



# LANIOTURDUS

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## Editorial

Once again in this issue we are able to report on species new to Namibia. Er, well, perhaps one of them is not really new to Namibia, but none of the previous records was accepted.

The species concerned is the Black Skimmer, a species native to the Americas and for which, as far as I can determine, there were no confirmed records on this side of the Atlantic Ocean.

A single bird suddenly appeared at Rietvlei near Cape Town in October 2012, stayed a few days and then disappeared. A couple of days later a single bird (believed to be the same individual) appeared in Walvis Bay, stayed for a short period and again disappeared.

There have been two previous unconfirmed records of this species in Namibia of which I am aware. The first is Joris Komen's record from the Rundu Sewage Works in the mid 1980's which was not accepted by the then rarities committee on the grounds that it was just too unlikely that this species had found its way there - I don't think that Joris has forgiven that committee to this day.

The second record is Tony Tree's sighting of a single bird at Walvis Bay in February 1998, which, as far as I am aware, was also shot down by the rarities committee.

For more on the Walvis Bay Black Skimmer see Otto Schmidt's article and John Paterson's stunning action picture in the "Rarities and Interesting Observations" section of this issue.

speed one sees exactly what they are bred for. The sun is low and it is the last race of the day. Everyone is eager to see this age old form of racing. Each dog is held back by its owner and a dummy gazelle hanging from a pole attached to a Land Cruiser a few of metres in front of them is making them crazy. At the starting signal the salukis sprint down the track at lightning speed and the owners head twice as fast straight for their vehicles. Then it is just one big dust cloud with the roar of V8 engines as cruisers pull away to beat the dogs to the finish line. One must stand well out of the way in order not to be run over. It all seems chaos but all focus is quickly back on the racing dogs. It feels as if everything is over just as quickly as it had started. When the last dog crosses the finish line and the dust settles together with the excitement we return to the desert camp.



Early in the morning the falcons are put out on their blocks and the last training sessions are worked in. We help to feed some of the falcons while others start packing for the move to Al Ain. The Sheik's falcons are only handled by his personal falconers. Some of the birds are from the Al Ain Zoo, others from breeding centres or privately owned. All the falcons had been tamed and trained over the last two weeks for the third International Falconry Festival that would be held over the next couple of days at Jahili Fort, Al Ain. But that is a story for another day.

## The "Real" Difference between Swallows and Swifts

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In my old copy of Newman's Birds of Southern Africa there is a two page spread explaining the differences between swallows/martins and swifts. Generally these differences are in the wing shape, colour, tail shape, flight pattern and the ability/inability to perch. I find it very easy to distinguish between swallows and swifts (some of the individual species are a bit trickier though) and I am always surprised to find that there are people who cannot distinguish them, but, if you are one of those, you are in good company.

The Common Swift was described by Linnaeus himself in 1758 and he named the species *Hirundo apus* (*Hirundo* (Latin) = a swallow, *apus* (Greek) = without feet – on account of the very short legs). It was only later that it was realized that this bird was not a swallow at all but of an entirely different genus and it was renamed *Apus apus*. Even though the describing of species was in its infancy at that time I am quite surprised that Linnaeus made this mistake. In the hand swallows and swifts are such different birds that it should be glaringly obvious that they have to be of different genera. Even a count of the primary flight feathers would reveal this as swallows have nine and swifts ten.

It is when one has the live bird in the hand that, in my opinion, one discovers the "real" difference between swallows and swifts and this, of course, is something that none of the field guides and other books mention. Swallows are laidback, gentle little birds which are very easy to handle (although they do have sharp claws) while swifts are the exact opposite. Most of my experience with swifts has been with Little Swifts and I find them particularly nasty little customers - in fact I prefer handling birds such as Acacia Pied Barbets and Rosy-faced Lovebirds because with those species, if one is careful, one can avoid being bitten. With Little Swifts it is almost guaranteed that one will be painfully

clawed. When one has a Little Swift in the hand the bird will almost certainly embed the four needle sharp little claws of one foot into a finger forcing one to prise them out one by one immediately after which the nasty little bird is likely to embed the four needle sharp little claws of the other foot into another finger – and so the process continues. Ringers handling swifts need to be prepared to shed blood.

I believe that this behaviour of the swifts stems from the fact that a swift senses that if it falls to the ground it is in trouble and will thus hold onto anything as tightly as possible to avoid falling to the ground. Some of the swifts I have caught in mistnets have not been entangled at all but have merely grabbed the mesh and held on after hitting the net. I had read that if one puts a swift onto the ground it is unable to get itself airborne again as, due to its very short legs and very long wings, it is unable to get a downstroke sufficient to give it lift. I have tried this but in my experience all the swifts I have put on the ground have managed to get themselves airborne albeit with some difficulty. However, I placed the birds on a smooth surface at the top of a flight of stairs. I should think that if a swift went down in long grass it would stand very little chance of getting itself back into the air.



Photo : © Neil Thomson

So in spite of all the physical differences between swallows and swifts to me, as a ringer, the “real” difference is in the temperament of the birds with swallows being

laidback and swifts being really nasty and I think that any ringer who has handled Little Swifts will agree with me.

PS : This was written with shredded fingers after handling eight Little Swifts in a day!

References:-

Clinning CF 1989 – Southern African Bird Names Explained – Southern African Ornithological Society

Newman K 1983 – Newman’s Birds of Southern Africa Fourth Edition (1992) - Southern Book Publishers (Pty) Ltd.

## **Vulture Ringing on Farm Smalhoek, 2012**

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Who would guess that a leisurely Sunday outing had as main requirement the ability to fearlessly scale a 10 m ladder, swaying among branches and thorns, at the top of which awaits a bird with a fearsome beak, ready to take off your finger? This was the first thing I learnt on a Bird Club outing to ring vultures on a farm near Dordabis. The second lesson was to stay upwind and keep your shoes tucked under your body if someone had a bird in the hand...

