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Editorial

The symposium and dinner to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Namibia Bird Club have come and gone. I am very pleased to be able to say that our members attended these events in numbers and that we had over seventy people there (including the invited speakers). The symposium went off without any real problems – none of the speakers overran his allotted time slot and on the technological front the laptops and the beamers communicated with each other.

There will be a special edition of *Lanioturdus* incorporating the papers presented so I will not go into detail here. Suffice to say that all the talks were at layman's level, all the feedback we have had has been positive and that we have had a number of people enquiring when we will be presenting another symposium – the answer to that one is simple – not before we have again accumulated sufficient funds.

Many people were able to obtain the software necessary to commence atlasing thanks to Arnold van der Westhuizen's efforts. SABAP2

Vulture Ringing at Farm Frauenstein

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September/October is vulture ringing season in Namibia. Most of our vultures (certainly the White-backed and Lappet-faced) are winter breeders and by September/October most of the chicks are big enough to be ringed and tagged.



Readying the mirror : Photo Wilfried Hähner

On Sunday 18 September 2011 eleven of us (three ringers, a trainee ringer and an assortment of assistants, observers and photographers) in four vehicles met at the Avis railway bridge and then drove to Farm Frauenstein where White-backed Vultures were known to be breeding. The expedition

headed straight to Schumannndam where active nests had been observed a couple of months earlier in the course of a bird club outing.

White-backed Vultures nest high up on top of trees - the nests at Frauenstein were between about 8 m and 12 m above the ground. In order to avoid the expenditure of a lot of unnecessary effort should a nest prove to be empty or contain only an egg, (these vultures lay only a single egg), a mirror on the end of a long pole is first used to check the contents of the nest. Should the nest contain a chick the long (and heavy) ladder is maneuvered into position to access the nest. White-backed Vulture chicks have the rather disgusting habit of regurgitating the (often foul smelling) contents of their crops over unwary ringers so caution is necessary when removing chicks from nests.



This nest is high up : Photo Uschi Kirchner

The first nest inspected at Schumannndam proved to have a chick in it and soon Holger

Kolberg was scaling the ladder and cutting his way through the thorny twigs to gain access to the nest. The chick was then put into a specially made “vulture bag” which seals with Velcro strips and has a shoulder strap which allows the “catcher” to have both hands free for the descent of the ladder. This chick proved to be too small to tag but it was big enough to be ringed and after processing was returned to the nest. The overall size of the nest, the size and depth of the cup and the height of the nest above the ground were all measured, the exact co-ordinates were recorded and notes were made of prey remains found in the nest. White-backed Vultures are ringed with 26 mm rings and each ring has its own unique number and the contact details of SAFRING engraved/stamped on it. The other two nests in the vicinity of Schumannndam were empty.



The bird is safely in the bag : Photo Wilfried Hähner

Farmer Stöck had advised that most of the

birds were nesting towards the N/a 'Ankusé boundary but had not given the precise location of the nests so we set off to look for them at the eastern extremity of Farm Frauenstein. A single nest was seen some distance from the track and approached. When the mirror was raised to check the contents the chick on the nest panicked, jumped off the nest and fluttered to the ground where it was easily caught. But this was not a vulture chick – it was a Tawny Eagle almost ready to fledge and, as Holger had brought along only 26 mm rings, I got the opportunity to ring the eagle which was a ringing lifer for me (Tawny Eagles require 19 mm rings). The only other nest found on this part of the farm was empty.



The Tawny Eagle : Photo Wilfried Hähner

In the course of seeking active vulture nests quite a number of other bird species were observed with good numbers of water birds, including an African Spoonbill, seen on Schumannndam itself while a number of Kori Bustards were also seen at various locations. A good variety of raptors including Secretarybird, Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Black-shouldered Kite, Lappet-faced Vulture and Martial Eagle were also observed.

After a rather interesting interlude where two of us managed to get stuck in a mud hole which we had to cross (fortunately Holger's “mean green machine” is fitted with a winch which made getting the mired vehicles out of the mud rather easy), we took a break for lunch and then proceeded to an area east of

Schumannndam where we found what we were looking for. Here there were a number of active nests and we were able to ring a further four vulture chicks although one of them was again too small to be tagged. One of the nests contained only an egg indicating that one bird had laid very late in the season. Trainee ringer Dawid van der Merwe put in a lot of hard yards doing quite a bit of the ladder work and as a reward got to put the rings on two of the birds while Holger applied the tags. The tags are identical to those used to ear mark cattle and have a four character alphanumeric code on them. The area of the wing where the tag is to be applied is treated with disinfectant and care must be taken when applying the tag not to punch its pin through a feather. Vultures in Namibia are tagged only on the right wing whereas birds in South African are tagged on both wings.



Applying the tag : Photo Wilfried Hähner



Ringed and tagged : Photo Wilfried Hähner



Dawid applying a ring : Photo Wilfried Hähner

Had we found these nests earlier in the day more chicks could have been ringed but as the sun was sinking it was decided to call it a day and after a well deserved beer at a vantage point overlooking Schumannndam it was time to head for home.

I think I can safely say that all concerned thoroughly enjoyed the day and I would like to extend our thanks to Family Stöck for allowing us to ring on their property.