



LANIOTURDUS

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Editorial

We rely heavily on books such as Roberts VII, (often referred to as the “birders’ bible”), for distribution maps, biometric measurements etc. - but is the information in these reference books always correct? And, possibly more importantly, do we read it correctly? Mark Paxton’s observations on the tail length of the green/violet wood-hoopoes he measured at Shamvura (Lanioturdus 43-2) got me interested. My own records of the measurements of the southern masked-weavers occurring in Namibia which can be seen in this issue further stimulated this interest. While there are some very obvious mistakes in even the best of publications (the distribution map for malachite sunbird in Roberts VII is a case in point as is the distribution map for red-billed quelea in Roberts Field Guide – Chittenden 2007), some of these can probably be put down to editorial oversight and printers’ gremlins, but the

Trivial pursuit or environmental catastrophe?

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Grey-backed Sparrowlarks *Eremopterix verticalis* and Lark-like Buntings *Emberiza impetuani* are well distributed over the western half of Namibia. Both these nomadic species are irruptive after rains and then appear in their thousands.

In 1997, from January to March, the pro-Namib, from the Gaub River towards the southern end of the NamibRand Nature Reserve, received its best rainfall for many years. In this area, on the grass covered plains of the Namib, Grey-backed Sparrowlarks and Lark-like Buntings filled the air with their happy songs. Both species bred prolifically and young birds were everywhere.

Anyone driving in the area would have noticed that many of these birds were feeding or sitting on the roads and tracks and getting killed by motor vehicles. Driving from Zais, near Solitaire, to Sesriem, (both in the Namib-Naukluft Park), on a regular basis, I too caused the death of many Grey-backed Sparrowlarks and Lark-like Buntings. I did a few mental calculations (and then had to get a calculator) and came to the conclusion that every day, hundreds of these birds were being killed.

Travelling at 100 km/hour, an average of five birds was killed per 100 kilometres. The Roads Department in Maltahöhe, in 1996, counted 27 vehicles a day in the tourist off-season on these roads. Allowing for an increase in tourism and an average of 30 vehicles per day in 1997, over a distance of 100 km for one month, there was an unnatural mortality of 4,500 birds. This is without taking into account the many hundreds of kilometres of tracks and roads on farms. Although the traffic is less on these roads, mortalities are still high because of grass growing right up to the tracks. During

the heat of the day these small birds sit in the shade of the tall grasses growing along the edge of these tracks. When a vehicle is travelling faster than 100 km/hour, the kill-rate increases dramatically.

In the area mentioned above, there are at least 1000 km of main roads. Taken at their peak abundance, over a three-month period, the number of birds killed increases dramatically to 135,000. That is without the losses on farm roads and tracks. From my observations, after subsequent periods of high rainfall in this area, many birds were killed on these farm tracks and roads, as people did not consider it necessary to slow down for "little birds". So the number of birds killed could be as high as 200,000.

Now the question arises; is this of any environmental importance or just bird-brained musings? Are these "avian locusts" there merely to feed other birds and reptiles, so that they in turn can "go forth and multiply"?

Wetland Bird Counts in Namibia 3: Inland Wetlands

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This is the third article in a series describing the results of regular wetland bird counts in Namibia and groups together inland sites where water is seasonally present as well as three sewage treatment plants. The article gives details for ten sites for which ten or more counts are available up to the end of 2008.

Larger scale replications of the graphs in this article are attached to the end of this edition.