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Experienced birders are more than happy to help beginners and novices on these outings. If you have a transport problem or would like to share transport please contact a committee member. Depending on the availability of speakers and suitable material we present occasional lecture or video evenings at the Namibia Scientific Society premises. Members receive the bird club's journal, *Lanioturdus* and outings and events are advertised on the club's website www.namibiabirdclub.org.

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Some notes on Namaqua Sandgrouse (*Pterocles namaqua*) nests from southern Namibia

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We present some data on seventeen Namaqua Sandgrouse (*Pterocles namaqua*) nests serendipitously encountered on a farm located roughly midway between Grünau and Noordoewer in southern Namibia.

Habitat

According to various authors Namaqua Sandgrouse breeds on “flat, open ground, mostly on calcrete, sand or on shingle/gravel plains” (Tarboton 2001); “sparsely vegetated calcrete and sandy flats” (Little and Crowe 2011); “within a local concentration of low objects” (Lloyd *et al.* 2000) or “generally in exposed situations, but within a local concentration of objects, most of them <15cm high and concentrated

within 30cm of the nest” (Lloyd *et al.* 2001).

This study:

The farm is located within the dwarf shrub savanna (Giess 1971) or Karas dwarf shrubland (Mendelsohn *et al.* 2002) vegetation type – i.e. Nama Karoo – with sparse shrubland being the dominant vegetation structure. Slightly more nests were associated with small ephemeral drainage lines, either located within the drainage line (n = 3 nests) or on the edge thereof (n = 6 nests) than on sandy/gravel plains (52.9% versus 47.1%) (Table 1). As the drainage lines typically have denser vegetation in the general area, these nest site selections probably indicate the increased camouflage value of this habitat type.

Table 1: Nesting substrate, nesting material and habitat indicated for 17 nests from southern Namibia.

Substrate	Presense of nesting material						Habitat	
	Sand only	Small stones	Grass	Twigs	Faeces	Seeds	Drainage line	Sand/Gravel plain
Sand/gravel		√					√	
Sand/gravel			√	√				√
Sand/gravel			√	√	√		√	
Gravel		√	√		√		√	
Gravel		√						√
Gravel		√						√
Sand			√		√		√	
Gravel		√						√
Sand				√			√	
Sand	√						√	
Sand			√	√			√	
Sand			√	√		√		√
Sand		√	√	√	√			√
Sand		√			√		√	
Sand			√		√		√	
Sand/gravel	√		√			√	√	
Total	2	7	10	6	5	3	9	8
%	11.8	41.2	58.8	35.3	29.4	17.6	52.9	47.1

Nests were associated with – i.e. in close proximity to – a wide range of vegetation although *Stipagrostis fastigiata* (n = 5 nests) and *Rhigosum trichotomum* (n = 4 nests), species

typically associated with ephemeral drainage lines throughout the area, were species often favoured (Table 2). *S. uniplumis* is the dominant grass in the area.

Table 2: Vegetation associated with Namaqua sandgrouse nests in southern Namibia (n = 17 nests).

Closest vegetation			
Herbs/Shrubs/Trees		Grasses	
<i>Asparagus</i> spp.	1	<i>Stipagrostis ciliata</i>	5
<i>Chascanum garipense</i>	1	<i>Stipagrostis fastigiata</i>	5
<i>Foveolina dichotoma</i>	1	<i>Stipagrostis obtusa</i>	1
<i>Hermannia gariensis</i>	2	<i>Stipagrostis uniplumis</i>	6
<i>Hermania stricta</i>	1		
<i>Parkinsonia africana</i>	1		
<i>Rhigosum trichotomum</i>	4		
<i>Salsosla</i> spp.	2		
<i>Sysindite spartea</i>	1		
<i>Tripteris microcarpa</i>	1		
<i>Zygophyllum</i> spp.	1		
<i>Unidentified shrub</i>	1		
Total	17		17

Nest

According to Hockey *et al.* (2005) the nest is a simple scrape in the ground usually exposed to the elements or placed “next to” a natural feature such as a couple of stones or a tuft of grass (Little and Crowe 2011) while Tarboton (2001) states that nests are usually not set right against a stone or bush. Lloyd *et al.* (2001) indicates that most nests are located close to various objects (within 30cm of the nest) which may serve as disruptive camouflage or serve as concealment of the incubating bird (Lloyd *et al.* 2000).

This study:

The mean average distance between the nests and the nearest perennial grass and nearest herb/shrub/tree was 41.1±12.2cm and 51.3±14.5cm, respectively (Table 3). This study indicates that nests are not usually located “next to” a natural feature as indicated by Little and Crowe (2011)

and slightly further than 30cm as indicated by Lloyd *et al.* (2001), but rather in accordance with Tarboton’s findings (2001). However, 5 nests (29.4%) were located within 1cm of perennial vegetation – i.e. directly against and/or under such vegetation (Figures 1a to 1c).



a)



b)



c)

Figure 1a - c: At least 29.4% of the nests encountered were placed directly below and/or within vegetation such as **a)** nest associated with a fallen, but alive, *Parkinsonia africana* tree in a drainage line; **b)** nest associated with a *Salsola* spp. and **c)**

nest placed below *Rhigozum trichotomum* and *Calicorema capitata* shrubs (Note the absence of nesting material in nest **a** – probably new and/or abandoned nest and significant material in nests **b & c**).

Table 3: Nest dimension (width versus depth); number of eggs and distance between the nest and the nearest perennial grass and herb/shrub/tree for 17 nests.

Number	Nest width	Nest depth	Eggs	Distance to nearest perennial grass (cm)	Distance to nearest herb/shrub/tree (cm)
1	14	2	3	100	33
2	13	2	3	160	78
3	10	2.5	0	6	114
4	15	2	2	135	1
5	14	1.5	0	7	100
6	15	2	3	1	1
7	13	2	3	8	56
8	12.5	2	3	70	7
9	14	1	3	7	150
10	15	1	1	7	49
11	14	2	3	7	7
12	10.5	2	2	7	18
13	16	2	2	7	200
14	17	2	2	77	1
15	15	1.5	3	14	1
16	15	3	2	45	55
17	14	2	3	40	1
Mean	13.9	1.9	2.19	41.1	51.3
SE	0.4	0.1	0.3	12.2	14.5

Why nests were placed below vegetation is unclear and probably not for shade purposes as the nests were all located during the cooler months (i.e. June [n = 1]; July [n = 12] & August [n = 4]), but probably rather to avoid predators. Lloyd *et al.* (2000) indicated that mammalian predators accounted for most of their predated nests and that avian predators are not viewed as important predators. However, placing nests below shrubs, as encountered for 29.4% of the nests

during this study, probably indicates an attempt at avoiding avian predators. Pied Crow and Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk have a constant presence in the area with Lanner Falcon and Booted Eagle also occasionally observed. These birds are known predators of Namaqua Sandgrouse and/or their eggs (e.g. Hockey *et al.* 2005).

Only three nests were located close to rocks during this study (17.6%) and probably reflect more on the general

habitat rather than structures selected for nesting as suggested by Lloyd *et al.* (2000).

Nesting material

Nests are usually unlined, although some may have a rim of pebbles (Tarboton 2001) while Maclean (1968) states that the nest may become filled with grit and plant matter during the incubation period.

This study:

Of the 17 nests we encountered, only one nest (5.9%) had no 'nesting material' present while other material encountered in the nests included small stones (41.2%), grass remains (58.8%), twigs from shrubs (35.3%), faeces from sheep/springbok (29.4%) and *Tribulus terrestris* seeds (17.6%) (Table 1). None of the nests we encountered had a rim of pebbles while the 'nesting material' – detritus – observed may have blown into the nest and/or against the incubating bird and become so embedded as nesting material. However, this does not account for the 41.2% of the nests with pebbles therein – i.e. material too heavy to be blown into the nest. Furthermore, the nesting material seemed orderly placed rather than randomly included as windblown detritus (Figures 1b & c; 2 & 3). Another interesting observation seemed like bill scrape marks located on the edge of some nests potentially indicating the incubating bird actively collecting passing detritus to be included within the nest (Figure 2). It is thus probable that windblown material collects passively in the nests, although the heavier material (pebbles – Figure 3) together with the bill scrape marks suggests that some active collection of nesting material potentially takes place.



Figure 2: What looks like bill scrape marks (see black arrows) potentially indicate active collection of stones and windblown nesting material by incubating birds.



Figure 3: Small pebbles used as nesting material probably indicate active collection, even some orderliness to the layout of the nest.

Nest dimensions

The nest scrape is 100-110 mm in diameter and 20-30mm deep (Tarboton 2001).

This study:

Our nest data indicate a diameter of 13.9 ± 0.4 cm and depth of 1.9 ± 0.1 cm ($n = 17$ nests; Table 3) – i.e. slightly larger and shallower than presented by Tarboton (2001). This probably depends on the substrate – e.g. sandy areas have bigger nests than on harder surfaces – or differences in determining the actual outer rim of a nest without a typical border.

Eggs

The clutch is usually 3 eggs, rarely 2 (Tarboton 2001) with a mode of 3 eggs (2.88; n = 256 complete clutches) (Lloyd *et al.* 2001).

This study:

The mean average number of eggs we encountered was 2.19±0.3 eggs per nest (range 1-3; n = 17 nests; Table 3), although we did not revisit all nests to confirm if these were complete clutches. One nest (Nest No 14; Table 3) had 2 eggs on 1/8/2018 and again on 14/8/2018 indicating that this was a completed clutch of 2 eggs. Eggs in three of the nests we encountered had recently hatched as was evident from partial egg shells in the nest and immediate vicinity. We also encountered 2 single eggs (both cold – abandoned) not associated with a nest probably indicating some birds laying eggs although not for breeding purposes and/or disturbed at the onset of laying (this data was not included in our analyses).

Laying season

Eggs can be laid throughout the year, but mainly between July and August throughout most of its range (Tarboton 2001) or April to July in the southern Namib and August to January in the Nama Karoo (Lloyd *et al.* 2001) while Little and Crowe (2011) indicate that although strongly variable, the Namibian populations breed from late summer into the winter (January to August with a peak in May).

This study:

Our breeding records are in accordance with other authors (See above). Although birds are observed throughout the year, we only encountered nests during June, July and August during this study – i.e. cooler winter months. Chicks were

observed during June 2018 (3 chicks each on 2 occasions). During 2018 we had late rains – between 23 and 30mm during late March – resulting in good grass growth, probably resulting in associated breeding as no nests were encountered during previous years (2015-2017) with below average rainfall.

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