



# 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.

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...



To ring a vulture chick you've first got to climb up a 10 metre ladder and be able to stay there while you wrap the chick in your special canvas bag. With only the ladder between yourself and a thorny fall, you climb down and the chick is processed after which you've got to climb up again, put the chick back and take careful measurements of the nest.



The ladder is then collapsed to its normal 6 m and off goes Holger with his entourage of enthusiastic helpers to the next tree where the process starts again with a search for the best angle at which to lean the ladder against the nest. Not as simple as it sounds, because you've got leave a gap between the camelthorn branches for a body to get through on its way to and from the nest.

The second lesson was the most impressive to the two children accompanying Louis and me on this outing. Vulture vomit smells like an abattoir and if it splashes on your shoes, you'd better get to water before you get in the car. It is common White-backed Vulture behaviour to vomit when handled by researchers or in other stressful circumstances and some scientists postulate that this evolved as a mechanism to off-load extra weight in order to become airborne/fly faster when evading predators.

The vulture ringing outing to Smalhoek was attended by about 28 people, including Dave Joubert and four of his Polytech nature conservation students. The students, as well as the rest of us, got a chance to climb the ladder and ring a vulture ... a treat that the students accepted with the alacrity of people not suffering from back pain.



We processed eleven nests and ten chicks were brought down. Two were too small to tag although they were large enough to ring and another was not tagged because the instrument failed and Holger did not want to further stress the bird, bringing the total of birds tagged to seven on the Sunday. One nest contained an egg which was probably infertile or addled seeing that it was late in the breeding season. Sunday was only the first day of a longer process and by the time Peter Bridgeford and Holger Kolberg finished, the total tally for Smalhoek was 18 White-backed Vultures tagged, two eggs and three chicks too small to tag. Peter says that the previous year they ringed six White-backed Vultures and found one egg.





Smalhoek is the farm where owner Helmuth Stehn, at that time a non-birder, observed White-backed Vultures eating the plant Slangkop (*Pseudogaltonia clavata*) which is believed to be poisonous. An article on this phenomenon was published in *Lanioturdus* 45 (3). Peter believes it is only the third time that anything about vultures eating plant material has been published and it was all thanks to Helmuth's observations and his willingness to share information.



Peter Bridgeford and Holger Kolberg spent the two weeks following that Sunday ringing vultures in the Dordabis and Gobabis areas. It is part of an ongoing project to promote vulture conservation and make farmers and farm workers aware of the importance of vultures and the risks they face. They processed 50 White-backed and three Lappet-faced Vultures on nine farms. That's a lot of ladders to climb.

## Workshop Birding

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It was a Monday morning in office; the telephone rang - why was I not in Otjiwarongo for the workshop? Invitation - what invitation? - and so on. I love workshops, I love them even more when they are organised like this one seemed to be. My frustration reached maximum permissible tolerance levels.

Anyway, soon I was on my way to Otjiwarongo and after I had secured accommodation at Otjibamba Lodge just outside Otjiwarongo I felt a wee bit better.

I arrived late in the afternoon, in time for a little walk in the beautiful gardens. A Southern Masked-Weaver showed me the way.



A Helmeted Guineafowl was enjoying the lush green veld...

