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Editorial

With funding for research projects becoming ever more difficult to secure more and more reliance is placed on the citizen scientist to help collect the data required for research. You and I who participate in atlassing, ringing, wetland counts, raptor road counts etc. are the citizen scientists, the amateurs, who provide much of the data from which the professionals are able to conduct their research.

In a way the wheel has turned a full circle. Some years ago (as far as I am aware around the mid 1970's) the school of thought was that research was purely the domain of the professionals and amateurs or citizen scientists were actively discouraged from data collection. A case in point is bird ringing where a policy was introduced whereby amateur ringing was only permitted if a project was registered. The immediate result of this was that many amateur ringers lost interest and threw in the towel. One cannot help wondering how much valuable data was lost through this short sighted approach. How many birds, that might have been ringed by

Delany and D. Scott (Eds.), Wetlands International, Wageningen, The Netherlands

Simmons, R.E. and Brown, C.J. In press. *Birds to watch in Namibia: red, rare and endemic species*. Ministry of Environment and Tourism and Namibia Nature Foundation, Windhoek.

Short Notes and Interesting Observations

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African Red-eyed Bulbuls

Monika Gerlach reported having observed African Red-eyed Bulbuls catching and eating newly hatched rock agamas. African Red-eyed Bulbuls are generally regarded as being frugivores and according to Roberts VII they eat a wide variety of wild and cultivated fruits as well as flower petals and they are known to probe aloe flowers for nectar. Roberts VII further states under "Foraging & Food" – "*also eats arthropods, flying up to hawk insects above trees or shrubs; darts after insects flushed from foliage.*" I cannot find any reference to them feeding on young reptiles so perhaps this is behaviour previously unrecorded for this species.

White-browed Sparrow-Weaver Nests

On 13/02/2011 we found a colony of eleven White-browed Sparrow-Weaver nests on a steel electricity pylon just outside Windhoek's Gammams Sewage Works. This is somewhat unusual because White-browed Sparrow-Weavers rarely build nests on manmade structures. What was equally unusual was that one of the nests had a distinct entrance tunnel, a phenomenon recorded before at Gocheganas, Farm Kakuse and Farm Bismarck (See *Lanioturdus* 43-4).



WBSW nests on pylon – Photo : Neil Thomson



WBSW nest with entrance tunnel – Photo : Neil Thomson

On the same day a further two White-browed Sparrow-Weaver nests were discovered on the insulators and conductors very high up on an electricity mast a few hundred metres south of the last location. Again one of these nests had an entrance tunnel.



WBSW nest on electricity mast – Photo : Neil Thomson

Then on 27/02/2011 we found a colony of eleven nests on Farm Hoffnung just to the east of Windhoek and this time five of the nests had distinct entrance tunnels while on 29/05/2011 we found a colony of eighteen nests, six of which had tunnels, on Farm Haiganas some 40 km south of Windhoek.

This phenomenon does not seem to be restricted to Namibia however. When we were driving back to Namibia in May 2011 Gudrun and I noticed at least two colonies between Prieska and the Nakop Border Post where some nests had tunnels.

It is thought that various weaver species start building entrance tunnels on their nests in an effort to keep brood parasites such as cuckoos out of the nests. White-browed Sparrow-Weavers are not regarded as primary hosts for any of the cuckoo species occurring in Namibia so this sudden tunnel building craze at so many different locations is somewhat baffling.

Murdering Pale-winged Starlings

A Mr Milke informed us of some rather strange and murderous behavior by Pale-winged Starlings. Mr Milke has swifts nesting under the eaves of his Klein Windhoek house. Not having seen the nests we assume that these birds are Little Swifts. While in the past Mr Milke had observed the swifts being attacked by Rosy-faced Lovebirds, in 2011 he observed a pair of Pale-winged Starlings attacking the swifts and killing three adult birds after which the swift chicks panicked and jumped out of the nest resulting in their deaths too. A starling then took over the nest and was seen sitting in the nest but it could not be determined whether this bird had laid any eggs in the nest. Mr Milke climbed up to the nest and chased off the starlings and at the time of writing they had not returned.

I have not been able to find any references to this sort of behaviour by Pale-winged Starlings in any of the literature to which I have access.

Partially Leucistic Red-headed Finch and Red-billed Quelea

On 01/06/2011 I caught and ringed what appeared to be a partially leucistic Red-headed Finch at my Klein Windhoek home. The bird exhibited the normal markings of a female Red-headed Finch but the colour was much paler than normal, the bird being largely whitish with pale grey markings. This is the first time I have come across leucism in this species. I had previously seen a partially leucistic Curlew Sandpiper at Walvis Bay and I have caught a White-backed Mousebird with one white outer primary. I have also caught Laughing Doves with the odd pure white contour feather. This is however the first time I have handled a bird with this degree of leucism.



Partially leucistic Red-headed Finch – Photo : Neil Thomson



Normal Red-headed Finch – Photo : Neil Thomson

Then on 26/09/2011 I caught and ringed a Red-billed Quelea with a grayish rather than the normal brown head. As this bird was not showing any sign of being a pale headed breeding male I can only assume that this was also some degree of leucism.



The unusual Red-billed Quelea – Photo : Neil Thomson

Unwanted Catch

On 02/06/2011 I had a rather unexpected and unwanted catch in one of my snaptraps. I had baited the trap with a piece of apple in an attempt to catch frugivores such as White-backed Mousebirds or African Red-eyed Bulbuls so you can imagine my surprise when I found a young yellow mongoose in the trap. I had always understood that these animals are purely carnivores/insectivores so I could not work out how this one came to be caught in my trap. I thought it most likely that it was merely inquisitive and had gone to investigate the bait or perhaps it just walked over the trap and triggered it – I very much doubted that it had become a vegetarian. I was able to release it unharmed from the trap although, given the carnage that these small predators can cause if they get into a walk-in trap full of birds, I must admit that I was sorely tempted.....

Then a couple of months later I saw an adult yellow mongoose enter my walk-in trap and take a piece of apple which was lying in the trap and since then we have observed a mongoose helping itself to pawpaw which was put out for the birds. Still later we saw one of these animals actually jump onto the feeding table and try to pull a piece apple off the

wires. I have learned something new – these animals are obviously omnivores.



Yellow mongoose in snaptrap.- Photo : Neil Thomson

Chestnut Weaver Nests

Dieter Oschadleus, the project coordinator at SAFRING, was very keen to come to Namibia to ring Chestnut Weavers in the 2010/2011 breeding season. The only colony we could find in the vicinity of Windhoek was one of about 180 nests just south of the Monte Christo turn off on the B1. Dieter duly ringed nearly 40 birds at this colony before the rain forced us home.

Chestnut weavers are renowned for being very unpredictable in their choice of nest sites and are even known to abandon half built colonies and move off. So where did these birds breed in the unbelievably wet 2010/2011 rainy season? We saw a number of colonies from Karibib to Usakos and for about 20 km to the west of Usakos. We also received reports of numerous colonies along the Karibib/Omaruru road while Jo Tagg informed us of the birds breeding at Wêreldsend. Jo said that this was the furthest to the west that he had ever seen these birds. It thus appears that most birds bred further to the west than usual in this year of abundant rain.

Speckled Pigeon Behaviour

My feeding table attracts a variety of birds ranging in size from Red-billed Firefinches to Speckled Pigeons. Speckled Pigeons are occasional visitors and I can't recall ever seeing more than two or at the most three on

the feeding table at any one time. Most often only a single bird is present. At the times when there are numbers of Laughing Doves on the table there is always a lot of pushing and shoving with a few birds being pushed off only to promptly return to try to push their way in again. Amongst the smaller birds such as Southern Masked-Weavers, Southern Red Bishops, Red-headed Finches and Black-throated Canaries there is often a bit of squabbling but this depends on the numbers present and the degree of overcrowding. When there are only a few of these small birds present they seem to feed together quite harmoniously. It is however interesting to watch how the Speckled Pigeons interact with the other birds. They are generally tolerant of the small birds feeding alongside them without showing any aggression whatsoever towards these birds. However, they do not tolerate the close presence of Laughing Doves and, when the doves get too close they actively attack these birds, pecking at them until they give way. I have ringed several Speckled Pigeons at my home and I have observed this behavior amongst both ringed and unringed birds so it is not something peculiar to one individual. A Speckled Pigeon is about three to four times the mass of a Laughing Dove. I can only assume that the Speckled Pigeons see the Laughing Doves as competitors for a particular type of seed (perhaps the crushed maize and larger seeds in the mixture) and thus attempt to chase them off whereas the smaller birds feed predominately on the smaller seeds which are not favoured by the Speckled Pigeons.

Flamingo Hunt

The following article appeared in the newspaper, der Südwestafrikanische Zeitung, on 04 December 1907. Today it is hard to believe that the graceful flamingos which enhance our coastal wetlands were once almost declared vermin to be eradicated. Fortunately the authorities declared them protected before this could happen.

Flamingojagd

Unglaublich aber wahr ist folgende Kampfansage an die Flamingos in Swakopmund, die der Deutsche Südwestafrikanischen Zeitung von 4. Dezember 1907 zu entnehmen ist.

“In letzter Zeit wurden die Gefilde unserer Stadt verschiedentlich von Flamingos heimgesucht. Zum Glück wurde jedoch zur Verhütung eines unabsehbaren Schadens sofort Jagd auf diese Tiere gemacht. Es freut uns, mitteilen zu können, daß auch nicht einer dieser Schädlinge länger als einen Tag uns belästigt hat und daß dem lebhaften Schützenfeuer, das kühne Jäger gegen sie eröffneten, kaum einer Räuber völlig gesund entronnen ist. Es wäre auch zu schade, wenn das reizende Landschaftsbild an der Swakopmündung mit seinen Seen und Villen durch derartiges Raubzeug, das sich in der Lagune breit macht und die Spaziergänger belästigt, beeinträchtigt und unsere ohnedies überreiche Fauna noch weiter vermehrt würde. Darum : Krieg bis aufs Messer!”

Soweit kam es aber glücklicherweise nicht, da die Flamingos kurz danach, am 16. Dezember 1907, laut Polizeiverordnung unter Schutz gestellt wurden.

Rarities and Interesting Observations

First a couple of records from the end of 2011 received too late for inclusion in the previous edition of Lanioturdus and starting with an absolute “mega”.

Michelle Ahrens photographed an African Pitta on Farm Hauchabfontein on the south side of the Naukluft Mountains on 19 and 20/12/2011. This may well be the first record of this species in Namibia. Roberts VII does not indicate any Namibian records. This species is a much sought after southern African rarity occurring usually on the eastern