

This issue of *Lanioturdus* is devoted to the raptor workshop which was held at Waterberg Plateau Park from 18-19 February 2005. The workshop was organized by the Namibian Nature Foundation and was open to all who were interested in raptors.

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Welcome and introduction

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Namibia's vultures, other diurnal raptors and owls are increasingly under threat from factors such as disturbance, particularly at breeding sites; the misuse of poisons and pesticides; electrocution and collisions with overhead lines; habitat degradation; persecution; illegal harvesting; and drowning in reservoirs.

Much work has been done on raptors in Namibia in the past. People have come and gone, however, resulting in a lull in activity which is now picking up again. By collaborating in a close-knit group rather than in isolation we will be able to achieve more, encouraging one another and pooling our resources in effective, coordinated synergies. There is also a need for new actions, which will be incorporated into existing programmes/initiatives where possible, with a focus on increasing public involvement.

This is why the time is right for our workshop on birds of prey at Waterberg Plateau Park on 18-19 February 2005. We are privileged to welcome a healthy mix of "old-time" raptor enthusiasts here who bring years of experience to the table, and a new cohort of young conservationists who will carry the flag into the future. One of our main outcomes will be to develop an action plan for these threatened birds (see the plan below).

Status of vultures in Namibia

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Introduction

Vulture research in Namibia started in the 1960's in the Namib Desert Park, now part of the Namib-Naukluft Park (NNP). Sauer (1973), Jensen (unpublished reports), Clinning (1978) and Brown (1985, 1986) all worked on vultures in the same area over the years. The present project of ringing Lappet-faced Vultures

show us definite trends, movements, disappearances etc. Certain modifications to allow for changes such as the taking down of telephone poles, replacement of new pylons etc. should be extrapolated to accommodate for these which will no doubt play an important factor in observations. During the past five to ten years it has also been remarked by many of us that there seems to be a decline in certain birds. Although the RR had ended, those of us who took part continued making casual observations about the decline of certain species. One such species which comes to mind is the Dickinson's Kestrel in the Kavango and Caprivi – these birds were fairly common in this area and during a period of 2 years while working in the Caprivi as a Nature Conservation Officer 13 birds were caught and ringed and many more seen. During several follow up visits to the area a further 4 birds were caught and ringed. Today when one visits the area these birds are nowhere to be found. Subsequent visits to the area have produced fewer and fewer individuals up until today where none have been seen in the past 6 to 7 years. Has deforestation in the Caprivi got something to do with this? Lets get all the old RR stats and compare – not only for this species – but also for all the raptors within our region.

Raptor Road Counts with students at Polytechnic of Namibia

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Introduction

The Department Nature Conservation at the Polytechnic of Namibia trains students in the field of Nature Conservation. Graduates are thus “fed” into the industry of conservation of biodiversity and our natural resources. The curriculum provides background information on biodiversity, ecology, and how to monitor and manage this. Field excursions to various parts of Namibia form an important “hands on” exposure to the regions. They also provide an ideal opportunity to expose students to raptor road counts as a simple but useful form of monitoring.

One of the first year excursions is to the coast. On the way to the coast, students conduct a practice road count. This allows them to make mistakes and iron out any problems with the form. It is under my supervision.

On the return journey, the students, again under my supervision, collect road count data for later analysis.

Upon return, the data is combined with previous years data and then analysed. Students have to calculate the linear density of each bird species, and species richness, within 3 different rainfall isohyets from the coast to Windhoek. They then have to discuss the reasons for the differences in species composition, density and species richness, relating it to concepts learnt in Ecology 1.

The students are graded for the assignment. Marks are awarded for the completeness and correctness of filling in the form, calculations and graphical presentation of the results and discussion of the results and suggestions for improvement of the “survey”.

Some examples of results obtained are shown in Figure 1 and 2 below.

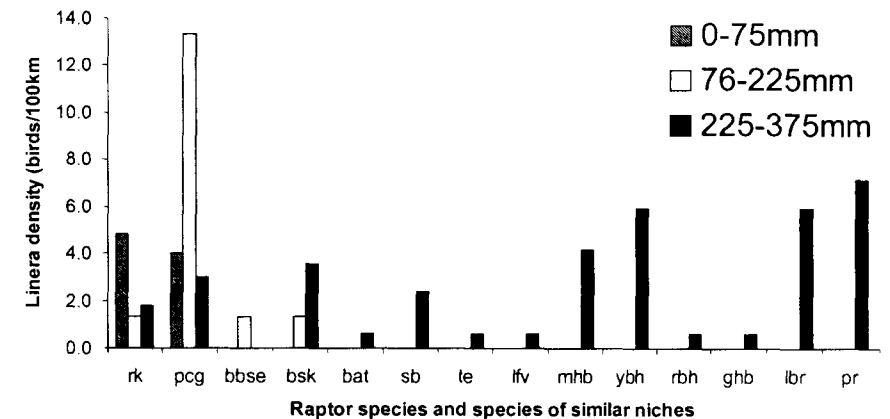


Figure 1: Accumulated densities (through 2002 to 2005) of raptor species observed on raptor road counts with students during excursions to the coast, conducted in summer months. Species mhb to pr are four species of hornbill and 2 species of rollers. These were included since these species occupy similar feeding niches, and it allowed students to familiarise themselves with a larger diversity of medium sized birds.

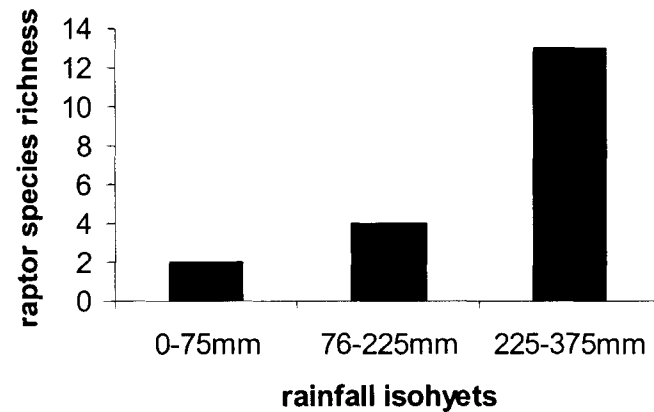


Figure 2: Accumulated raptor species richness (through 2002 to 2005), as observed on raptor road counts from Swakopmund to Windhoek. Species richness includes hornbills and rollers.

On other excursions, students are encouraged to conduct raptor road counts under the guidance of accompanying lecturers.

The value of raptor road counts as a teaching tool

In theory, raptor road counts are valuable as a teaching tool for the following reasons:

They

- demonstrate a useful, cheap and relatively easy monitoring technique
- are an example of an index for showing trends
- improve bird identification skills
- improve analytic skills and write up skills through the analysis of the data and the writing up of a report.

Furthermore, the results of the raptor road counts demonstrate important concepts relating to species diversity. For example, species diversity can be seen to be a correlate of productivity (rainfall) or habitat heterogeneity. Students get to grips with these concepts and discuss them.

How successful are raptor road counts?

My impressions of raptor road counts as a learning and awareness tool are mixed. Few students continue with raptor road counts voluntarily after graduation, but most students knowledge of raptors is increased somewhat. Is this limited interest a function of attitude towards biodiversity (ie. only the big and hairy count not the medium and feathery) or is it an apathy towards filling in forms? (I can sympathise with this last possibility). Another possibility is that here is uncertainty as to whether the data is being captured and analysed still. In other words, the students are asking themselves whether the data is of any use. I have impressed upon students the potential value of performing raptor road counts, citing examples of analyses of these counts to determine temporal trends in, for example, PCG populations.

Suggestions and conclusions

I suggest that MET staff and volunteers could be given certificates for different levels of identification skill. For example, a form obtained from a level 1 volunteer would be viewed with more caution than a form filled in by a level 3 volunteer. A dubious identification of a Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* by a level 1 volunteer could be downgraded, for example to an unidentified raptor medium. The revival of the MET raptor road count programme and associated publicity would go a long way towards improving the attitude of students towards raptor road counts and eventually increase the pool of counters out there.