

LANIOTURDUS

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Namibia Bird Club



since 1962

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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 organize monthly visits to interesting birding sites around Windhoek as well as regular visits to Avis Dam and the Gammams Sewage 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 a digital newsletter, *Namibia Bird News*, which includes a programme of forthcoming events and the Bird Club journal, *Lanioturdus*.

The Namibia Bird Club is not affiliated to any global or regional organization 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.

Instructions to Authors

Lanioturdus is a journal dedicated to birds and birding. Although the journal's primary focus is on Namibia, articles from other geographical parts of the globe will also be considered for publication. Authors should use common and scientific names of southern African birds as published in *Roberts' VII*. For other regions, English and scientific names following BirdLife International's species list (<http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/species>) should be used. Text should be submitted as a MS Word document. Photos, maps and figures should be sent as separate jpeg images, graphs as MS Excel charts or jpeg images and tables as MS Word or Excel documents. Please indicate in the article text where these should be placed.



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CONTENTS

KOLBERG H	Editorial 1
KLEIN F	Cape Bird Club Ghana Birding Trip (Part 2) 2
KOLBERG H	Namibia's Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas 1: Overview and Introduction 10
THOMSON N	Farm Kakuse/Etoshia National Park atlas ing bash 01 to 05 May 2014 14
BROWN C, J TARR, P TARR AND M STANBACK	Nesting boxes, Honeybees and Lesser Honeyguides 17
DEMASIUS E	The tragic case of Claude Gibney Finch- Davies 20
BROWN C	Meyer's Parrot – an unusual nest site 25
THOMSON N	Rarities and Interesting Observations 27

The Tragic Case of Claude Gibney Finch-Davies

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The older members of us ornithologically interested folk will know about Claude Gibney Finch-Davies and his beautiful paintings of southern African birds. In the prime of his career he was regarded as the best bird artist in southern Africa.



Claude Gibney Finch-Davies
24 May 1874 – 4 August 1920
(Photo © Wikipedia)

Born in India on 24 May 1875, Claude Gibney Davies was raised in England and then came to South Africa to enroll as member of the Cape Mounted Riflemen in 1893. He developed a love for natural history and in particular ornithology and painting of birds. His first bird paintings originated in the Eastern Cape where he did duty with his regiment. By 1906 he had produced some two hundred outstanding bird paintings published in ten volumes and soon he was recognised as an illustrator of international repute. He also started contributing to scientific

journals and was a co-founder of the South African Ornithologists' Union.

An acquaintance with Major Boyd Horsbrugh resulted in Davies illustrating and providing observations for the book "*The Game-Birds and Water-Fowl of South Africa*" in 1912. Davies' regiment did duty at Matatiele in East Griqualand from 1910 onwards and it was here where he concentrated on raptors, a period described as being one of his most productive.



Bateleur by Claude Gibney Finch-Davies

World War I saw Davies doing duty in the Kalahari where he found many a bird new to him. In 1915 he was sent to Walvis Bay, now with the rank of lieutenant. His stay here was a short one as the German troops surrendered at Khorab near Otavi on 1 July 1915. Before returning to South West Africa in 1916 he went to Cape Town, where he met his future wife Aileen Finch, who after their wedding in August 1916 insisted on

retaining her maiden name and so they became Finch-Davies.

By now Finch-Davies started corresponding with Austin Roberts of the Transvaal Museum, supplying specimens to the museum in exchange for access to their journals. He also published some papers on the birds of Okahandja and Outjo and a month spent at Walvis Bay enabled him to study the coastal birds.

From 1919 onwards he lived close to Pretoria and he spent many an hour in the library of the Transvaal Museum, much to the dismay of his young wife. Finch-Davies had donated his collection of bird skins to the museum in exchange for access whenever he wished.

Sadly Austin Roberts established not long after this that some plates of bird sketches in books and journals, in fact two hundred and thirty of them, had gone missing and Finch-Davies was the identified culprit. The police set a trap for him and he was arrested. However the museum did not prosecute him. Finch-Davies promised to return all material and in exchange he deposited his entire collection of bird paintings in twenty nine volumes as security to the museum.

The military took disciplinary action, severely reprimanded Finch-Davies and he was transferred to Cape Town in 1919, his reputation badly damaged. But his apparent obsession to paint birds together with a kleptomaniac disposition once again led to the discovery on 18 May 1920 of more than one hundred and thirty plates found missing from the South African Museum's bird books and journals.

Davies resultantly suffered severely from emotions and distress and on the morning of 4 August 1920 he was found dead, the cause of death given as either *angina pectoris* alternatively having committed suicide.

Claude Gibney Finch-Davies was indeed a well recognised artist in South Africa. His bird paintings had been used on a number of series of stamps, an honour bestowed on very few artists in South Africa.

The Bophuthatswana Birds of Prey issue of 1989 featured the Black-shouldered Kite, Southern Pale



Chanting Goshawk, Lesser Kestrel and the Black-chested Snake-Eagle.

The series of four sandgrouse stamps issued by Bophuthatswana in 1990, featuring paintings by Finch-Davies of Burchell's Sandgrouse, Double-banded Sandgrouse, Namaqua Sandgrouse and Yellow-throated Sandgrouse.



On 2 August 1990 a commemorative set of stamps was issued with South African birds. The set of four depicts the Knysna Turaco, the Red-capped

Robin-Chat, the Rufous-naped Lark and the Bokmakierie.

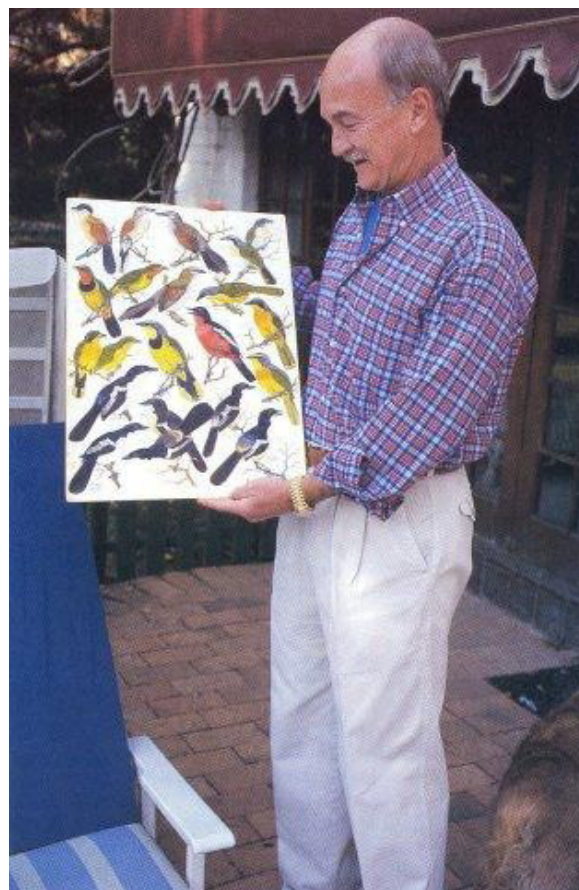


The "Birds of Venda" issued in 1991, depicted the Cape Batis, the Red-capped Robin-Chat, the Collared Sunbird and the Yellow-streaked Bulbul.



Twenty years after the tragic death of Claude Gibney Finch-Davies, Austin Roberts was about to publish his "Birds of South Africa" which we all know better as the current "Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa". This book required a great number of clear illustrations, in fact the total number required was one thousand and thirty two bird paintings on fifty six plates, a daunting task for anyone commissioned to deliver these.

As such undertakings are bound by time limits of publication and a limited budget, the artist selected for this prestigious undertaking, Mr Norman C. K. Lighton was under enormous pressure.



Steve Bales, Group Art Custodian for First National Bank, current owners of the plates, showing plate XLV

Austin Roberts was very well aware of this and understood the predicament in which they found themselves and therefore he took responsibility for the direct supervision of the execution of the watercolours for his new bird book. It was Roberts himself who made the plates of Finch-Davies available to Lighton to ease the pressure of work on him.

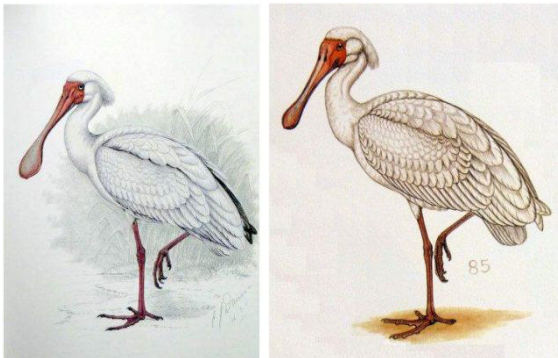
Strangely Roberts did not notice or did not seem to notice the close similarity between the paintings produced by Lighton and those of Finch-Davies, alternatively he did not mind, be it on account of pressure of time or an old grudge still held against Finch-Davies.

The end result is that many – not most or every painting as alluded – are very good copies of the Finch-Davies paintings with a foot or

feather in a different position or the painting in mirror image. The similarities are simply too many and too obvious.

Some examples will highlight the striking similarities (in each case Finch-Davies' painting is on the left, Lighton's on the right):

African Spoonbill:



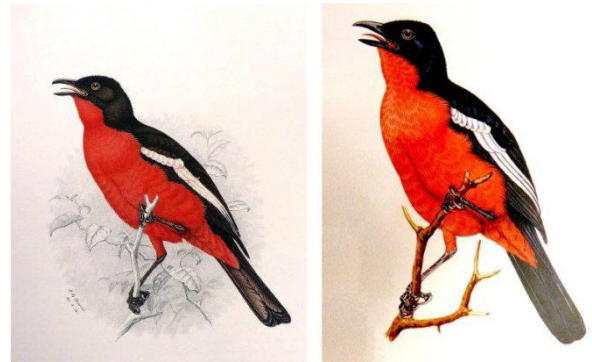
Verreaux's Eagle:



Swallow-tailed Bee-eater:



and Crimson-breasted Shrike.



Dr Alan Kemp who published a few books during the 1980s on Finch-Davies to make the artwork of Finch-Davies more publicly known is said to be "charitable" about this on account of the enormity of the task given to Norman Lighton to produce the plates in a very short time.

I believe that this is where Austin Roberts erred. As a scientist he should have been aware of the dangers of plagiarism and the least that he should have insisted on is that the artist of the original artwork, Claude Gibney Finch-Davies, should have received due acknowledgement and recognition.

Austin Roberts was also aware that Finch-Davies' wife was bitterly poor and that the six hundred exquisite bird paintings in the vaults of the Transvaal Museum could possibly have been sold to ease her personal financial burden, had he given Finch-Davies the required recognition. Mrs Finch-Davies is said to have remained dead poor for the rest of her life.

The museum authorities could however not resolve whether to sell the Finch-Davies paintings or not. Mrs Finch-Davies, by then living in England, only had two of her late husband's paintings, which on her request were sold by Austin Roberts on her behalf. The proceeds

amounted to £ 7 7/-, the only income she ever derived from her late husband's paintings.

And if it was not for the human shortcoming of Claude Gibney Finch-Davies himself, having this "madness of a collector", he could have ended up being the well-deserved illustrator of "Roberts Birds of South Africa" and shared a bit of the fame of "Roberts' Birds" as we affectionally know it today. As they say, fate works in curious ways!!

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