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Short Notes

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Early Breeding Red-billed Firefinches

On 29 September 2013 Gudrun Middendorff and I caught a family of Red-billed Firefinches (*Lagonosticta senegala*) comprising an adult pair and a young chick in Klein Windhoek.

Roberts VII gives the laying dates for this species in Namibia as September to March but these dates are for the Zambezi Region. In this species eggs are laid at one day intervals and incubation starts after the full clutch has been laid and takes eleven to twelve days. The nestlings take a further seventeen to twenty days to fledge. Fledglings are fed by the adults for a further eight to twelve days and remain with the adults for two to four weeks. As the adults were seen feeding the fledgling in the trap it must be assumed that the juvenile was less than twelve days old. Allowing for minimum incubation and nestling periods it is obvious that most if not the whole of the clutch must have been laid in August i.e. earlier than the dates given in Roberts VII.

We have caught fledglings in March/April before and Gudrun has seen adults with fledglings in June. It appears that this species may well be breeding year round in Windhoek.

Red Eyed Female Southern Masked-Weaver

Many people believe that non-breeding adult Southern Masked-Weavers (*Ploceus velatus*) can be accurately sexed by the eye colour with males having red eyes and females brown eyes. A small percentage of adult female Southern

Masked-Weavers, however, also have red eyes as can be seen in this female bird captured and ringed on 02 November 2013 in Klein Windhoek. This bird has a red eye (although the photograph does not really show its true colour) and a very definite brood patch. As incubation is done solely by the females in this species the bird is very definitely a breeding female.



Photo © Neil Thomson

African Harrier-Hawk taking Bradfield's Swifts

Further to the article on African Harrier-Hawk (*Polyboroides typus*) sightings in Windhoek published in *Lanioturdus* 46(4) Chris Brown advised that he had observed a young African Harrier-Hawk hunting in his neighbour's Windhoek West garden on four consecutive mornings in March 2013. This bird would arrive just after first light and visit a *Washingtonia* palm tree before the Bradfield's Swifts (*Apus bradfieldi*) had left their nests/roosts in the dead fronds. It would hunt by extending one foot into likely nest entrance tunnels amongst the dead fronds while hanging on with the other foot. On two mornings Chris witnessed successful hunts, both prey items being adult Bradfield's

Swifts. Having caught a swift the raptor would carry its still struggling prey to another neighbour's roof to begin plucking the bird.



Photo © Chris Brown

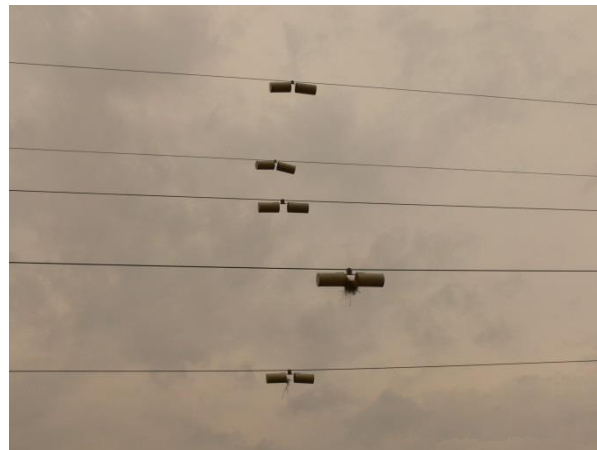
Nocturnal Hunting by Familiar Chat

Illona Middendorff informed me of a Familiar Chat (*Cercomela familiaris*) hunting insects at night around an outside light which had been left burning. On 04 November 2013 Illona had left the outside light burning at her Olympus Village home. At about 22h00 she went outside to check that the gate was properly locked and was surprised to find a Familiar Chat chasing moths and insects around the light. I have not heard of this behavior in Familiar Chats but Fork-tailed Drongos (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) are well known to hunt around lights at night, particularly at the floodlit water holes in the Etosha National Park. This behaviour has also been observed in Dusky Sunbirds (*Cinnyris fuscus*) (see *Lanioturdus* 46(2)).

Opportunistic Cape Sparrows

At Barberspan in the North West Province of South Africa we noticed that a number of open cylinder shaped objects had been attached to the conductors of the powerlines running along the southern edge of

the pan, presumably to make the conductors more visible to birds. Cape Sparrows (*Passer melanurus*) had taken advantage of these open ended cylinders and many of them had nesting material protruding from the open ends.



Photos © Neil Thomson

South African Cape Vulture at Farm Aris

Hanjo Böhme saw a very pale coloured tagged vulture at Farm Aris on 08 December 2013. Fortunately he was able to read the patagial tag, C163, as the bird turned out to be not an old White-backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*) as initially thought but a Cape Vulture (*G. coprotheres*) which had been brought in to the Blouberg Nature Reserve in Limpopo Province, RSA, by the local community. After rehabilitation the bird was tagged and released there on 27 November 2012. This is the second recent record of a South

African tagged Cape Vulture in Namibia after Holger Kolberg found a bird at Hotzas on 10 December 2012 (see Lanioturdus 46(2)).

Horus Swifts near Windhoek

Chris Brown advised that he had seen Horus Swifts (*Apus horus*) starting to prepare nesting burrows in the earth wall of a gully just beyond the Daan Viljoen Game Reserve early in December 2013. Fourteen birds were seen on this occasion. Chris first found this small colony in March 1986 when the birds were actively breeding. Six birds were seen then with their partners presumably on the nests. At least four nest tunnels were being used then. This shows a small, stable population and fairly long term site fidelity. It is estimated that the current birds are about four generations on from those observed in 1986.

Boomslang driven off by Birds

On 03 February 2014 Klein Windhoek resident Klaus Brandt was privileged to observe a bird party led by a pair of Crimson-breasted Shrikes (*Laniarius atrococcineus*) drive off a boomslang in the trees in his garden. Other species which Klaus was able to identify actively participating in mobbing the snake were African Paradise-Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone viridis*), Scarlet-chested Sunbird (*Chalcomitra senegalensis*), Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler (*Sylvia subcaerulea*), Southern Masked-Weavers (*Ploceus velatus*) and mousebirds. After the shrikes the paradise-flycatchers and the tit-babblers were the bravest of the party.



Photo - © Klaus Brandt

African Hoopoe Nest

On 06 February 2014 Gudrun and I went to Farm Teufelsbach between Windhoek and Okahandja to ring two African Hoopoe (*Upupa africana*) chicks. The hoopoes had bred in a rather unusual place – in a valve box in the ground, the lid of which had been left partially open. There were two half grown chicks in the nest and also two unhatched eggs. This seems to me to be an extremely high risk nest – it must be extremely hot under the steel plate valve box cover during the day and at risk of flooding in heavy rains. Roberts VII and Roberts Nests and Eggs describe a variety of nest holes for African Hoopoes from natural and old woodpecker holes in trees to holes in the ground, termite mounds, stone walls, drainage pipes, underfloor space or roof space of buildings etc.





Photos © Neil Thomson

Oxpeckers get their Goat

On 01 March 2014 Paul Gascoigne and Helen Pooley were travelling along the D3402, the old gravel road, from the direction of Divundu towards Rundu. Approximately fifty kilometres from Divundu they came across an unattended flock of goats wandering along the road and the roadside verge. They slowed right down to a walking speed and noticed that one of the goats had a Red-Billed Oxpecker (*Buphagus erythrorhynchus*) riding on its back. As they stopped the car the bird flew off and joined four other Red-billed Oxpeckers riding the back of another goat towards the rear of the flock.

All the bird literature suggests that Oxpeckers prefer large animals rather than smaller goats.

Longevity Record for Common Terns?

On 09 March 2014 at the Walvis Bay oyster beds Mark Boorman read the number (AT055395) on a ring fitted to a Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*). It transpired that this bird had been

ringed as a chick on 13 July 1980 at Hirvensalmi at Lake Puule, Finland. The elapsed time between ringing and this sighting was 33 years 7 months and 24 days which is probably a longevity record for this species. The oldest traceable record is that of a United Kingdom ringed bird which was 33 years 0 months when its ring was read in the field.

Northern Grey-headed Sparrows breeding in Namibia?

On 18 March 2014 I observed a bird which I am convinced was a Northern Grey-headed Sparrow (*Passer griseus*) foraging on the ground at Masokotwane about 40 km south of Katima Mulilo. The bird was very definitely a grey-headed sparrow, the head seemed darker and the bird slightly larger than the Southern Grey-headed Sparrows with which I am familiar, it had a very definite white throat patch and was totally lacking any white shoulder bar. The bill was black and also seemed substantially larger than that of a Southern Grey-headed Sparrow (*Passer diffuses*). The bird then flew into a large tree carrying what looked like a caterpillar. There was a second sparrow in the tree but I was not able to see this bird very clearly. One of the birds made several forays into the tree carrying prey which strongly suggests that there was a nest with chicks somewhere in that tree. Roberts Nests and Eggs states that breeding of Northern Grey-headed Sparrows has not been recorded in southern Africa.