LANIOTURDUS

VOL. 43 (4) 2010

www.namibiabirdclub.org

CONTENTS

THOMSON N Editorial 1

THOMSON N Obituary: Marc Dürr 2

DEMASIUS E Some Birding Notes on a Trip to Etosha 3

THOMSON N Namibia Bird Club Long Weekend at Okatjikona 5

BRIDGEFORD P Trivial Pursuit or Environmental Catastrophe? 7

KOLBERG H Wetland Bird counts in Namibia 3 : Inland Wetlands 7

KOLBERG H Summary of the Summer 2010 Wetland Bird Counts in Namibia 13

BARTLEWSKI S Successful Release of Artificially Raised Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters 13

NIDDRIE R Mahango Game Reserve in the Rainy Season 14

OSCHADLEUS D & THOMSON N Sparrow-Weavers and Buffalo Weavers at Kakuse in Northern Namibia 15

THOMSON N Some Interesting Personal Observations 16

DE VRIES J Crowned Eagle – a First for the Western Caprivi and Namibia 20 20

KOLBERG H Summary of the 2009 Ringing Season 20

OSCHADLEUS D Dial into PHOWN 23

RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS 24

Editorial

We rely heavily on books such as Roberts VII, (often referred to as the "birders' bible"), for distribution maps, biometric measurements etc. - but is the information in these reference books always correct? And, possibly more importantly, do we read it correctly? Mark Paxton's observations on the tail length of the green/violet wood-hoopoes he measured at Shamvura (Lanioturdus 43-2) got me interested. My own records of the measurements of the southern masked-weavers occurring in Namibia which can be seen in this issue further stimulated this interest. While there are some very obvious mistakes in even the best of publications (the distribution map for malachite sunbird in Roberts VII is a case in point as is the distribution map for red-billed quelea in Roberts Field Guide – Chittenden 2007), some of these can probably be put down to editorial oversight and printers' gremlins, but the

colonies were larger (20, 30, 30 nests in three colonies).

NT found similar nests previously at Gocheganas Nature Reserve and Wellness Village, about 25 - 30 km south east of Windhoek, in October 2007. There were about 6 nests in the tree and two of them had tunnels.

One of the nests with a long entrance tunnel at Gocheganas– Photo Neil Thomson

In checking the literature, two references were found to long tubes in this species. Collias & Collias (1964) reported a nest with a spout of 15 cm from the western Transvaal. Tarboton (2001) mentions that the breeding nest has a single entrance that leads up a short tunnel of 150-200 mm. This does not seem to be normal, however, as most colonies do not have nests with entrance tubes.

Buffalo Weavers

Three large *Acacia tortilis* trees near the Kakuse farm house contained Red-billed Buffalo Weaver nests. No birds were seen, although some ringers did see one buffalo weaver a few kilometres from the farm house. On 16 May HDO checked these nests at dawn and one bird flew out from a nest 5.58 am. This indicates that buffalo weavers forage away from their colonies but some individuals may return to roost in a nest.

Thanks to everyone that helped with the ringing event! Thanks to Anke and Uli for their hospitality and meals, Gudrun Middendorff for organising the event, and all the ringers and others for being there.

References

Collias NE & Collias EC, 1964. Evolution of nest building in weaverbirds (Ploceidae). University of California Publications in Zoology 73:1-239

Tarboton W, 2001. A guide to the nests and eggs of southern African birds. Publishers (Pty) Ltd, Cape Town

(Another sparrow-weaver nest with an entrance tunnel was found on Farm Bismarck about 30 km east of Windhoek on 26/09/2010 – Ed)

Some Interesting Personal Observations

Neil Thomson
(batqs@mweb.com.na)

Red-billed queleas

In December 2009 Gudrun and I between us ringed 12 red-billed queleas in Windhoek and a further 9 on the farms Kakuse and Tsutsab north of Tsumeb. What is of interest is the difference in mass of the birds captured in the different areas. If one discards the heaviest and lightest bird from each set the remaining 10 city birds averaged 21.2 g (range 19.8 – 23.0 g) while the remaining 7 country birds

averaged only 16 g (range 14.5 – 17.8 g). The city slickers were on average a whopping 32% heavier than their country cousins. While this is based on a small sample of unsexed and unaged birds it does appear that the city slickers which plunder the seed on our feeding stations have a very much easier life than those in the country at that time of the year when neither seeding grass nor standing grain crops are available to them.

While on the subject of queleas there is an old saying that children and animals will always make a liar out of you. The same seems to apply to birds. No sooner had I written that I had never before so much as seen a ringed quelea on my feeding table after having recaptured a ringed bird (Lanioturdus 42-4) than I not only started to see ringed queleas but I caught five more ringed birds. Two of these birds were birds I had ringed only a few days previously so I did not record the particulars but two of the other three were birds that I had ringed more than a year earlier at the same site while the third was a bird I had ringed some four months earlier. At least one of the ringed birds seen on the feeding table had the ring on the left leg indicating that it was possibly ringed by Dirk Heinrich. There was no way to ascertain whether this was the bird I had recaptured previously.

Southern masked-weavers and lesser masked-weavers

Whilst attending the ringing workshop at Wakkerstroom in December 2008 I discovered that the southern masked-weaver that occurs in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, is a very different bird from that occurring in Namibia. The first time I had one of these South African birds in my hand I noticed that it felt completely different from our local birds. This was a big chunky bird of over 30 g whereas our birds rarely exceed 25 g. A 20% increase in mass in a bird this size is substantial and the bird often feels totally different in the hand. I was so uncertain of my identification of this strange bird that I went to some of the experienced South African ringers to confirm that this bird was indeed a southern masked-weaver. Later at the workshop Dieter Oschadleus gave a lecture on the various weaver species occurring in southern Africa and confirmed that the Namibian birds are considerably smaller than their South African counterparts.

Since I catch a fair number of southern masked-weavers and southern red bishops in my garden I registered the site as a ringing site for these species for a project of Dieter's which is investigating the survival rates of weavers. The data required for the project include a full set of measurements (wing, tail, head, culmen, tarsus, mass and moult score) whereas I normally only measure the wing, mass and moult score. The average measurements for 10 male southern masked-weavers captured in my garden are:- wing 76 mm, tail 53 mm, head 32.9 mm, tarsus 21.4 mm, culmen 15.5 mm and mass 24.6 g.

I very seldom catch lesser masked weavers at my home but when I recently caught three male birds I decided to take the full set of measurements out of interest sake and was astounded to find that these birds were almost exactly the same size as the southern masked-weavers – not much "lesser" about these ones. The average measurements of these male birds were:- wing 73 mm, tail 52 mm, head 34.5 mm, tarsus 21.0 mm, culmen 16.0 mm and mass 22.6 g.

I have extracted the measurement ranges for both species from Roberts VII and have tabulated them below as a comparison with the birds I have measured.

From this it can clearly be seen that "our" southern masked-weavers are "tiny" compared to their South African counterparts with the wing, tarsus, culmen and mass measurements all being below the bottom end of the range given in Roberts VII while "our" lesser masked-weavers fit the parameters.

	Wing	Tail	Head	Tarsus	Culmen	Mass
Roberts SM-W (M)	78-89	52-58		23-26	17.5-21	31-45.5
Local SM-W (10M)	74-78	50-54	31.8-33.6	20.5-22.5	14.6-16.1	22.5-26.5
Average Local SM-W (10M)	76	53	32.9	21.4	15.5	24.6
Roberts LM-W (M)	67-78	45-56		18-22	14-17	15-43
Local LM-W (3M)	73-74	51-54	33.7-34.9	20.5-21.9	15.9-16.2	22.1-23.1
Average Local LM-W (3M)	73	52	34.5	21.0	16.0	22.6

Cape glossy starling

On 04/12/2009 I saw a Cape glossy starling standing on the back of a warthog in the road reserve between Hosea Kutako International Airport and the Omitara turnoff. Roberts VII mentions Cape glossy starling gleaning ectoparasites from cattle, sable antelope and gemsbok while other species such as fork-tailed drongos (Africa Birds and Birding Vol 8 No 2) and, rather surprisingly, even southern ground hornbills (Africa Birds and Birding Vol 7 No 3) have also been known to take ectoparasites off animals. Unfortunately I was not able to observe the bird as it would have been very interesting to see whether it was looking for ectoparasites on the warthog, whether it was perched there in the hope that the feeding warthog would flush some insect prey from the grass or whether it was simply "hitchin' a ride".

Winged assassin

When we were in Swakopmund at the end of October 2009 we noticed a lot of feathers on the balcony of the flat in which we were staying. Most of these feathers looked as if they were from southern masked-weavers and as these were largely primaries, secondaries and retrices my immediate thought was that these were not moulted feathers but that they had been plucked by a predator. Looking around we saw a rock kestrel perched in a palm tree about 100 m away and immediately suspected that this was the culprit. Our suspicions were confirmed a few weeks later when Gudrun's daughter, Illona, stayed in the flat and saw the rock kestrel sitting on the gutter above the balcony plucking its prey and littering the balcony with feathers. Illona had a closer look at the debris and found a lot of what Dirk Heinrich would describe as "spare parts". Illona collected the bills of about fourteen birds amongst the debris. The only species that we were able to positively identify from these remnants was a male Cape sparrow as the two mandibles were still attached to each other and there were still some black feathers attached to the remnants of the skull. The bill shape and culmen measurement fit that of Cape sparrow. It appears that the kestrel breaks open the skull to get at the contents and leaves only the bill and the feathers uneaten as Illona found no other remains of any sort.

Cape teal

An interesting sighting at the Gammams Sewage Works during the course of the bird count on 23/01/2010 was that of 34 Cape teal. These birds are usually seen only in very small numbers at the sewage works although Dieter Ludwig has said that years ago they were common there. Dieter is of the opinion that they possibly largely disappeared from the sewage works due to a change in the salinity of the water as these birds prefer more saline water. Could the reappearance of a number of Cape teal perhaps mean that a saline solution is leaching out of the old Ramatex evaporation ponds into the sewage works? However, on 11/04/2010, there was not one Cape teal to be seen at the sewage works. Another change in the salinity?

Red-billed firefinches

In my article on red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek (Lanioturdus 42-3) I mentioned that these birds had been seen at both Monte Christo and Otjiseva some 30 km north of the city. On 25/05/2010 Gudrun and I caught and ringed two red-billed firefinches at Otjihavera Portion No 3 (east of the B1 opposite the Namwater pump station) about 40 km north of Windhoek. It is my hypothesis that the birds were originally artificially introduced to Windhoek and on their release or escape had followed their natural habitat along the Gammams and Otjiseva Rivers to Monte Christo and beyond. This latest sighting is about 10 km further to the north and is the first I know of east of the B1 to the north of Windhoek. The locality where the birds were caught is close to the Otjihavera River where the habitat would be similar to that along the Gammams and Otjiseva Rivers. Anton Seabrooke, the owner of the property, indicated that he had been aware of the presence of red-billed firefinches there for about three years. It would indeed be interesting to know exactly how far north of Windhoek this species has spread and whether it has also spread beyond the suburbs in other directions.

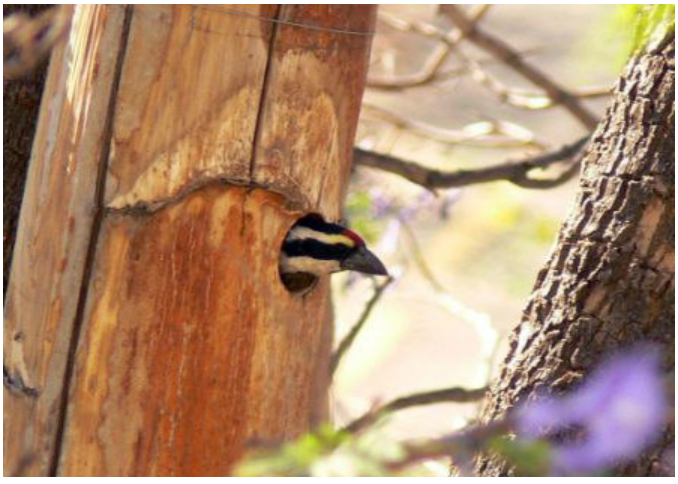
Acacia pied barbets and lesser honeyguides

A few years ago I set up a prepared sisal log in the jacaranda tree in front of my lounge window and it was not long before a pair of acacia pied barbets excavated out a nest cavity for themselves. As far as I am aware they bred successfully in the first season without interference from lesser honeyguides but once the honeyguides found the breeding pair they started inspecting the nest regularly. Even when breeding the barbets are very tolerant of most other birds close to their nest and the likes of laughing doves, African red-eyed bulbuls and white-browed sparrow-weavers are ignored when they perch close by. But when a lesser honeyguide puts in an appearance the action starts. The barbets obviously know that this species is a threat to them and they do all in their power to chase off the honeyguides. It is quite fascinating to watch how one barbet sits in the nest opening blocking access while the other expends a lot of energy trying to physically chase off the brood parasite. When the chasing bird becomes tired the pair swap roles with this bird taking up “block duty” while the other does the chasing.

While I have never seen a honeyguide succeed in getting into the nest when the pair has been defending it they have obviously had some success as some of the chicks that have emerged over the years have been an olive grey brown colour and quite unlike barbet chicks.

I have also seen Monteiro’s hornbills inspect the nest, no doubt looking for food as this cavity is far too small for them to use for nesting. When this happens the barbets are nowhere to be seen. I don’t know whether they sit still in the deepest part of the cavity or whether they evacuate the area until the threat has passed but they certainly do not even attempt to chase off the hornbills.

Also of interest is the completely different, almost catlike, hissing alarm call of the barbets when there is a honeyguide or a terrestrial predator such as a yellow mongoose in the vicinity of their nest.



Blocking the nest opening – Photo Neil Thomson