

Western Banded Snake Eagles in Namibia

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The Western Banded Snake Eagle *Circaetus cinerascens* is described as "little known" (Brown et al. 1982) with no definite breeding records for southern Africa (Maclean 1985). It inhabits mainly riverine woodland, but also forest strips passing through less-dense woodland or savannas (Brown et al. 1982). In recent field guides (e.g. Newman 1983, Sinclair 1984, Maclean 1985) it is shown to range along the entire length of the Kavango River bordering Namibia, and through the western and eastern Caprivi Strip. However, its distribution according to records held by the Directorate of Nature Conservation in Namibia is somewhat smaller (Fig. 1).

While the Kavango River flows for about 440 km along the northern Namibian border and then across the western Caprivi into Botswana, along only the last 50 km have Western Banded Snake Eagles (WBSE) been recorded. This is almost certainly attributable to the high human population along the river (see van der Merwe 1983 for human population distributions) and the large-scale destruction of riverine forest. Only along the lower sections of the river is some protection afforded to riverine vegetation at the Andara Mission Station, at Popa Falls and in the Mahango Game Reserve. About four pairs of snake eagles are estimated for this Kavango area, and no records exist between the Kavango and the western boundary of the eastern Caprivi.

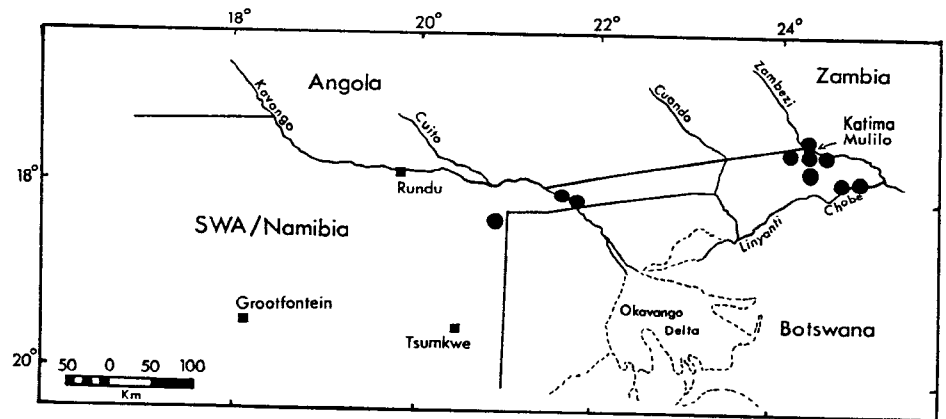


Fig.1. Distribution of the Western Banded Snake Eagle in Namibia per quarter degree square - from records held by the Directorate of Nature Conservation, Namibia.

(GABAR 2:40-42, 1987)



Fig. 2. A female Western Banded Snake Eagle, showing uniform brownish plumage with little or no barring.
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10 minutes both flew off calling, and it was impossible to see if any food had been involved in this interaction.

In early November, a young WBSE was seen in the same area, perched near the river in a dead tree. The bird was generally much paler than the adults, with no belly barring and a dark subterminal tail bar. The head was pale grey with faint brown streaks and the legs off-white. Within 30 m of the bird we located two well-hidden, small nests about 15 m apart, both in Knobthorn trees *Acacia nigrescens*. One appeared to have been used recently, judging from the small patches of white-wash on the outer twigs and supporting branches, while the other was still in good repair and assumed to be last year's nest. No prey remains were found beneath the nests, both of which were small (40-50 cm across and 15-20 cm deep), placed about 10 m above the ground and well within the canopy of their respective trees. In addition, both trees supported thick creepers that further obscured the nests.

Conservation recommendations

Because of the paucity of information on this snake eagle, it is recommended that a survey be undertaken to identify all areas of suitable habitat in Namibia, and that these areas be systematically checked in an effort to obtain a more accurate estimate of the status of this species. Of particular high priority should be the conservation of all remaining riverine forest in Namibia, as this habitat now constitutes less than 0.01% of the land area.

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Western Banded Snake Eagles have been recorded along the Zambezi River in the vicinity of Katima Mulilo and near Ngoma on the Chobe River. Although they have not been recorded along the Linyata River in Namibia (Fig. 1), they are expected to occur there. Two other localities, away from riverine forest but in tall woodland-grassland/omuramba transition zones, have been reported. These are in the central eastern Caprivi and the Kaudum Game Reserve in Kavango respectively (BR Rieker pers. comm. and R Jessnitz in Brown 1985). Despite fairly extensive recent coverage of the most likely WBSE habitats, records of this species remain few. The eastern Caprivi is estimated to hold about 10 pairs, giving a total for the country of about 14 pairs.

Evidence of breeding

The following notes describe the first evidence of breeding in Namibia and may be the first for the subcontinent. In May 1986, a pair of WBSES was observed in the Mahango Game Reserve performing what was assumed to be courtship behaviour. Initially one bird was seen perched in a large *Diospyros mespiliformes*, and was shortly joined by another bird which had been perching lower in the tree. The second bird was darker than the first and not as clearly barred, and was assumed to be female. The birds then proceeded to jump from perch to perch, one following the other in quick succession and perching close to one another. After about