

SHORT NOTE

Breeding record for the Cape Eagle Owl in Namibia

by

A. Walter

P.O. Box 577
Walvis Bay 9190

J.P. Walter

Directorate of Nature Conservation and Recreation Resorts,
P.O. Box 9,
Luderitz 9000

C.J. Brown

Directorate of Nature Conservation and Recreation Resorts,
P/Bag 13306,
Windhoek 9000

The Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis* is an unobstrusive bird and easily overlooked. It was first recorded in Zimbabwe only in 1967 since which time it has been found to be widely distributed and not uncommon in areas of suitable habitat (Steyn 1982). It was reported from Namibia by Clinning in 1980, identified from a photograph taken in 1956 by A.W. in the lower Orange River valley on the extreme southern border of this country. Unsubstantiated reports of the Cape Eagle Owl have been received from the Fish River Canyon (2717DA) (Clinning 1980), and the Naukluft mountains and Sesriem (2416AA and 2415DB respectively), both in the Namib-Naukluft Park (H. Boyer and P. Bridgeford, pers. comm.). Cape Eagle Owls have been found breeding at Brandvlei in the arid north-west Cape during a prolonged five-year drought. These observations suggest that the species is likely to occur widely in the Karoo, the Richtersveld and possibly quite extensively in Namibia (Myburgh & Steyn 1982).

In September 1983, while examining a Rock Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* breeding site near Luderitz, two Cape Eagle Owls were discovered. At first these were assumed to be a pair of adult birds, but close examination of the slides taken of them, suggests that they were an adult and a young fledged bird.

On 28 August 1984 and in the same area, a newly-hatched nestling and an unhatched egg were found in a small cave on a narrow ledge two-thirds up the steep 5 m high east side of a narrow gorge, cutting into a granite hill some 12 m from the sea (Plate 1). The nest consisted of a shallow depression in the thin earth of the cave floor, surrounded by old pellets, bits of bone and a few feathers. On revisiting the site on 3 September, two nestlings were found, the older considerably larger than the younger (Plate 2). Assuming an incubation period of 34 to 36 days (Steyn 1982), the eggs would have been laid in the last week of July, and thus within the overall laying period (May to August) of southern African birds (Maclean 1985).

During the course of the next eight days, daily visits totalling some 34 hours were made to the nest site by the senior author, mainly in the early mornings and late evenings, but also through the course of one night. Only one adult, presumed to be the female, was rearing the nestlings. No sign of the male bird was ever seen. The female left the nest to forage for a period at last light and again just before first light. During these periods the nestlings were left alone. For the remaining periods the adult bird closely brooded the nestlings.

No new pellets were found in the nest during these eight days, and usually no food was present. This is an unusual situation for the species, as at other nests studied "the male supplies prey and there is usually more food on the nest than the female and her young can consume" (Steyn 1982). This indicates that this bird was hard pressed to supply enough food for itself and its nestlings, a situation to be expected when a parent bird has to brood young and hunt alone. In ad-



PLATE 1: The cave nest site of the Cape Eagle Owl near Luderitz.

dition, the disparity in size between the nestlings increased to such an extent that, on 10 September, it was decided to remove the younger one and handrear it, but unfortunately, on 19 September it died.

Blocks of fresh beef placed on the nest were immediately eaten, either swallowed by the adult and then regurgitated and fed to the nestlings, or torn up and fed to them directly. Natural prey items recorded during this period were a Hartlaub's Gull *Laurus*

hartlaubii, an unidentified rat, a striped mouse *Rhabdomys pumilius* and a red rock rabbit of the genus *Pronolagus*, a new distribution record for this genus (Smithers 1983).

On revisiting the nest a week later it was found to be empty and no sign of the adult or the nestling could be found.

This is the first record of the Cape Eagle Owl breeding in Namibia, and an extension to its known range.



PLATE 2: Two Cape Eagle Owl nestlings of about five and seven days old, surrounded by old pellets, pieces of bone and feathers.

While Clinning (1980) suggested that the bird recorded in the lower Orange River near Lorelei may have been a vagrant, this breeding record confirms that the Cape Eagle Owl is a resident species in Namibia. Suitable habitat and the presence of its preferred prey (i.e. red rock rabbits, dassies, scrub hares (Gargett & Grobber 1976; Steyn & Tredgold 1977), all species associated with the rocky and mountainous habitat of the Cape Eagle Owl) are to be found throughout the southern and western regions of Namibia. It is therefore reasonable to expect (as has been intimated by Steyn 1982) that the Cape Eagle Owl would occur throughout this area.

REFERENCES

- CLINNING, C.F.
1980. The occurrence of the Cape Eagle Owl in South West Africa. *Madoqua* 11(4): 351—352.
- GARGETT, V. and GROBLER, J.H.
1976. Prey of the Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis mackinderi* Sharpe 1899, in the Matopos, Rhodesia. *Arnoldia* 8(7): 1—7.
- MACLEAN, G.L.
1985. Roberts' Birds of southern Africa. The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund; Cape Town.
- MYBURGH, N. and STEYN, P.
1982. The Cape Eagle Owl: An additional distribution record. *African Wildlife* 36(6): 219.
- SMITHERS, R.H.N.
1983. The mammals of the southern African subregion. University of Pretoria; Pretoria.
- STEYN, P.
1982. Birds of prey of southern Africa. David Philip; Cape Town.
- STEYN, P. and TREDGOLD, D.
1977. Observations on the Cape Eagle Owl. *Bokmakierie* 29: 31—42.