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EDITORIAL

This summer has seen the most remarkable influx of huge numbers of birds of a variety of species and a surfeit of rarities from the North to the coast and places in the South – or is it that we are getting more birders out into the field finding more birds and reporting their observations. I think it is probably a combination of both.

This year, some of the biggest numbers of Abdim's Storks I have ever seen, arrived and stayed even though there was a general lack of rain and *Koringkrieks*! Around Etosha, through the central parts of the country to south of Windhoek there were storks everywhere. Huge numbers of coastal terns, skuas, waders and pelagic seabirds were reported from the Walvis Bay and Sandwich Harbour areas. Large numbers of Western Redfooted Kestrels were reported from the central part of the country for most of the summer and huge numbers of European Swifts were reported at the same time. But for me the interesting thing has been the number of reports we have received of other species of interest (see *SHORT NOTES*) and the number of people reporting these. I can only hope that people's interest has again been stimulated to get out birding and that, although local, *Lanioturdus* is starting to provide the medium for pricking people's interest. This is what it is there for, and I cannot stress enough to you all that without your support and contributions the magazine (and the club) will fail.

Thanks for all your support and keep on birding.

birds in the southern African part of African Waterfowl census (which includes counts from Botswana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe) for January 1996 was about 586 000 birds; the same figure for January 1997 was 654 000 birds. The wetland birds from Sandwich therefore represented 36% of the total birds counted in southern Africa on this occasion!

Needless to say, this is no Sandwich short of a picnic, and this particular wetland is alive and well!



SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS IN VIOLET WOODHOOPES

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Last year, whilst collecting material (i.e. blood and feathers) for genetic studies on Redbilled and Violet Woodhoopoes, in Damaraland, I had the opportunity to witness a male-male mounting event between an adult breeding male and a fledgling male Woodhoopoe.

While following a mixed group of Redbilled and Violet Woodhoopoes (two males and three females), I noticed that a young male (>1yr) was consistently falling behind the group and forcing a considerable delay on the group's progress. The first delay came about during the early morning, when the group was dispersing away from their roosting cavity. Post roost dispersion flights probably play a key role in woodhoopoe survival, since any unnecessary advertising of their roosting cavity may attract the undesirable attraction of potential predators. So it is crucial to leave the roost in relative haste and silence.

The group took off from a mopane tree in the vicinity of their roost, but left behind a young male bird. As the group disappeared downstream, alarm calls were uttered by individuals in the group and once the group gathered they cackled vigorously. This, I assumed, was probably an attempt to entice the missing chick to join them. However it had no apparent effect on the lone immature bird, which remained perched on an exposed branch.

Seconds later, I heard the soft cuckling notes of the breeding male retracing its flight path back to the dead mopane tree, to join and fetch the delayed youngster. I had yet not seen the male arrive when my eye caught a glimpse of the scurrying young male as it scrambled hurriedly into the dense foliage of the tree, narrowly missed by the reach of sharp talons of a swooping Little Banded Goshawk (*Accipiter badius*). Witnessing this, the arriving male sounded some ear-piercing alarm notes and rushed in close mobbing pursuit of the goshawk. The rest of the group arrived seconds later and teased out from the depths of the canopy a rather wary and nerve shattered looking youngster.

The breeding male returned seconds later and wound up the whole group into a series of cackling crescendos. Once the cackling settled, the group flew into some nearby mopane bush clumps. I observed the entire group as they foraged on the ground, rock-hopping, bounding and probing their bills under rocks and tossing and tearing at the base of grass clumps, a terrestrial foraging behaviour one seldom observes in South African Redbilled Woodhoopoes and which is more typically observed in Namibian woodhoopoes. Eventually the group approached another mopane clump and engaged into their more familiar bark inspecting foraging behaviour.

One by one, the group trickled out of the clump and proceeded downstream, with the exception of the young male, who once more decided to remain behind, and (much to my dismay) had chosen (*again!*) a dead and exposed branch to perch for the day. The group cackled from further downstream, but failed once more to call its lost member. Two scouting woodhoopoes returned to fetch the youngster. Their flight was direct, fast and lacked the characteristic shallow wing beat displayed by woodhoopoes in reconnaissance and inter-territorial disputes with other woodhoopoe

groups. Instead they both flew low and past me (and past the young bird, too?), to dive-bomb a nearby mopane shrub from where another Little Banded Goshawk burst out, twisting and turning as it escaped the mobbing woodhoopoes. I never saw the return of the second mobber. However, once the raptor had been chased off the breeding male flew back to the same branch where the young male was perched.

Once alongside the youngster, the male sidled up to the younger bird until their wings were touching. Feeling this approach the youngster emitted some soft begging shrills and gently pecked at the breeding male's bill (this he repeated in three instances but the male gave no response). The breeding male rose to an erect stance, whilst the youngster remained in his perching position, lifted his leg over the youngsters rump, climbed onto the youngster's back and proceeded to mount him. The mounting male's tail was spread open and swayed sideways like that of a male seeking cloacal contact, with drooped wings balancing him as he manoeuvred himself into some sort of position. There was no neck clasping, and the mounting event lasted five seconds.

The youngster responded to the mounting by crouching for 2–3 seconds after which it started preening the adult male's neck, throat and ear regions. Approximately half a minute later the breeding male flew off in the direction of the rest of the group, and this time the young male slipped into his wake without delay or hesitation. Not once during the rest of my observations (five hours) was the youngster observed to slip behind the group's progress.

Following the events certainly allows one to better understand the nature of this mounting event. The youngsters lack of cohesion with the group, had forced two unwanted encounters with likely predators and it had placed at risk the confidentiality and safety of their roost. This, far from being a challenge towards the breeding male's status, nevertheless triggered a clear dominant behaviour from the breeding male seeking an immediate subordinate and obedient response from the youngster.

Mounting is a behaviour pattern which is most commonly observed during

male–female copulation events, however, male–male mounting, and mounting *per se* occurs in a myriad of other contexts and social species. Mounting observations in the field can all-too-easily become labelled as copulatory mounting if one disregards the context, partner and behavioural background that lead to the event. So be warned – mounting behaviours are not always copulatory, they really are just a behavioural link in a series of events that precede and follow it, and often they can be your only clue to work out the intricate social hierarchies in some species of animals.

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I would like to thank Steve and Louise Braine for their hospitality at Hobatere Lodge in Eastern Damaraland. But in particular their unsparingly shared knowledge, contagious enthusiasm and for the six extra Woodhoopoe blood samples sent to me weeks later as proof that there are many ways to skin a cat...

IMMATURE AMATEUR BIRD LIST

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In mid-December 1997 we travelled through the area in the Cape Province just south of the Namibian border. Along the section of road from Vioolsdrif to just beyond Steinkopf we were amazed by the numbers of raptors sitting and nesting on the telephone poles. There had seemingly been good rains a short time before and the grass (and rodents) were plentiful.

Tarrant, the youngest member of the family, had earned his Bird Badge at Cubs shortly before the holidays and this naturally qualified him as something of an expert on the subject. With this newfound knowledge and the contagious enthusiasm of a beginner birder he compiled the following list of bird names and times of sightings. (Please bear in mind that it was written in a moving car which is not conducive to copper-plate handwriting. A look at the times is an indication of the numbers of birds which were seen, if you consider that the time between each note was probably taken