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## SECTION B: OPEN PAPERS

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## Status of the Rock Pratincole in the Kapako area of the Okavango River, Kavango East, Namibia

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### Abstract

A boat survey conducted on 30 December 2017 along an 8.6 km stretch of the Okavango River revealed 45 adult Rock Pratincoles and 20 young birds. This brings the estimated number of Rock Pratincoles in the Okavango system in Namibia to about 361 birds, and for all river systems in Namibia to about 410 birds.

**Keywords:** *Glareola nuchalis*, Namibia, Okavango river, Rock Pratincole, status.

### Introduction

The distribution of the Rock Pratincole (*Glareola nuchalis*) is confined to sub-Saharan Africa. In southern Africa it is an intra-African migrant, arriving mainly in August when the water levels of the large river systems are low and in-stream rocks are exposed, and departing by January when the rivers rise. In Namibia Rock Pratincoles are confined mainly to areas of rocky outcrops in the Okavango, Chobe and Zambezi rivers. The birds roost and nest on these exposed rocks (Figure 1), and hawk for insects over the water and adjacent riparian belt, mainly at dawn and dusk. For most of the day, they perch unobtrusively on the rocks (Hockey et al. 2005, Simmons et al. 2015). Fourteen previous breeding records for Rock Pratincoles in Namibia give laying months in October (two), November (seven) and December (five) (Brown et al. 2015).



**Figure 1:** Adult Rock Pratincole (left) with chick about 12 days old, perched on an exposed rock in the Okavango River. Photographed 30 December 2017.

Namibia's Rock Pratincole population is estimated to be fewer than 950 birds (Simmons et al. 2015). However, they have never been systematically surveyed across their range in Namibia, and the numbers actually recorded from isolated counts are much smaller – about 365 birds. I report here on a Rock Pratincole survey in the Kapako area of the Okavango River in December 2017.

### Study area and methods

The Kapako area is situated in the Kavango East region, about 170 km due east of Rundu. The survey was conducted from a boat on 30 December 2017, from 09h15 to 12h20, starting near Rudhiva at 17.98530S; 21.35220E and ending about 1.5 km downstream of Diyana at 18.01420S; 21.40970E, a distance on the river of 8.6 km (Figure 2). All rocky outcrops in-stream and along the river banks were carefully examined using 8 x 40 binoculars, and all Rock Pratincoles seen were photographed using a Sony DSC – HX200V camera with built in GPS. Young birds were subsequently aged from the digital images on a high-resolution screen. The age of young birds plus the incubation period of about 20 days (Tarboton 2011) were used to calculate the approximate date when eggs were laid.

### Results and discussion

In total 45 adult and 20 young birds were recorded on this survey (Table 1), bringing the estimated number of Rock Pratincoles in the Okavango system in Namibia to about 361 birds, and for all river systems in Namibia to about 410 birds. The density of adults over the 8.6 km stretch of river was on average 5.2 birds per km. This compares to 6.3 birds per km on a 230 km stretch of the Zambezi River between Kazungula and Lake Kariba (Williams et al. 1989), and 2.2 and 7.0 birds per km in the Kariba and Mupata Gorges respectively on the Zambezi River (Wood & Tree 1992). The density of Rock Pratincoles on the Okavango River in Namibia varies widely, from no rocky outcrops and no birds along much of the river, to about

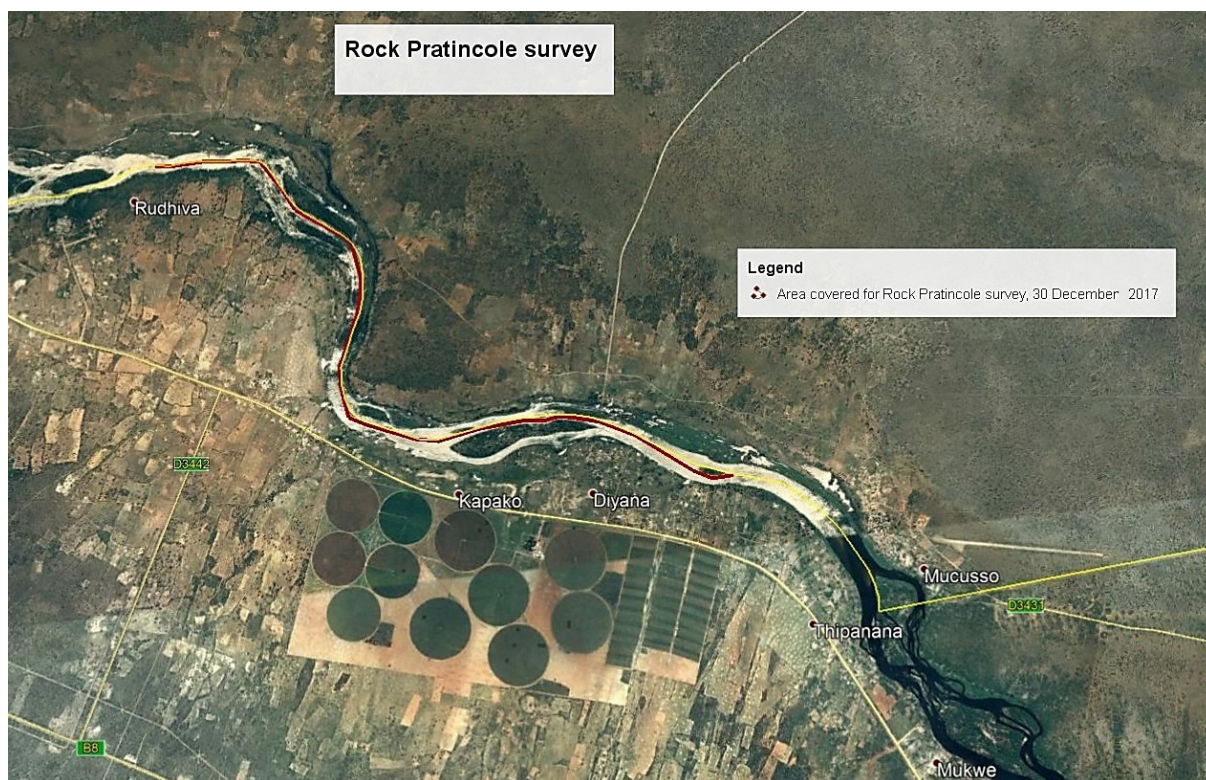


Figure 2: Section of the Okavango River in the Kapako area that was surveyed (red line), 30 December 2017.

19 birds per km along the 15 km stretch between just north of Mukwe to Divundu, where the river divides into numerous channels and islands, strewn with rocky outcrops.

Rock Pratincoles lay 1-2 (mean 1.7) eggs per clutch, between August and December, with a peak in September in Zambia, October in Zimbabwe (Hockey et al. 2005) and November in Namibia (n=34), combining past records (Brown et al. 2015) and those from this survey (Figure 3). The ratio of young to adult birds was 1:2.25, or about 0.4 young per adult. A colony of about 150 birds in Gabon monitored over nine years fledged on average just under 0.2 young per adult per year (Brosset 1974).

There are rocky sections of the Okavango, Chobe and Zambezi rivers in Namibia that have not yet been surveyed for Rock Pratincoles. I would encourage birders and conservation officials to target these unsurveyed stretches to help complete the assessment of the Rock Pratincole population in Namibia.

Table 1: Known numbers of Rock Pratincoles in Namibia.

River system	Section of river	Number of Rock Pratincoles		Reference
		Recorded	Estimated	
Okavango	Namushasha, west of Rundu	4 birds	4 birds	CB 2016 pers. obs.
	Shankara area	6 pairs	12 birds	MP in Simmons et al. 2015
	Kapako area	45 ad bird 20 juv birds	45 birds	This survey
	Just N of Mukwe to Divundu	57 birds	285 birds	CB in Simmons et al. 2015
	Popa Falls	4-6 pairs	8-12 birds	MP in Simmons et al. 2015
	Mahango, Bwabwata NP	3 birds	3 birds	MP in Simmons et al. 2015
	<b>Total Okavango</b>		<b>361 birds</b>	
Chobe	Impalila – Kasane rapids	12 pairs	24 birds	Randal 2001
		11 pairs	22 birds	CB in Simmons et al. 2015
	<b>Total Chobe</b>		<b>24 birds</b>	
Zambezi	Near Wenela-Sesheke bridge	7 birds	7 birds	CB in Simmons et al. 2015
	Adjacent to Impalila Island	9 pairs	18 birds	CB in Simmons et al. 2015
	<b>Total Zambezi</b>		<b>25 birds</b>	
<b>Total recorded birds for Namibia</b>			<b>410</b>	

Abbreviations: CB – Chris Brown, MP – Mark Paxton

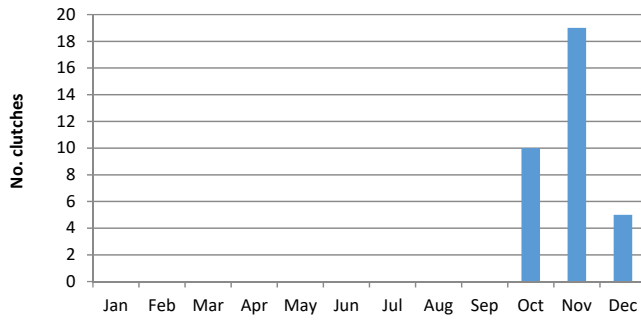


Figure 3: Laying months for Rock Pratincoles in Namibia.

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