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Two French Ornithologists and the Namibian Birds

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After visiting Namibia in June 2000 and December 2006, October/November 2013 was the third time that my wife, Danielle, and I were travelling through a part of Namibia to enjoy some beautiful landscape and part of the richness of the wildlife.

My name is Marc Baumann; I am a 50 year old French “free time” ornithologist. We live in the corner where Switzerland, France and Germany have a common border. As a grandson of a farmer I grew up in a little village with nature all around. Probably because of this, today I spend most of my free time in nature and specialize in bird watching. In 1996 I discovered bird ringing and it was “love at first sight”. I passed my examination as bird ringer in France in 2004 and since then I have been ringing between 1 500 and 3 300 birds per year. Danielle often accompanies me when I am doing this activity.

In 1995 we went to South Africa on safari for the first time and it was magnificent. We met a lot of lovely and really passionate people and immediately fell in love in the African wildlife. Since then we have spent many beautiful moments travelling through the continent. As ornithologists we give special attention to birds and we made the phrase “who is looking for birds will always see animals” ours.

Our first “indirect” encounter with the Namibia Bird Club was in Etosha in December 2006. I was sitting outside our bungalow at Okaukuejo giving bread to the birds. Some weavers came very close and what a

surprise; one of them was ringed. Excitedly I called Danielle who was sitting inside, telling her my surprise and she just “shouted” back “bouuu that’s not a funny joke”. I got my camera, let the bird come closer and took two or three good pictures of the ring. Not good enough to be able to read the complete number but good enough to read “SAFRING”. Once at home I contacted Safring to see if it was possible to have contact with bird ringers if we came back to southern Africa. We didn’t imagine that it would be such a long time between this encounter and our next visit.

Thanks to our two previous visits, we knew what we would like to see and where we would like to stay. What is really nice as a tourist and especially an ornithologist in Namibia is that you can rent a car and go on your own wherever you like, you can make as many stops as you want; clearly you can stop and look at every single bird, every single animal and stay there as long as you want. At the beginning of 2013, once we were sure that we would be able to go to Namibia I contacted Safring again and they gave me some e-mail addresses of Namibian bird ringers. I contacted these people and we were really happy when all of them confirmed to us that there was a possibility to see us and do some bird watching and ringing together. Our trip through Namibia was very easy to plan but not so easy to organize. There was some trouble getting all the rooms we wanted in the national parks but with a little bit of luck and a little bit of perseverance in the end we got all our bookings. With all the

places we would like to see again or to discover we had to limit our choice in a stay of three weeks. Some weeks before we left, I discovered the internet site of the Namibia Bird Club just by tapping “Namibia” and “bird” on the internet. I never imagined that we would meet some of the people we discovered by looking on these internet pages.

For sure we had our binoculars in our luggage but also the Sasol Birds of Southern Africa book. What is a shame for us is that there is no “little” book about the southern African birds that has the quality of the hand books of European birds, neither from the plates and nor for the descriptions. But we had to deal with this as it is quite normal in Europe where such a book can be sold in thousands of copies but not in southern Africa. We landed at Windhoek International Airport on Friday 18 October. We landed just few minutes after sunrise and around the airport buildings even before we had our luggage we were lucky enough to observe some swifts and swallows chasing insects. The funny thing was that one of the first swifts we saw was the Common (European) Swift, a species that nests less than 50 metres from our house. We observed a Lilac-breasted Roller hunting insects at the feet of the palm trees even before we passed through customs. What more could we hope for? After a full night in the plane we spent our day by relaxing around the pool at our hotel. Luckily the hotel was situated just at the border of the Windhoek suburb called Eros and at the edge of a little hill. So even by hanging around, we had the possibility to observe a dozen species. Because of the approaching rainy season the Southern Masked-Weavers were in what I could call “building stress”. It was amazing for

us to see how quickly they build a nest and especially how quickly and easily each little piece of grass finds its place. On the Saturday we went to the Daan Viljoen Game Reserve. We were a little bit surprised because on that Saturday there was a special fair with full volume music, four wheel drive vehicles around and so on. After hesitating, we went for a walk and luckily for us, after just a few metres, our attention was drawn to some trees where two Common Scimitar-bills were making a lot of noise. On coming closer we discovered the reason for this excitement: a Verreaux’s Eagle-Owl was sitting on a tree. A Verreaux’s Eagle-Owl! One of Danielle’s favourite birds just sitting some 30 metres in front of us and quietly looking at us. What a start!



Figure 1: Verreaux's Eagle-Owl.

The next great moment came when we arrived at the highest point of the

walk; in the distance we could see Windhoek, and in the sky I spotted two little dots flying around. They came closer and showed us the unmistakable wing form of the Verreaux's Eagle. For us this may be the most beautiful African raptor, also called African Black Eagle - you can't mistake it with its big white dot on the black back. It looked like a male and a female flying what would be for a European raptor a typical territory marking air show; up, down, side by side, one above the other etc. Magnificent! Two highlights in one day and there were nineteen more days to come.



Figure 2: Marico Sunbird.

On the Sunday another exciting moment was planned. We would meet with Gudrun and Neil from the Namibia Bird Club and go with them to a farm some 30 km north of Windhoek to do some bird ringing. Thanks to Holger I got a Namibian

bird ringing license. Since 2006 it had been a dream for Danielle and me to come to Africa to do some bird ringing and what more can I say: a dream come true. The journey was just magnificent. We won the trust of Gudrun and Neil and so I was allowed to do all the bird ringing, measuring etc. It was more than unexpected, my hands were trembling a little bit at the beginning and I was not able to give the sex and ages of the birds but we were here to learn. Every single bird we held in our hands was just a fantastic moment. Being able to ring a sunbird or the tiny Blue Waxbill made our hearts beat quicker.

On Monday morning we left Windhoek for Walvis Bay. We choose the C28 via the Bosua Pass to profit from the sightseeing and also maybe to have the opportunity to see some birds. On the way we saw the Pygmy Falcon, African Hawk-Eagle and also Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk and some other birds including some species of lark. I was proud to be able to recognize some of them. During our past visits it was this bird family which gave us many "headaches" identifying them. In Walvis Bay we had a lodge directly at the sea. So it was quite easy whenever possible to go out and see birds. But sometimes the birds come closer to us than we expected; we were lucky to observe two Orange River White-eyes and some Cape Sparrows during our breakfast. The next high moment of our holiday was the meeting with Mark, a bird ringer living in Swakopmund. He took us along to the Walvis Bay salt pans where we observed many species such as plovers, stints, sandpipers and godwits between flamingos, cormorants and pelicans. The most uncommon bird we were able to observe was a Wilson's Phalarope

(Uncommon? – this is a mega rarity in southern Africa – Ed). But better was to come, during two evenings/nights we were able to go with Mark to the salt pans north of Swakopmund to see if we could capture and ring some terns. Once again we were very lucky; on the first night we captured over thirty of them; most were Common Terns but we also got some Black Terns and some uncommon Arctic Terns. The second night we were lucky again. We captured fewer birds but one of the Common Terns was wearing a Polish ring.

Back in Windhoek on Saturday we had a long walk on the little hill just around Eros where we had the pleasure of observing a couple of Pirit Batis occupied by building a nest in a little tree. On Sunday we had another meeting with Gudrun and Neil. This time we were invited to participate to the Namibia Bird Club visit to Otjiseva Farm. Neil opened some nets in the garden and put out some traps along the river to see if we could capture some birds to ring them. And once again we were really lucky. The first bird captured was a Lilac-breasted Roller; even the rainbow hasn't so many colours. And this was only one of many magic moments we experienced during that day.



Figure 3: Lilac-breasted Roller.

We had an enriching discussion with other members of the Namibia Bird

Club and with the farmer. One of the funny moments was the observation of a European Honey-Buzzard, a typical European bird. Danielle and I needed “only” 11 hours from France to Windhoek - how many days were necessary for it, how many dangers had it faced? We left the Namibia Bird Club to go north in the direction of Damaraland and the Etosha National Park for the next two weeks. But the Namibia Bird Club came back to us indirectly twice; the first time at the Palmwag Lodge. We had to wait a couple of hours for our driver who would take us to a camp in the mountains. What do ornithologists do when they have some free time? They look at birds and what a surprise - in the grass around the hotel were two Familiar Chats each wearing a ring. On the information sheet at the hotel we learnt about the ringing campaign of the Namibian ringers at this lodge earlier in the year. Nice to see some pictures of people we had met in the last few days.

Since during our two previous visits we never went further north than Twyfelfontein, at Palmwag we discovered a fascinating landscape. We loved it immediately. Even amongst the stones we were able to see some interesting birds like the Double-banded Sandgrouse, Lanner Falcon, Red-crested Korhaan, Benguela Long-billed Lark and many more. From Palmwag we went to what was for us another “old” dream: discovering the western side of the Etosha National Park. On some flowers at Dolomite Camp we observed a couple of White-bellied Sunbirds; the Short-toed Rock-Thrushes were everywhere in the camp. We were also lucky during our safaris in observing two Black Rhino on the first day in Etosha. Around Dolomite camp I had the luck to realize another of my dreams: to see

some Mountain Zebra. We had seen some before close to Palmwag but far away and only a small group. After two days in western Etosha we went to the camps in the eastern side. Mark in Swakopmund had told us about the fact that, some months before, poachers in Zambezi Region had put poison on carcasses to kill the vultures so the rangers could not follow them to the kill. Only after six days in Etosha we saw more than five vultures together at one time. Until that moment we had seen more rhinos than vultures. It was a shock for us and it is frightening. North of Okaukuejo we were lucky to see a Fork-tailed Drongo building a nest. It did it in a Mopane tree very close to the road. It was using the fork of two branches but used only grass and mud to build the nest. No real structure on it but we were not close enough to see all details of the construction.

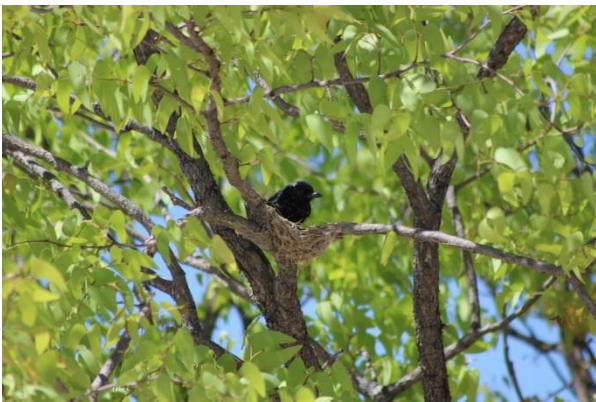


Figure 4: Fork-tailed Drongo on nest.

At Okaukuejo we made our “last” encounter with Namibian ringers. I went out around our bungalow to try to take some nice pictures of common or maybe less common birds. After I had taken pictures of Sociable Weaver, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting and Marico Flycatcher a Fork-tailed Drongo came in front of my lens and what a surprise to see that it was wearing a ring on the right leg.



Figure 5: Ringed Fork-tailed Drongo.

Also at Okaukuejo one night when we came back from the waterhole a Verreaux’s Eagle-Owl was sitting on the tree just outside our bungalow. It was not shy so we were able to go very close and took some pictures even with flashlight from less than about ten metres. We stayed face to face with it for more than ten minutes and it didn’t care about us as long as we stayed far enough away. When we got too close it didn’t fly away; it just started making a noise. At Halali we had a similar experience; what we think was a Spotted Eagle-Owl was sitting in the tree just above our car and was calling. But when I came closer it stopped calling and I just saw its shadow. That’s why I am not sure about the species.

Gudrun and Neil told us about the bad rainy season of 2012/2013. We thought that this was also very visible to us during our trip through

Namibia. In Etosha some waterholes were dry and the grass was in many places just a little bit more than dust. What we think is another sign of this drought is that during our three week trip we didn't see any species of kingfisher and as for herons and storks we just saw some Cattle Egrets at the waterhole at Namutoni. Where have all these birds gone? Just away to better places or did most of them die?

What is always nice to see is the Blue Cranes that you can observe in Etosha. We found a little group of six of them close to Andoni Gate with two Double-banded Coursers close to them.



Figure 6: Blue Cranes.

During our past travels in Namibia we had many encounters with rollers and especially the Lilac-breasted Roller but also some Purple Rollers. During our trip in 2013 we saw only three Lilac-breasted and one Purple Roller outside Namutoni. Why? Close to the entrance of Namutoni we observed two Red-breasted Swallows taking a sun bath in the morning sun. Nice for us was the observation of a Southern Pochard and a couple of Cape Shovelers on some

waterholes around the camp. Our last full day in Etosha was the only time we saw more than ten vultures at one time. There was a kill the day before and in the morning more than twenty five vultures flew away. The last morning we spent at Etosha we had another encounter with a European bird species. In Windhoek we saw one European Bee-eater but on that last morning there were plenty everywhere. Did they arrive during the last few hours or was it the storm the previous night that brought them close to us? From Namutoni we drove back south but made a last two day stop at Waterberg Plateau National Park before going back to Windhoek. It was also the time to make our last observation, the last species we observed was the White-browed Scrub-Robin in a bush in front of us at the camp. This was species number 215. From the over 600 species of birds that have been observed in Namibia in the past, we saw about one third of them, which is not bad. But the most important thing was to have had the pleasure of seeing each of them. It is not a race; every bird is/was a moment of joy.

Once again we would like to thank all of you we had the joy and luck to meet during our holiday. We want to thank you for your warm welcome. Thank you to Holger for helping us during our research. Special very warm thank you to Neil, Mark and Gudrun for all the fantastic moments you gave us. Thank you for your patience, for your trust and all that you taught us. We experienced magic moments at your sides.