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Editorial

This issue of the *Lanioturdus* would have been rather skinny had it not been for Wessel Swanepoel's numerous contributions. The editor is still waiting for the Chairman's annual report delivered to the March 2005 AGM and any trip reports from members on outings.

Peter Steyn and Rob Martin report on the puzzle of Namibia's Booted Eagles. Here is a species that used to be difficult to identify thus adding to the confusion but recent advances in field guides should help even novice birders identify this species. Surely the bird is a more common breeder than we think, people just have to scan likely breeding rocks, kloofs and canyons. Perhaps we can solve the mystery.

New birds have been reported for the country so it is good to see that birders have been active even though it is the dry season. There are two articles on rarities within the country and one from our neighbour, Botswana.

Once again I appeal to all members to help the Namibia Bird Club. If you want to keep the club viable you must also do your part and try and get new members to join.

vagrancy further along the coast, no further. Odd birds from this population have ended up mated to Sandwich Tern in Britain and France over the years and I would guess that the bird seen by Mark is one of these asymptotes and NOT a pure Lesser Crested Tern. Obviously with Sandwich Tern genes in them one of the inherited characteristics would be that of long-distance migrant.

A rather lost Elegant Tern has been seen on a number of occasions in Western Europe and that, together with the purported longer de-curved bill of the subsequent hybrids seen, has given the impression that the descendants are from this source. That may be so and if that is the case then these hybrids could, therefore, be either Elegant or Lesser Crested tern asymptotes. If the Elegant is the case then do we accept these birds as being a new species to the southern African list?

Birds claimed as Lesser Crested Tern have been reported from the Western Cape Province on several occasions and all probably belong to this hybrid population. This may also include a bird claimed as that species in summer 2003 from the Kromme estuary. This means that all of these birds migrate along the Namibian coast and should be watched out for at migration time. Please also check for the individual colour rings that occur on some of them. If you see the bird in flight make a definitive account of the dark on the underwing primaries and also check for pale pink on the underparts when in fresh plumage.”

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Wattled Crane *Grus carunculata* numbers, habitat use and diet in Bushmanland

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Introduction

Wattled crane *Grus carunculata*, being nowhere common in Namibia, regularly migrate to the ephemeral pan system around Tsumkwe in Bushmanland. The Nyae-Nyae Pan, situated in a woodland savanna approximately 20km south of Tsumkwe with an average rainfall of 400-450mm, is one of the largest ephemeral pans in the area, which hold the greatest number of *G. carunculata* at a time, with a maximum population estimate of up to 150 birds (Hines 1993). The largest numbers previously recorded at any one time in this area were 52 birds in the Nyae-Nyae pan – south area (Hines 1993) and 72 birds during April 2004 (*pers.obs.*). Simmons (2004) estimates a population of approximately 200 birds for Namibia. *G. carunculata* are usually found in pairs or small flocks (up to 40 birds in southern Africa, elsewhere in Africa up to 400 birds (Maclean 1993). Hines (1993) states that they mainly occur in groups of 3 birds – 2 adults and a fully-fledged juvenile – in the Bushmanland area.

The birds are opportunistic feeders (Newman 2003) with the diet including small reptiles, frogs, and mammals as well as insects, grain, tubers and rhizomes (Maclean 1993).

Wetlands disappearing and/or being degraded have resulted in a steady population decline for *G. carunculata* throughout its natural range (Holt-Biddle 2003, Simmons 2004). Being one of the few true wetland-associated birds in Namibia (Williams 1991) they potentially suffer the same fate as wetland birds elsewhere in Africa. This paper investigates the distribution, population size, group composition and size, diet and habitat use of *G. carunculata* in the Bushmanland area.

Methods

To determine the population size of the *G. carunculata*, total counts were carried out every 7 days of each month between January and June 2005. A fixed route passing the main pans was driven through the area and all birds encountered were documented. Group composition, group size, habitat use and diet were noted during the above-mentioned counts. Habitat use was determined by dividing the area frequented by the birds into the following three habitat types – i.e. pan, grassland, and woodland. Birds seen foraging were observed with binoculars to try and determine what they were feeding on. All the data was entered in a spreadsheet for later analysis.

Results

A total number of 275 *G. carunculata* individuals were observed during the study period. The birds arrived in January and departed towards the end of May with no birds seen during June and July. Most birds (81%) were observed during February (32.4%) and March (48.4%). A mean of 55.00 (SD=55.56) and a maximum of 133 birds were observed during March 2005 (Figure 1).

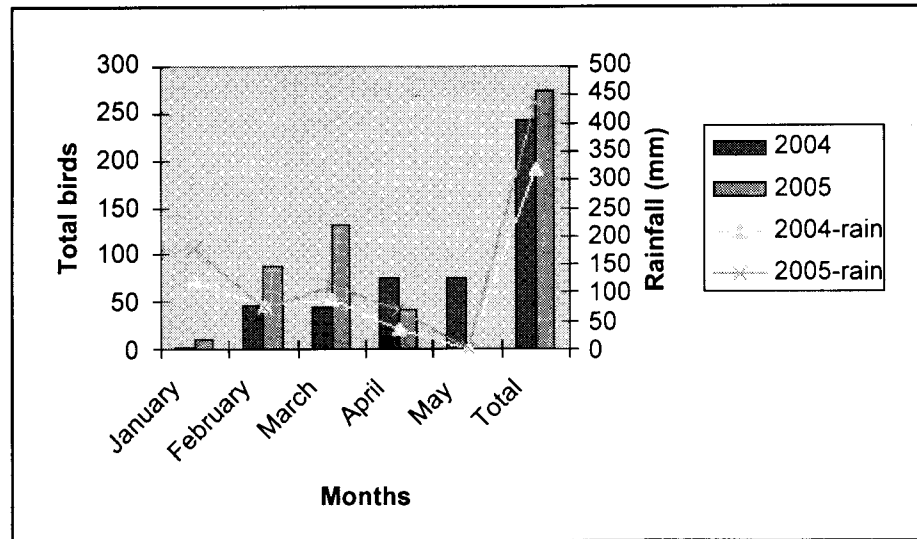


Figure 1. A comparison of *G. carunculata* numbers between 2004 and 2005 in the Bushmanland area.

Birds were observed at Nyae-Nyae pan (92.4%) followed by Khabi pan (3%) with most groups of birds also favouring the former pan system (81%) (Figure 2).

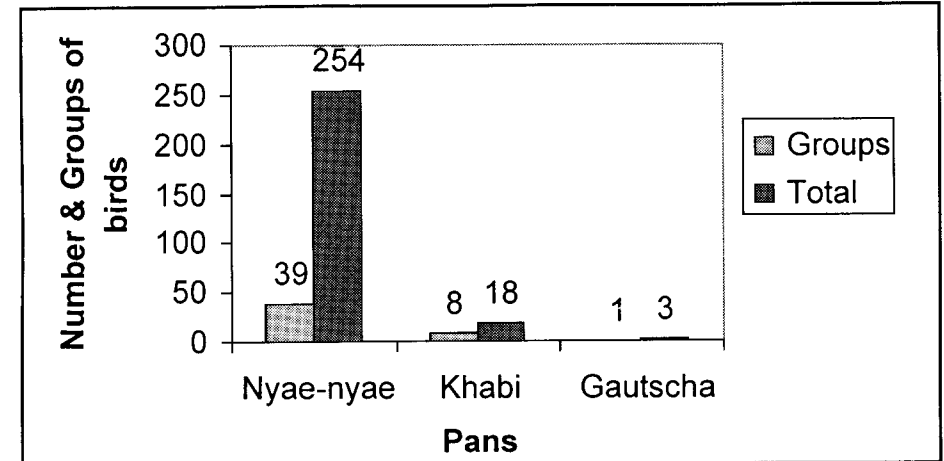


Figure 2. Group number and number of *G. carunculata* individuals observed at three pan systems during 2005 in the Bushmanland area.

All the birds were observed frequenting the pan (59%) and bordering grassland (41%) areas with no observations made of birds in the adjacent woodland areas (Figure 3).

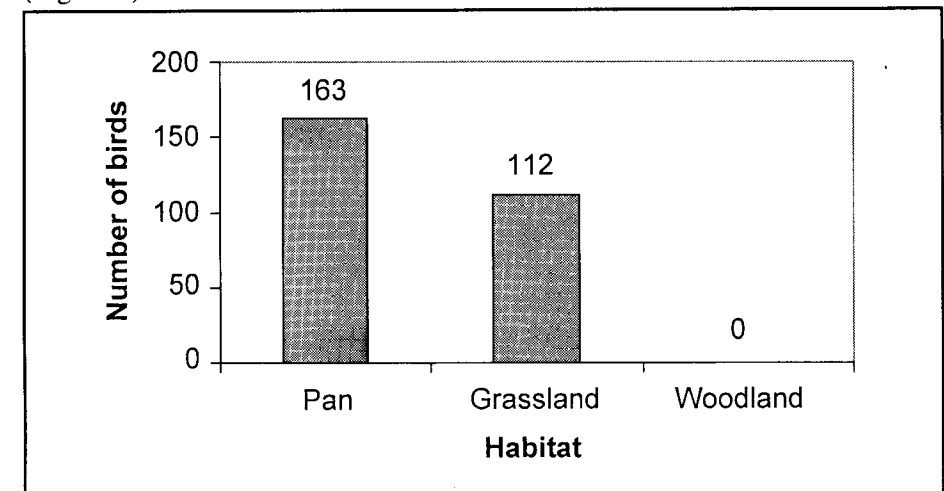


Figure 3. Habitat use of *G. carunculata* during 2005 in the Bushmanland area.

Half the birds observed were in a group size of 3 individuals with the largest group size being 18 individual birds seen on 1 occasion (Figure 4).

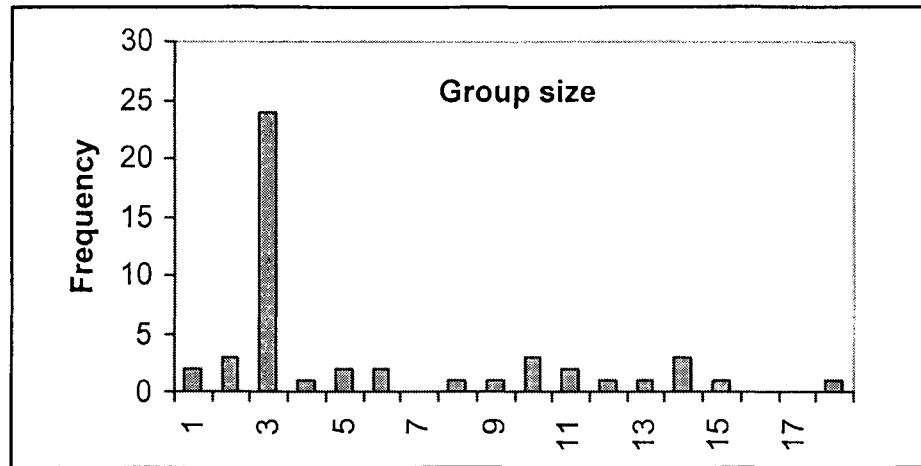


Figure 4. Group size of *G. carunculata* during 2005 in the Bushmanland area.

Only 5.5% of the birds could be positively identified as being juvenile birds although the high incidence of 3 birds in a group indicate that more were sub adult although could not easily be identified as such.

G. carunculata were observed feeding on the grasses *Panicum repens* (Couch panicum) and *Diplachne fusca* (Swamp grass) during the study period.

Discussion

Total *G. carunculata* numbers increased by 32 individuals for 2005 possibly indicating a better breeding season elsewhere. It is still unclear where the birds that visit the Bushmanland area originate from, but thus far no breeding has been recorded in the immediate area (Kolbooi *pers.comm.*, Simmons 2004). A strong positive correlation was observed between rainfall during the first 6 months of 2004 and bird numbers ($r = 0.93$, Total: 316.8mm) although this correlation was not repeated for 2005 ($r = 0.15$, Total: 436.8mm), but more rain was recorded during the same period. The association with rainfall thus seems more complex than initially anticipated. The amount and timing of rainfall as well as the rainfall at origin are possible factors influencing bird numbers. However, Hines (1993) states that the birds frequent the area even during relatively dry years.

The maximum number of 275 birds observed during the study period is important if taking into consideration that Newman (2003) states that the estimated population for South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland totals only 230 birds and that the largest population of 1 219 birds occurs in the Okavango Delta in Botswana. The Okavango Delta supports the largest single concentration of birds in Africa (Anon 2003). An estimated global population of between 13 000-15 000 birds was determined during the 1990's compared to fewer than 7 000 birds by 2002 (Bishop 2002). Bishop (2002) furthermore indicates that of the 4 000 birds estimated from Zambia, only 967 were counted during a survey in 2001. The latest reliable estimates include 1 300 birds for Botswana, 4 500 for Zambia and a world population of 8 000 (Beilfuss *pers comm.*).

Total *G. carunculata* numbers in the Bushmanland area may be an underestimate as there are many "hidden" pans off the beaten track which are difficult to reach during the rainy season and that are frequented by *G. carunculata*. This was confirmed when 30 birds (February 2003) and 15 birds (March 2004) were counted approximately 10km and 1km west of the main Nyae-Nyae pan at such hidden pans, respectively. It is suggested that an aerial survey be conducted to get a better idea of the total numbers of birds frequenting the general area.

The dominant group size of 3 birds (2 adults and fully fledged juvenile) confirms the Bushmanland pan area as a post juvenile nursery area or pre-breeding area. Breeding peaks during May to August (Maclean 1993, Tarboton 2001). As no breeding has yet been observed in the Bushmanland area it is possible that the birds congregate in the area for sub adults to secure mates and/or "fatten up" before breeding commences elsewhere.

The bird due to its large size, varied habitats and being relatively undisturbed, possibly favour the Nyae-Nyae pan system. This pan comprises of a number of dry land habitats and a variety of wetland types, which include vegetated open water pans, dominated by *Diplachne fusca* grass (Hines 1993). The habitat use of the birds – i.e. pan and bordering grassland habitats – indicates their preference for a diet associated with these habitats. The grasses *Diplachne fusca* and *Panicum repens* were observed eaten by *G. carunculata*, and according to Gibbs Russell *et al.* (1991) and Van Oudshoorn (1999) both are palatable and well utilised by livestock and game. Both grasses flower from October to April and

October to June, respectively, coinciding with the birds visit to the area. Bento (2002) indicates the sedge *Eleocharis* sp. dominating the diet of *G. carunculata* in Mozambique. This sedge is scarce in the Okavango Swamp area where the birds are presumed to feed on the roots and tubers of other sedges (Hancock *in litt.*). *Eleocharis acutangula* is known to occur in the Bushamanland pan system (Clarke & Mannheimer 1999), but not known if it is included in the diet of *G. carunculata*.

Hines (1993) and Simmons *et al.* (1998) suggests that the overall threats to the Nyae-Nyae wetland system is low although increased tourism and farming may affect the drainage and subsequently also the birds visiting the area. Fires have also been identified as a major threat to the birds feeding sites elsewhere (Rodwell 2004) and should thus be contained in the Nyae-Nyae area during the bird's temporary residence. The area is also significant from a bird diversity point of view as Mendelsohn *et al.* (2002) indicate between 201-230 species of birds are known to occur in the general area. Simmons *et al.* (1998) classifies the pan area, when wet, as an important birding site in Namibia, which can hold more than 10,000 waterbirds of 84 species. Although the area now falls within a conservancy it is imperative that the Nyae-Nyae pan system be adequately protected so as to ensure the future of the site for summer foraging and socialising of the *G. carunculata* migrants.

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Birds on the move : range extensions and vagrants in western, central and southern Namibia 1994–2005

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Many bird species are subject to movements, some of which are poorly understood. As such, individuals or even flocks, may be recorded unexpectedly at any specific locality. In Namibia this is particularly evident in the arid southern and western regions, where a wide range of habitats are found locally in a specific area, e.g. the riparian woodland along river courses and small wetlands or fountains along the coast and in the ephemeral river courses. These habitats provide refuge to resident, migratory and vagrant birds and are localities where observers should be on the lookout for species unusual to the specific area. Some species even establish resident populations, as the Karoo Thrush *Turdus smithi* and Cape Robin *Cossypha caffra* did along the Fish River in southern Namibia.

An annotated list of such species as recorded by myself is provided and covers the post southern African bird atlas project (SABAP) data collecting period, from 1994 up to May 2005. These records are compared with the records of the SABAP as indicated in *The atlas of southern African birds* Vols. 1 & 2 (Harrison *et al* 1997).

Saddlebilled Stork – *Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*

A single adult bird was seen on 28th November 2002 at a permanent pool in the Fish River at Küb, near Kalkrand (2417AB). This record is 80 km to the south of the southernmost record during the SABAP period. Like all previous records from central Namibia, this bird is suspected to be a vagrant to the area (Benn 1997).