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Editorial

Tim Osborne

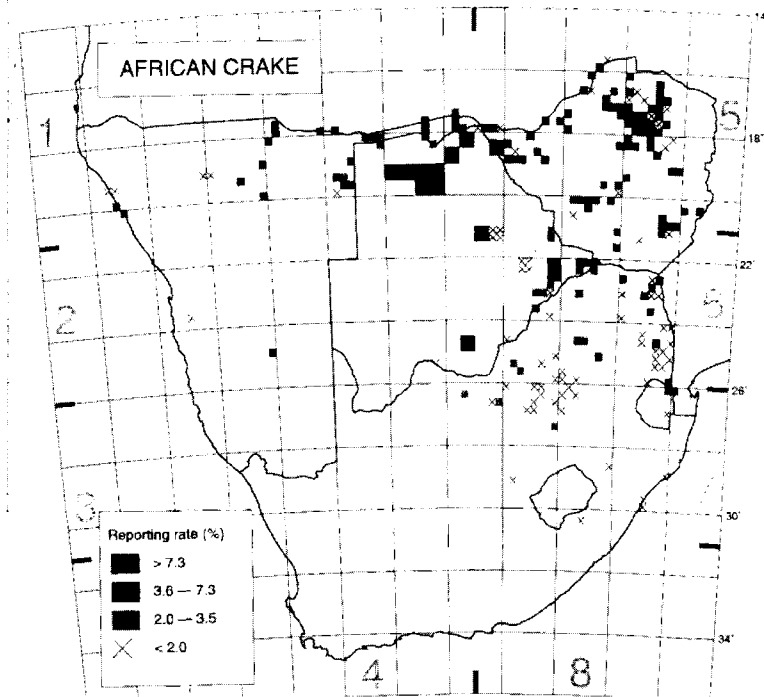
I must apologize to the members for the delay in Vol. 37 (1). It was at the printers in late January but due to unforeseen circumstances it was delayed until April. It also had a distortion error and a double entry of the map accompanying Holger Kolberg's ringing report, which was my fault. Not having a printer, I only work on my laptop and sometimes I cannot see what the final page will look like.

The rains are past and those birds dependent on insects have bred. The seed-eaters are enjoying the harvest and the large raptors are prospecting their nests as they also have lots of prey in the form of young birds. The Monotonous Larks are still singing their hearts out day and night on our farm. The African Scops Owls are also calling throughout the night. From our place we can hear 5 pairs, one of which is right outside our window. Funny how one gets used to natural sounds in the bush. When we come to Windhoek we cannot sleep with the car alarms, dogs barking and traffic, but here with a Scops calling all night we sleep right through.

From the Chairman's Report you will be able to see that the club membership is declining. If you want to keep the club viable you must also do your part and try and get new members to join.

There are a lot more sightings reported in this issue, which is a welcome change. Keep sending those in. So far this year we have added three new species to the Namibian list: Gull-billed Tern, Streaky-breasted Flufftail and European Blackcap (more on this species in the next volume).

On Thursday 29 April, we took the dogs for a walk east of Kramersdorf, when suddenly Miss Bonnie would not be persuaded to move on. Instead she remained at a little *Arthrerea leubnitziae* bush. My wife went to investigate and called me to come and have a look at a most beautiful bird, which sadly was already dead.



The distribution map from the *Atlas of Southern African Birds* indicates that the bird is not seen often in the west of Namibia and that its occurrence is mainly as a result of east winds over the Namib. "...the occurrence of stragglers to the Namib Desert and the west coast is attributed to the effect of prolonged easterly winds." (Taylor, P.B. 1997 African Crake *Crex egregia*. In *The Atlas of Southern African Birds*. Volume 1: Non-passerines. Harrison J A, Allan D G, Underhill L G, Herremans M, Tree A J, Parker V and Brown C J. (eds) pp 320-321: Birdlife South Africa, Johannesburg, 1997.

During the week we had indeed some very strong east winds and it must be assumed that the Crake was blown into the desert by the strong east winds.

We gave the bird to Mark Boorman, who is of the opinion that the bird must have just moulted, as its feathers were in a very good condition.

Sociable-lising in Namibia

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This article is a short account, at the request of the editor, of a short research trip in pursuit of Sociable Weavers *Philetarius socius* in Namibia in August 2003. As part of my PhD research, I have been studying these bizarre birds at Benfontein Game Farm, near Kimberley in South Africa. Their enormous and permanent communal nests, low levels of dispersal from their natal colonies, and high levels of snake predation on nestlings seem to have combined to lend them a curious life history. My study so far had suggested that Sociable Weavers appear to differ quite strongly among colonies in morphology (for example bill shape), parasite load, and associated traits.

For example, colonies within sight of each other can have quite different degrees of ability to raise an immune reaction, suggesting that they have experienced different pressures from parasitism or might do better to allocate their resources in different ways, often depending on colony size. I am presently attempting to disentangle the likely mechanisms through experimental studies of the Kimberley population. However, it seemed a little arrogant to pretend to understand variation among Sociable Weaver colonies based on my postage-stamp sized study area (3 x 5 km), right at the edge of their extensive range!

Of particular interest in a broader context is the conspicuous gradient in aridity that exists from the semi-arid savannahs of the north and east, to the Namib desert fringe. Theoretically, we expect coevolution between parasites and their weaver hosts to be more intense in more productive environments, but there is yet little field data to test this prediction. For example, might Namib Desert birds suffer less from parasitism, and hence exhibit different kinds of variation among colonies? Beak shape, for instance, has been shown in other species to be related to preening ability and hence ectoparasite infestation.

With such musings in mind, Raju Raman, a friend and colleague at Cambridge, and I set out last August to examine weavers at three sites in Namibia: Aandster Farm, on the NamibRand property, Bakenkop Farm, north-west of Outjo, and finally Claratal Farm, south-west of Windhoek. For the possibility of working at these sites, and for their tremendous hospitality, we're most grateful respectively to Peter and Marilyn Bridgeford, Tim and Laurel Osborne, and Ekkie Freyer.

The best method of catching complete Sociable Weaver colonies, developed by Mark Anderson in Kimberley, is to creep out well before dawn and surround the nest tree with a triangle of mist-nets (more picturesquely referred to by Tim Osborne as the "wall of death"!). Shortly before sunrise, the birds are flushed into the nets, with the help of hand-clapping and invective, and processed as quickly as possible – bills are measured, parasites counted, and blood smears taken, amongst other phenotypic measures. However, no quantity of nocturnal weaver ordeals in Kimberley had prepared Raju and I for the marathon of working through four weaver colonies in two days at Outjo (with Tim's energetic help), or solid nights of processing birds in the Namib. Days later, Raju memorably tried to pass blood slides across the tent to me in his sleep, and was heard to sleep-talk about whether we would have sufficient bird-bags!

Namibian weavers certainly were an education. Statistics aside, birds in the Namib had, for example, strikingly bulbous, almost parrot-like bills, Etosha weavers were almost parasite-free, and those close to Windhoek had slender bills yet perplexingly had similarly high levels of parasite infestation to those at the desert fringe. As at Kimberley, birds in nearby colonies seemed to differ statistically in several traits. What can variation in aridity explain? The somewhat anticlimactic answer thus far must be that little can be inferred from just four sites, and I must await next spring's fieldwork, during which I hope to dash about the southern Kalahari a little, before the picture can approach being complete enough to generate convincing patterns. Certainly, there is scope for applying slowly growing understanding of fine-grained adaptation within the Kimberley population on a broader scale, and perhaps explaining the basis of the variation among Namibia's four weaver sub-species.

Further to the generosity of the people already mentioned above, I'm much indebted to Rob Simmons, Holger Kolberg and John Mendelsohn for their kind advice and support.

Red Data Book draft

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The following is a draft of the Red Data Book entry for the Martial Eagle. I would like all readers of the *Lanioturdus* to please read the draft and send me any comments, corrections, observations that will improve the document.

MARTIAL EAGLE

Polemaetus bellicosus

Endangered

Range: Widespread, uncommon Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe

Area of Occupancy: 242 956 km²

Population estimate: < 350 pr

Population trend: declining

Habitat: Grasslands, scrubland and wooded savannas

Threats: Shooting, drowning, poisons, diminishing food resource

Distribution and abundance

This species is a widespread but uncommon Afrotropical species found from the Sahel south (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994). It is locally common only in protected areas where nesting trees occur (Boshoff 1997), but it avoids dense forest habitat (Steyn 1982). It occurs right across southern Africa with concentrations in Kruger NP, and the Kgadikgadi Trans Frontier Park of South Africa, and the Chobe NP, Botswana (Boshoff 1997). In Namibia it is thinly spread throughout the country, with gaps only in the Namib sand sea and some central-south farmlands where small-stock farming occurs (Brown 1991). Population concentrations occur in Etosha NP and communal land to the west, Bushmanland (Tsumkwe District) in the east, and central Namibian farmland (Brown 1991, Boshoff 1997).

The global (African) population is un-estimated but in southern Africa the highest density populations occur on rich basalt soils in Hwange NP, Zimbabwe with