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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

Eckart Demasius

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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.

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.

References

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