

# LANIOTURDUS

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## **About the Namibia Bird Club**

The Namibia Bird Club was founded in 1962 and has been active since then. The club's mission is to contribute to Namibian ornithology by, amongst other things, arranging regular birding outings, conducting bird ringing and atlasing excursions and educating the public about the value of birds. To achieve this, we organise monthly visits to interesting birding sites around Windhoek as well as regular visits to Avis Dam and the Gammams Water Care Works and occasional weekend trips further afield. Bird club members also participate in the African Waterbird Census twice a year.

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](http://www.namibiabirdclub.org).

The Namibia Bird Club is not affiliated to any global or regional organisation and relies entirely on members' subscriptions and donations to fund its activities.

The opinions expressed in this journal are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Namibia Bird Club or its committee.



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Cover photo Southern Red Bishop © Beate Schwippert



## Steinhausen atlasing bash 24 – 27 August 2018

Neil Thomson and Gudrun Middendorff

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It all started with a chance meeting at Gross Barmen. We were acting as bird guides for a Namibia Scientific Society outing (see Lanioturdus 51[3]) when Gudrun encountered André du Plessis at the camp site. On discovering that we were birding there André intimated that there was plentiful birdlife on his farms and that we should visit sometime. So often this sort of comment is nothing more than a throwaway line but Gudrun saw the possibility of an atlasing bash in an unatlased part of the country and kept up the contact. It was eventually arranged that the Namibia Bird Club would visit André's Farms Okarupika and Alaska in the Steinhausen area over the August long weekend.

It was made clear to us that this would be "rough camping" with only a "veld toilet" provided and we hastily purchased a field shower cubicle and a few more items necessary to make "rough camping" a little more comfortable. With one eye on the synoptic charts and weather forecasts (Farm Alaska is apparently not so named without reason) we (Gudrun and Neil) set off on the Friday afternoon. On arrival at Farm Okarupika we found the gate locked. The immediate thought was that André might have forgotten that we were coming that weekend. Gudrun climbed the gate and walked to the nearby farmhouse where she found André, telephone in hand, frantically trying to organize the inoculation and transport of some of his cattle. The wind was pumping (it was of course August, the "windy month" in central Namibia) and André asked whether we would rather stay at a location on Farm Alaska where there were two

rondawels, a flush toilet and a shower instead of "rough camping" at an exposed site. What a choice! After a long chat over a beer about our birding activities etc., André and his wife, Stefanie, took us to this location. It transpired that this was where they had lived on Farm Alaska when they were weekend farmers before they purchased neighbouring Farm Okarupika where they now live. By the time they left us night was falling and we elected to use one of the rondawels rather than put up a tent in the dark.



**Figure 1:** The camp © Judy Fuller

Starting fairly early the next morning, we completed two hours of atlasing on that part of Farm Alaska. A leaking reservoir at the camp attracted numbers of small bush birds such as Golden-breasted Buntings and Violet-eared Waxbills and the local Crimson-breasted Shrikes (of which there were at least five) were singularly unperturbed by our presence, hopping about and foraging between our feet, thus leading us to refer to them as "the camp managers". We then drove back to the farmhouse to team up with Franz, Michael, Judy, Uschi and Anita who arrived together in

midmorning. After they had set up camp and we had had an early lunch the pentads to be atlased that afternoon were identified. I (Neil) had drawn up a pentad map of the area using an old 1:250 000 scale map and the Google map on the SABAP2 website. Not for the first time we found that some of the roads shown on these maps did not exist but there was still plenty of public road in the area and André had given us unrestricted access to both farms. We split up into three teams, Gudrun and Judy, Franz, Michael and Anita, Uschi and Neil and set off in different directions to commence atlasing the area.



**Figure 2:** Golden-breasted Bunting © Neil Thomson

The wind was again blowing strongly and finding birds in those conditions proved difficult. One of the surprise species seen that day (and subsequently) was Crested Francolin – we had not expected to find this bird so far south. The afternoon’s mission accomplished, it was time for that day’s cooking team to prepare a delicious chicken curry for dinner. In deference to Michael, who dislikes both chicken and rice, the curry was served with couscous!

The next morning was almost wind still but birds would again prove

difficult to find. We split up into the same teams and, as Judy was concerned about having sufficient fuel to get back to Windhoek, she and Gudrun headed for Hochfeld to refuel while Franz and his team continued atlasing in the four pentads on which the farms were situated and Uschi and Neil headed northwards in the direction of Summerdown.



**Figure 3:** Crested Francolin © Neil Thomson

On the way to Hochfeld we (Judy and Gudrun) found a grader busy scraping the gravel road – a welcome sight after experiencing the condition of some of these roads elsewhere in the country. On this route we found Eastern Clapper Lark, a widespread species in the eastern part of Namibia but not so easy to identify, on two adjacent pentads. The first Red-breasted Swallows for the season were seen at one of the road junctions and Southern Pied Babblers were conspicuous on almost every pentad along the way. Upon reaching Hochfeld it was noticeable that the town had expanded and it now has a guesthouse which offers camping as well. When we arrived at the petrol station other customers were already waiting. They looked like locals and on enquiring about the whereabouts of the petrol attendant we were told “He is coming”. Well there is “no hurry in Africa” and after 45 minutes somebody eventually turned up. Patiently waiting our turn we atlased all the doves and sparrows

the region has to offer. A short visit to the nearby large borrow pit delivered approximately 100 Egyptian Geese and a few Black-winged Stilts.

Meanwhile, shortly after arriving on our first target pentad along the D1841 towards Summerdown and hearing bird sound in the bush, I (Neil) tried “spishing” and an inquisitive pair of cisticolas popped out to investigate the sound. It was immediately obvious that this was a species neither Uschi nor I had seen before. Reddish brown crown, pale supercilium and long rufous tail together with a totally different “jizz” made these Tinkling Cisticolas – an unexpected lifer! Another somewhat unexpected sighting in this area was that of a Wahlberg’s Eagle as it seemed fairly early in the season for this summer visitor.

More than four hours of atlasing after a not too early start meant a late lunch and just enough time to atlas another pentad in the afternoon. The teams were rearranged with Anita and Neil heading southwards, Judy, Gudrun and Uschi going back in the direction of Hochfeld where about an hour had been spent on a certain pentad that morning and where they wanted to complete a full protocol list, while Franz and Michael continued their atlasing on the farm pentads and went looking (unsuccessfully) for vulture nests in an area where we were told White-backed Vultures had bred in the past. That evening André and

Stefanie joined us for sundowners before we dined on venison stew.

On the Monday morning we awoke to a freezing cold wind – Farm Alaska was living up to its name! We packed up our belongings and, as Franz, Michael and Anita were in a hurry to get home, they left us. Those of us remaining, Judy and Uschi and Gudrun and Neil, elected to atlas two more pentads *en route* although birds again proved difficult to find in the cold, windy conditions.

The bottom line for this very enjoyable long weekend was thirteen new pentads atlased, two of them twice – one by design with two different starting dates and the other by accident when Franz atlased a pentad on the farm and Gudrun did the same pentad from the public road (with very different species recorded on the two cards). A total of 89 species was recorded on the thirteen pentads with 72 species being recorded on the four Okarupika/Alaska pentads. The number of species per card varied between 25 and 53 with an average of 38. We believe that birding in this area will be very different in the summer when the vleis are flooded and the migrants are present. The seeds of a follow up atlasing bash have already been sown.

We would like to reiterate our gratitude to our hosts, André and Stefanie du Plessis, for inviting the Namibia Bird Club to their farms and making this very successful outing possible.