LANIOTURDUS

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Editorial

Bird distributions are on the move with ranges both expanding and contracting. I have noticed in the short time that I have been editing this journal that there have been a number of sightings of various species in areas where they have not previously been recorded. Some examples of this are blue waxbill and African harrier-hawk sighted at the Spitzkoppe, great spotted cuckoo east of Lüderitz (although I suspect that this one might be a case of reverse migration), lesser jacana and rufous bellied heron at Farm Tsutsab etc. I was recently browsing through old issues of *Mitteilung der Ornithologischen Arbeitsgruppe*, the predecessor of Lanioturdus, and came across an article by S. M. Seftel wherein the writer was commenting on the disappearance of fiscal shrikes and southern white crowned shrikes from the Avis Dam area back in the 1974. I have also heard Dieter Ludwig comment that chat flycatchers and capped wheatears are no longer to be seen in the Windhoek area and that ant-eating chats have also disappeared from the Avis Dam area. I have myself noticed that white-tailed shrikes, which were regular visitors to my Klein Windhoek garden in the late 1980's, are now very seldom seen there while until about three years ago I had never seen a southern red bishop in my garden and now they come in droves. A new species moving into an area is probably far more noticeable than the gradual disappearance of an established species. While the Atlas of Southern African Birds and Roberts VII still contain the most accurate information available on species distributions in Namibia it must be remembered that data collection for the Atlas ceased some 16 years ago in 1993 and that there have been changes in the relatively short period since then although it must also be remembered that coverage for each individual species was not 100 %. Seven of the last ten rainy seasons have brought above average rainfall (at least to central Namibia) so changed climatic conditions may well be a factor in the extended ranges while disturbance and changes in habitat probably play a role in the contracting ranges and disappearance of species from some areas. Please continue sending in your observations of species new to an area or unusual in an area and also of species that may have disappeared. You never know – maybe someone who reads this journal in 35 years time will say "Oh wow – species X was already present in that area way back in 2009."

on a farm close to the BirdLife Centre. Although there had been a lot of bird activity there when the site was reconnoitred the previous day there was not much happening when we set up the mist nets. A couple of Bokmakieries together with Cape Robin-Chats and Cape White-Eyes were caught and the highlight was the ringing of two large Secretary Bird chicks on a nest in the vicinity. As Gudrun and I had planned to leave only on the Saturday we set up nets again at the Birdlife Centre and managed to catch a few Cape Weavers. Our intention to do some serious birding in the Wakkerstroom area in the afternoon was thwarted by the weather but on the Saturday morning we took the back roads to Volksrust which produced good sightings of White Stork, Grey Crowned Crane, Cape Longclaw and Amur Falcon and then we spent a few hours birding at the Marievale wetland near Nigel.

We are both of the opinion that the course was well worth the effort to get there. I ringed 108 birds of 28 species, 24 of which I had not ringed before. It also gave us the opportunity to work in habitats totally different from those in which we work in Namibia and to meet some of our South African colleagues and exchange ideas with them. It is well known that ringers “steal with their eyes” and, having observed our colleagues at work, we have seen a number of innovations which we are likely to put into practice in our own ringing activities. Gudrun and the other trainees were able to work with a number of different ringers and observe the different techniques used by them.

(*) Sadly Dries passed away on 18.4.2009 – a huge loss to ringing in southern Africa.

Summer Migrants

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During the rain season and particularly in a good rain season, the increase in the number of small, medium and large birds that grace our skies is astounding. The bird species that migrate to southern Africa and to Namibia range from tiny 8 g warblers to large 3 kg eagles. One of our visitors, the Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* holds the record for distance. This bird species weighs only 100 g and migrates 15 000 km, halfway around the world, twice a year.

Most migrant birds arrive from around September. Some species arrive to feed, nest and breed. Others breed in Europe, Asia, some as far north as the Arctic Circle and they only migrate to the southern hemisphere to escape the icy northern winters and to utilize the abundance of food available in our warm and wet summer months. Then in April to early May as the southern hemisphere winter months approach, migrant birds begin flocking for their long return journeys to the northern hemisphere summer.

Driving around much of central, eastern and northern Namibia, or wherever good rains have fallen, the most obvious migrant birds of prey are the Black Kites, *Milvus migrans*. These 700 g aerial acrobats are awe-inspiring but can be dangerous to themselves and to vehicles as they swoop and swerve over the roads in chase of aerial insects. In their chase of food the Black Kites are seemingly oblivious to the fast moving traffic. This can be a death trap for the birds as well as for unsuspecting or inexperienced drivers.

Many drivers do not slow down when they have a flock of birds swooping over the road. An experienced driver would know that the length of road along which the birds are foraging would probably be a very short section of a journey. Yet there seems to be a lack of care for both the birds as well as human lives even though the potential danger is obvious. No actual statistics are available but fatal accidents have occurred when fast moving cars have rolled as the driver suddenly swerves to miss a swooping Black Kite.

When migrant kites, kestrels, swifts and swallows arrive in northern Namibia, thousands can be counted and then as the birds spread out across southern Africa flocks of tens or hundreds are seen. On a journey along many of our roads a lot of Black Kite carcasses can be counted. Few drivers stop to check on the condition of the bird with which they have collided. In many cases the drivers cannot stop, they are probably in shock after a high-speed collision with a bird, or have traffic directly behind them and in many cases the birds are probably killed instantly. However some birds may simply have a concussion or a simple fracture that can be repaired.

A common question is why bother to stop and save an individual bird of a species that seems so abundant. A few reasons can be offered; the seeming abundance is because so many of the population have gathered in an area. Some seemingly identical birds are actually subspecies or different races of a species. For example with the kites one subspecies is a short distance intra-African migrant and the other a long-distance inter-African migrant that crosses continents.

Black kites are scavengers and insect eaters. Each bird consumes around 70 g of food per day; this makes them highly useful pest controllers. Just 1 000 kites could consume 7 tonnes of insects in a 3-month period. But as insect eaters and scavengers this species is most susceptible to secondary poisoning from agricultural pesticides throughout Africa, Asia and Europe as well to poison used for predator control in livestock farming.

Combine the potential mortalities from poisoning with those from road accidents and other dangers associated with long distance travel. Add future dire predictions of climate change. Then consider the magnificence of watching kites in flight and perhaps come to a conclusion that the magnificent flyers are worth caring for.

A Black Kite with a fractured humerus will take about 5 weeks in rehabilitation.