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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.

Further to the fact that there seem to be no records of red-billed firefinches between the areas where they were atlasted and the Windhoek area another reason to believe that the species did not naturally expand its range to the Windhoek area is the absence, around Windhoek, of its brood parasite, the village indigobird. Natural range expansion of host species is often followed by a similar range extension of their brood parasites. An example of this is the range extension of both the acacia pied barbet and the lesser honeyguide into the Western Cape. I am certainly not aware of any sightings of village indigobirds anywhere near Windhoek. The absence of the brood parasite has also no doubt improved the breeding success rate of the firefinches.

Irrespective of where they may have originated the population in central Namibia must number hundreds, if not thousands, and it remains to be seen how much further this species will spread from this established base.

References

Harrison JA, Allen DG, Underhill LG, Herremans M, Tree AJ, Parker V & Brown CJ. *The Atlas of Southern African Birds*.

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Female red-billed firefinch

Photo: Neil Thomson

Sunday Lunchtime Raptors

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Having finished lunch on Sunday 20th January 2008 we went outside to see where the next shower of rain would come from. We saw a big raptor, possibly Wahlberg's Eagle or Yellow-billed Kite passing low and close by but it flew behind some trees, out of sight. We went outside the garden fence to scan the trees. We detected some movement high up in a Makalani Palm *Hyphaene petersiana*. The raptor was perched on a Red-billed Buffalo-weaver *Bubalornis*

niger nest. The binoculars came out and we watched. The bird was trying to plunder the contents of the nest colony, plucking at the twigs, trying to get at the chicks. This was not so easy, considering the material the Buffalo-weavers use to build their nests. During its efforts the Buffalo-weavers tried their best to scare it off. The raptor moved around the trunk, trying at another spot without success. It then flew off into another Makalani, some 300 paces further, to try its luck there.

Its luck was out. The Buffalo-weavers there were already being kept in panic by another, smaller raptor, a Wahlberg's Eagle *Aquila wahlbergi*. This Wahlberg's Eagle chased the bigger bird off and it perched still further away on a dead tree.

We had a look at the books; when we came out again we could no longer find the birds.

Wahlberg's Eagles are breeding migrants on our farm in Quarter Degree Square 1818 CC. They have a nest a short distance away from our home in a Marula tree *Sclerocarya birrea* which has been occupied for the third or fourth time this year. Their chick must be close to fledging by this time of year. This is the first time we have observed Wahlberg's Eagle trying to plunder a Buffalo-weaver nest.

We came to the conclusion that the first raptor had been a Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*. We did not get a good look at the bird as it was scurrying around the Makalani. The bird appeared brown in colour but not like Wahlberg's eagle. Bill greyish, underwing secondaries barred, base of the primaries whitish, the outer part of underwing primaries were blackish-brown, darker than the rest of the underbody. When taking off its rounded tail was conspicuous. It also showed a somewhat whitish bar or spot on the base of the upper tail.

In the books consulted it is mentioned that Wahlberg's Eagle robs nests of herons, weavers, cuckoo-hawk and other species. Lesser Spotted Eagle also eats recently fledged Red-billed Queleas. Robbing nests of Red-billed Buffalo-weavers is not specifically mentioned for either species but we presume this must be hard work, considering the thorny twigs of which these nests are built.

References:

Ginn, P.J.; Mc Illeron, W.G. & Milstein, P. le S.:
The Complete Book of Southern African Birds, fourth impression 1004, published by *Struik & Winchester*.

Hockey, P.A.R.; Dean, W.R.J.; Ryan, P.G.:
Roberts - Birds of Southern Africa, VII th Edition 2005, published by the trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund.

(I can't help wondering whether the conclusion that the first raptor was a lesser spotted eagle is correct. The nest raiding behaviour seems more commensurate with that of an African Harrier-hawk Polybaroides typus (Gymnogone). A juvenile Harrier-hawk could also fit the description and as we all know, juvenile raptors can be notoriously difficult to identify. - Ed)