grass was to be seen until we reached Sesfontein's dusty plains where more Ostriches gave us a faint glimpse of themselves through the dust.

It took a day's driving to reach our camp. After leaving the dusty plains we entered the floodplains which held a little water and Cape Wagtail, Three-banded Plover and Red-faced Mousebird were recorded. Entering the river "proper", i.e. after passing the Poort, Red-eyed Bulbul, Pale-winged Starling and Dusky Sunbird were seen.



Figure 3: Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill.

The next day we explored the river further west and shortly before Amspoort we were greeted by a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill. Further west towards the park boundary it is desert at its best and the only species seen and heard was Cape Sparrow. Returning towards camp we took a detour along one of the tributaries looking for Big Foot which was missing so far for the day. In this much drier stream we recorded Mountain Wheatear, Karoo Chat and Rüppell's Korhaan. This is the northern race, the nominate race, *Eupodotis rueppellii rueppellii*, with its paler brown back and whiter belly.

The difference from the southern race, *fitzsimonsi*, was clearly recognizable.



Figure 4: Rüppell's Korhaan ssp. *rueppellii*.

Some Ostriches graced the desert landscape and I am always astounded in their ability to survive in this harsh environment.



Figure 5: Ostrich in a harsh environment.

The afternoon activities were devoted largely to Big Foot which finally made its appearance and every now and then we had to adapt to the right of way traffic rules of the Hoanib River.



Figure 6: Hoanib River right of way.

On the third day we once again concentrated on the upstream side of

our camp, as the elephants had spent their time there the day before.

An early morning surprise was Hartlaub's Babbler followed by Verraux's Eagle flying overhead. On the cliffs of the Hoanib an Augur Buzzard was looking for some prey....



Figure 7: Augur Buzzard.

... while a caravan of elephants passed us quietly and ...



Figure 8: Elephant caravan.

... a Black-chested Snake-Eagle oversaw the proceedings from above.



Figure 9: Black-chested Snake-Eagle.

Our sundowner we spent at Amspoort with Red-billed Spurrow

entertaining us in the dunes. Although it was very dry we recorded a number of birds in the late afternoon, Familiar Chat, Common Scimitarbill, Pied Crow, Black-chested Prinia, Gabar Goshawk and my highlight for the afternoon, Crimson-breasted Shrike.



Figure 10: Red-billed Spurfowl.

Day four started with the obligatory visit to the President's Waterhole No 1 "to read the newspaper", i.e. to see what activities had taken place during the night at the waterhole. This determined the activities for the remainder of the day. As a large elephant bull had moved upstream, we followed his tracks. At the waterhole itself only Southern Grey-headed Sparrows and Black-throated Canaries came to drink.



Figure 11: Pearl-spotted Owlet.

Grey Go-away-bird, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Augur Buzzard and Bokmakierie made their presence known on the way to the President's Waterhole No 2 further upstream where we hoped to meet the elephant

bull, instead only Golden-breasted Bunting and a Pearl-spotted Owlet kept us company. So we moved on to the Poort where we encountered some traffic coming towards us.



Figure 12: Elephant at the Poort.

And this pretty much ended the birding activities for the rest of the day. The next morning we were on our way back home and there we met the old elephant bull having breakfast early in the morning.



Figure 13: Elephant bull having breakfast.

At Palmwag we were surprised to see a Hamerkop in the reeds and a White-tailed Shrike was hunting insects.

All in all, not being entirely a birding trip, the birding aspect of the tour still proved to be more productive than anticipated, especially taking the very dry conditions into consideration.

Altogether about forty different species of birds were recorded in the Hoanib River.