



# LANIOTURDUS

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RARITIES AND INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS

### Editorial

The winter bird count at Walvis Bay has come and gone and it was extremely gratifying to see the number of Namibia Bird Club members participating in the count many of whom had traveled long distances at their own expense to be there. It is my belief that the bird club can make a real contribution to projects such as this.

Presumably everyone knows by now of the oiled penguins which were rescued at Lüderitz some months ago. What is possibly less well known is that the Namibia Bird Club committee made the decision immediately after the news broke to donate N\$ 5 000 from club funds towards the

rehabilitation of the oiled birds and following this Gudrun Middendorff was interviewed on the German radio service and was able to raise a further N\$ 10 000 as a result of this interview.

Holger Kolberg has put together an index of all the articles that appeared in *Ornithologische Beilage* (a supplement to the Scientific Society's newsletter) and *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe*, the forerunner of *Lanioturdus*, for the period 1963-1984. This index lists the articles published in chronological order and also by author and is a very useful tool for anyone writing articles and seeking references. The index can be obtained from the Namibia Bird Club at N\$ 40.00 per copy and all issues of *Ornithologische Beilage* and *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe* are to be found in the library of the Scientific Society.

In this issue we feature two articles on red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek, one written by Peter and Janke Cunningham who had seen a firefinch in Windhoek for the first time and the other by myself who had been aware of their presence for some time. Both come to the conclusion that these birds most probably did not arrive in Windhoek unassisted.

In an earlier issue of *Lanioturdus* I asked for readers' comments on the new electronic format of this journal. To date the comment received has been overwhelmingly favourable with only one member saying that he preferred the printed booklet format.

### Diary of a Successful (?) Breeding Attempt of Gray's Larks

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**Saturday, 28 February 2009**

- On the afternoon of 28 February 2009 my wife found the nest of a Gray's Lark, *Ammomanopsis grayi* containing two eggs, east of Kramersdorf, whilst walking the dogs.
- The cup-shaped nest was located on the southern side of an *Arthraerua leubnitziae* bush.
- The nest was not constructed in typical fashion but with lots of pieces of cotton string.
- No adult bird was in the vicinity.

## Steel Jaw

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For birds of prey 2009 has not brought relief from the weaponry used on farmlands for mammalian predator control. In the first week of the new year, NARREC (Namibia Animal Rehabilitation Research and Education Centre) received two of our large and rare raptor species, a poisoned White-backed Vulture and a leg-hold trapped Tawny Eagle. Both were non-target victims of careless application of predator management techniques.

The vulture arrived at NARREC paralyzed with extreme muscle cramps, symptoms of strychnine poisoning. However, this bird was fortunate enough to have been found by a concerned Namibian farmer and rushed directly to NARREC. After 48 hours of intensive treatment she recovered well. Then, after a further week of therapy and rest the bird was ringed and tagged for identification and released.

The Tawny Eagle was however a lot less fortunate. A farmer had set a leg-hold trap (also known as a steel-jaw trap, foot-hold or gin-trap) to catch a leopard. The leg-hold trap is made up of two jaws, a spring of some sort, and a trigger in the middle. When the animal steps on the trigger the trap snaps closed around a foot or leg, preventing the animal from escaping. The leg bone of the trapped animal is often broken by the force of the trap's steel jaws. A meat lure is used to attract animals to the trap or the trap is set along an animal trail. The Tawny Eagle was actually seen at the trap late in the afternoon but left until the following morning by which time, the sharp edges of its broken leg bones and the steel teeth of the trap had torn all the lateral tendons on its "knee" and severed all the veins and arteries of its trapped leg.

Tawny Eagles are large birds of prey. They have the distinction of finding food by regularly scavenging or pirating prey from other eagles as well as by predating on small prey items; they have rather small talons for an eagle and are no risk to any domestic livestock. It is the scavenging nature of the Tawny Eagles' behavior that leads them, as non-selected victims, into the jaws of the farmers' weapon-

ry. As scavengers Tawny Eagles might be caught in badly placed leg-hold traps or become primary or secondary victims of poison-baited carcasses.

In the latter half of the 1980s Dr C. Brown, then the ornithologist at the Ministry of Environment and Tourism studied, with the use of radio telemetry, the Tawny Eagle population in the Khomas Hochland. Over the 5-year study period approximately 80% of the adult breeding eagles in the study group were killed through direct persecution or indirectly as non-target victims when farmers attempted to catch or poison mammalian predators. A quarter of a century later, these same non-selective techniques are killing ever diminishing large birds of prey populations.

Various types of traps and poisons have been used for predator control on livestock farms for many decades. Poisoning, snaring and leg-hold trapping are globally among the most contentious ways of controlling predators. The ethics of these methods are criticized for their serious negative effects on non-targeted mammals and birds, which occasionally includes dogs, cats, and endangered wildlife species. The methods are also criticized for the inherent cruelty as animals are usually badly maimed by the traps and often left to die slow and painful deaths.

In order to make lethal and non-lethal methods of predator control target specific there are numerous and fairly obvious ways of handling the equipment. However, some farmers seem to not be bothered with or are ignorant of obvious and necessary actions that can be taken to minimize the cruelty aspects as well as to prevent the non-selective nature of trapping.

In the case of the latest Tawny Eagle leg-hold victim the farmer had left the trap with a farm assistant. This person it can be assumed, although given lethal equipment, has not been informed or did not use best practice methods. A scavenging bird looks for food by sight from above. A leopard uses its sense of smell. A trap of any sort or a poison-laced bait that is well hidden from aerial view will prevent birds from becoming non-target victims.

Steel jaw-traps were first described in western sources in the late 16th century. They were widely used for fur bearing animals in the early days of North American settlements. These traps do not kill, they hold the animal alive in steel jaws. The pain can be long and the slow death may involve hunger, cold, exhaustion and blood loss until the returning trapper ends it all. Because of the cruelty aspects and the known large number of non-targeted animals caught, the American Veterinary Medical Association, the World Veterinary Association, and the American Animal Hospital Association have declared leg-hold traps "inhumane". The European Union (EU) banned the use of the "cruel and indiscriminate" steel-jaw leg-hold trap in 1995. EU regulations prohibit the use of these traps in the 15 member nations of the EU and prohibit the import of fur into the EU from those nations who had not prohibited use of leg-hold traps. As Namibia has a large beef export market to the EU we should be aware that the use of leg-hold traps may in the long term work to a national disadvantage. Worldwide the steel leg-hold is banned in over 88 countries.



*Damaged leg of Tawny Eagle*

*Photo: Liz Komen*

Namibia, as with many other jurisdictions around the world, has enacted statutes, which forbid cruelty to animals. In Namibia the anti-cruelty laws relate to all animals. However when certain predator control techniques are applied on farmlands cruelty is simply seen as a necessary practice. In Namibia leg-hold traps with appropriate names like "Terminator" and "Magnum" are available for both small and large animals. These traps are sold without warnings or description that could assist an ignorant farmer in minimizing the negative potentials of catching non-target animals and of cruelty aspects. Modified traps are manufactured to reduce potential animal injuries, but these are not readily available in Namibia. The modified traps have thick smooth offset jaws that are padded. But, like any other trap they need to be intelligently placed for the target species and to be checked very regularly.

Throughout the world domestic livestock and game farm animals may be at risk of predation. The question remains as to whether any non-selective or cruel and contentious methods of predator control have a place in modern farming.

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**Report on the Summer Wetland Bird Counts,  
January/February 2009**

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The start of the new year once again meant that Namibia's bird watchers had to dust off their binoculars and venture out to do the annual summer wetland counts. The global economic crisis does not seem to have affected the birders because I'm pleased to report that twenty-seven sites were counted although the geographic coverage is still very much biased in favour of the coast. The two Ramsar sites, Sandwich Harbour and Walvis Bay, once again came up trumps in terms of bird numbers but the most species were encountered by Wilferd at Oponono. Wilferd also reported the lowest count (Fischer's Pan). Cape Cross and the Walvis Sewage Works are emerging as important sites in terms of numbers. For the first time the figures for the Orange River Mouth are also included (these were usually reported by Mark Anderson as part of the South African counts) where unfortunately only the Namibian side was counted because no replacement for Mark Anderson has yet been appointed.

One interesting observation is the almost complete absence of White-fronted Plovers (only 1 393 seen) and terns (11 063 counted) at the coast and the overall low number of Lesser Flamingos (4 267). There are also some other notable absentees viz. no cranes, Great Crested Grebe and Black-headed Heron were counted.

However, this is more than complemented by the list of rarities seen: American Golden Plover (3), Common Black-headed Gull (1), Elegant Tern (1), Eurasian Oystercatcher (1), Pectoral Sandpiper (1), Red-necked Phalarope (7) and Common Redshank (2).

Many thanks to all the counters without whom these counts would not be possible. Special thanks to Peter Bridgeford who has taken on the job of organizing the Walvis Bay count in his usual enthusiastic manner.

| Site                                    | Birds  | Species |
|---|--------|---------|
| Aeroplane Bay                           | 67     | 6       |
| Agate Beach                             | 21     | 4       |
| Cape Cross                              | 3 560  | 22      |
| Ekuma River                             | 4 756  | 20      |
| Elizabeth Bay                           | 192    | 9       |
| Fischer's Pan (dry!)                    | 0      | 0       |
| Griffith Bay                            | 36     | 11      |
| Grosse Bucht                            | 136    | 6       |
| Guano Bay                               | 227    | 10      |
| Hardap Dam                              | 1 202  | 24      |
| Lüderitz Sewage Works                   | 33     | 3       |
| Mile 4 Saltworks                        | 3 797  | 36      |
| Monte Christo                           | 335    | 34      |
| Naute Dam                               | 1 223  | 21      |
| Oponono                                 | 5 213  | 44      |
| Orange River – Skilpad to Hohenfels     | 275    | 14      |
| Orange River – Hohenfels to Bridge      | 705    | 19      |
| Orange River Mouth (Namibian side only) | 1 735  | 34      |
| Radford Bay                             | 47     | 10      |
| Sandwich Harbour                        | 96 146 | 37      |
| Second Lagoon                           | 296    | 21      |
| Shearwater Bay                          | 28     | 1       |
| Swakop River Mouth                      | 236    | 27      |
| Walvis Bay                              | 95 380 | 42      |
| Walvis Sewage Works                     | 2 241  | 26      |

No counts had been received for Shamvura and Swakop Sewage Works at the time of writing.