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EDITORIAL

Several people have asked me why I continue to attend Bird Club weekends and outings – "Wouldn't you prefer to go birding on your own?" In answer to this I can quite honestly say, "No".

How you go birding is an entirely personal choice, but I believe that combining both social and independent (single) birding you can get the most out of it. There are almost certainly some birders who are either entirely social birders (never venturing far without being on an organised outing) or entirely single birders (entirely independent and not making use of the social, informational and club contacts available to them).

Why do I continue going out with the Bird Club? – the answer is I enjoy it. For several reasons – probably the most important of which is that I am continually reminded of my own fallability as a so-called "expert" birder. On outings I am often stumped by questions from "beginners" which make me re-evaluate my approach to birding, makes me develop new solutions to tricky groups and generally hones my skills as a birder. At the same time the "beginner" is learning something new and perhaps useful to develop their birding skills.

When you go birding with others you learn their skills too – some people are aces at listening to and identifying birds largely by call, others are visual experts, identifying birds by "jizz", teaching field characters which can only improve skills as a birder. But at the same time you learn from others not to become dependent on them for all your id's and birding experiences. Go out and try to apply some of the learnt skills, study your bird books and develop your own suite of birding tools. But remember, you can only achieve so much on your own – as with almost everything else in life you have to share experiences to grow. This is the value of the Club for me and hopefully for others as well. I appeal to you, the members, to make more use of the Club outings and functions, encourage others (especially kids) to join and to push some personal birding frontiers by learning from others.

Zambia we never saw this bird in groups larger than 6–10 birds and we do not remember seeing large flocks of the bee-eater in Namibia in 1997. Maclean (1993) mentions that in the non-breeding season it sometimes occurs in small groups. Herremans and Barnes (1997) used atlas records to show a movement from central Namibia and Botswana to moister woodlands in northern Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. The large numbers I saw may have been influenced by the drought conditions.

Greyheaded Sparrow *Passer diffusus*

A flock of 150 birds was seen at Gobaub waterhole on 11 May 1998. Maclean (1993) notes that in western southern Africa during the non-breeding season it is gregarious with flocks of 50–60 birds but rarely up to 500.

Short-toed Rock Thrush *Monticola brevipes*

In late May and June 1998 birds were seen in the Okaukuejo area and on the plains to the north-west. Birds were also seen in the same areas in 1997 at the onset of the cold season but it took a year before we were aware that birds were absent at other times. There is no rock thrush habitat closer than 30 km from the plains. We mistnetted and ringed an adult male on a farm in Outjo District and noticed that its head did not look like the illustrations in either Maclean (1993) or Newman (1996). The bird had a grey head but did not have the clear white or pale eyebrow and the crown was grey like the sides of the head. The bird did have a small white malar stripe which none of the books illustrate nor mention. There were two other adult males near the farm buildings. One had an engorged tick over the left eye which made it distinctive. From 20 m with 10x binoculars, it had the diagnostic features (white eyebrow, whitish cap) of the Short-toed Rock Thrush. The other bird which was not ringed was very similar to the bird we had handled and did not have the white eyebrow.

Driving from Okaukuejo to Outjo on 17 June we counted 20 rock thrushes perched on the telephone poles. On 26 June at Okaukuejo I (Tim) was discussing the strange rock thrush I had seen with Chris Hines and a similarly marked male flew up on a fence 20 m from us. It had an all grey

head like the Cape Rock Thrush, without the white eyebrow but with a faint white malar stripe.

I (Tim) suspect that in addition to resident rock thrushes undergoing local movements during the cold season from rocky mountains areas to the lower lands (Harrison 1997), that perhaps another subspecies migrates to the area.

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SPITSKOPPE WEEKEND

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The Independence Day weekend (21 March) saw several groups of keen birders descending on the Spitzkoppe near Usakos. The area had had a little rain as had quite a wide belt of the country between Windhoek and Karibib. Raptors were particularly good on the way down and we saw several Tawny Eagles, Steppe Buzzards, Lanner Falcon and Rock Kestrels on telephone poles along the way.

Past Usakos Carole caught a glimpse of a pair of plain buffy coursers (Temminck's or Burchell's) next to the road. We stopped to get a better view and our prediction of Temminck's was confirmed by the the lack of white trailing edge in the secondaries in the flying birds. As soon as we got

off the main road we saw hundreds of Stark's Larks flying over the gravel plains. Larklike Buntings were foraging in large numbers along the roadside, and Greybacked Finchlarks had me twitching several times, in the hope they would be Gray's Larks.

On arrival to Spitzkoppe we met up with Tim and Laurel Osborne, Ernie and Ellen Gudde, and the Ludwig family. Camp was set next to Fort Osborne, on the north-eastern face of Groot Spitzkoppe near to some rock pools. The Ludwig's schloss was re-erected, Ernie and Ellen had one of this nifty snail tents on their roof rack, whilst Carole and I decided to stay close to Tim's cold watermelon, so we squatted in the bushes nearby.

By now it was hot and gusty, so we gathered with Ernie and Ellen next to a large rock pool under an *Acacia* to watch the birds coming in to drink. The constant traffic of Namaqua Doves and Larklike Buntings had us well amused, until the thirst pangs got hold of us. Ernie started fantasising about his Raspberry Trim-line concentrate, and of course a hasty retreat to the nearest Engel freezer ensued.

Clouds built up on the horizon over the Erongos, the wind picked up, the first grey veils of a shower were spotted and excitement grew in camp with the prospect of getting wet. The clouds kept advancing in our direction, the distinct scent of rain engulfed camp and soon after the first rain drops made their welcome appearance. This, as Tim Osborne pointed out, triggered a very interesting and certainly endemic behavioural response among Namibian naturals, which merely entails jumping into a car and driving in the rain.

The Spitzkoppe formation changed its colour as water trickled down its faces. Water was running from every crevice and the rocks were glistening around us. We even had the rare chance to splash around a waterfall that was rushing down a granite outcrop. I could not help taking a sip of the freshly fallen rain, only to find out what sweet ammonia-dassie-pee wash-out tastes like.

When the rain subsided and the sun came out, a spur of bird activity

allowed us to bag some more species for our bird list: Cape Sparrow, Dusky Sunbird and Layard's Titbabbler. Bradfield's and Alpine Swifts were whooshing past our heads. Rüppell's Korhaans and Whitetailed Shrikes were heard calling from the plains below. We decided to give the Herero Chat a go and proceeded to one of its known stake-outs.

On the way a pair of Bokmakieries were heard calling from the slopes, Whitethroated Canaries were also seen perching on a bush up on the slopes and Elephant Shrews were particularly common and very amusing to watch. However all my senses woke up when we heard the distinct drawn whistle of Longbilled Larks. This is the second time I had seen the birds in this part of the world and since these birds are likely to be split from the Longbills I know from the Karoo, we decided to scrutinise them carefully.

A short and less curved beak and an indistinct eyebrow, a white throat emphasised by a short bib of markings that do not extend further than the birds carpal joint (wrist), plus a clearly paler colouration to what I am used to seeing in the Karoo, were about as many differences I could pick up. However, whether that gives it the status of becoming a species on its own (Kaokoland Lark) will have to be determined over some "Longbilled Lark milkshakes" and "electrophoretic jelly", back in the molecular lab dungeons of the Fitztute in Cape Town.

The search for the chat resumed with the birding party decreasing in size, and having covered all the perches I knew, I followed my gut feel and we headed for the rock outcrop. On arrival Tim Osborne saw a chat-looking bird moving at its base. "There ..." "Where? ..." "Got it ..." "Yup! Herero Chat!!!!". The distinct white throat contrasting with the black mask that runs through its eye and white eyebrow were obvious, not so the breast markings.

Sunday morning started with a golden stained Spitzkoppe as the sun rose. Walking up to the top of one of the adjacent granite boulders to watch the spectacle we were rewarded with a Peregrine Falcon flying along the steep vertical face of Groot Spitzkoppe. Air traffic intensified through the morning, a pair of pale Booted Eagles were seen skilfully stalling in the air

and screening the scrub below, two Black Eagles on their way to a favourite hunting spot, cast some beautiful shadows against the orange rock. As it warmed up mixed groups of Alpine and Bradfield's Swifts gathered and screamed their way past camp.

We walked out to the Bushman paintings on a roundabout route to traverse as many different habitats as we could. We started from the car park heading east along the outcrop along a thickly bushed area growing along a drainage line. This proved to be good cover for Pririt Batis, Titbabbler, Burntnecked Eremomela and the expected dove assortment. Higher on the rock face a group of Rock Pigeons sunbathed after their morning toiletries at a nearby rock pool. Above them a Rock Kestrel scrutinised the surface for sluggish geckos cranking up their body engines with some solar power.

Eventually we reached a biggish pool with several Palewinged Starlings and Larklike Buntings splashing about – this really excited Ernie who by now had ticked Larklike Bunting for the 100th time. It became quite obvious that he had little intention to stop this ticking spree, and he continued twitching them as different species on the basis of bedraggledness, wetness, breast mottling variation.



It was getting quite hot and we decided to get to the paintings. On the way we stopped at one particular Kokerboom that has been branded through the years with graffiti, some of them dating back to 1928 and 1931. I have always found ironic how widely admired and accepted old graffiti is, compared to the freshly vandalised rock paintings up the hill!! With all due respects, Bushman's Paradise should be renamed Vandals Haven. Looking at it one struggles to understand whether this blatant destruction was triggered by disrespect, lack of education or simply bad manners.

On the birding side we soon reached a large rock pool where birds and lizards of all sorts had gathered. Sitting around the pool we added Pied Barbet, Whitebacked Mousebird, Bokmakierie, Monteiro's Hornbill, Whitethroated Canary and heard a Short-toed Rock Thrush. However the common locals were playing hard to get and we never saw Lanner Falcon or even heard a Rockrunner. We spotted a pair of Scimitarbilled Woodhoopoes that were mobbing a pair of Rock Kestrels which had just caught a snack. Black Eagles were seen cresting the ridge above us. A Longbilled Crombec and a stunning Dusky Sunbird, sporting its yellow epaulettes scolded a Slender Mongoose up the hill. Further on, a confiding pair of Plumcoloured Starlings were spotted.

The weekend wound down slowly with a late brunch at the camp and most people leaving in the late afternoon. We had got to see all the specials we had hoped for and with about 80 species for the weekend everyone was well satisfied. Another great birding weekend.

RUACANA AND THE KUNENE RIVER

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During the weekend of the 21st to 25th of May 1998, many keen birders took on the long road to Ruacana and the Kunene in pursuit of the promised, (see Bird Call 2/1998) elusive Cinderella Waxbill and Grey