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WHAT IS THE STATUS OF THE DAMARA REDBILLED HORNBILL?

The Damaraland population of the Redbilled Hornbill Tockus erythrorhynchus damarensis has been recognised as distinctive since its description by Shelley in 1888. More recently, Kurt Sanft of Berlin, in his 1960 monograph of the Bucerotidae (Das Tierreich 76), confirmed that the population was indeed discrete but that, based on museum skins, it appeared to be intergraded with the more north-easterly T. e. rufirostris.

The two populations are easily separated in the field; the Damaraland form has a dark brown eye set in a very white face and the more easterly form T. e. rufirostris has a yellow eye set in a face with grey cheeks. The Damaraland hornbill also has much more white in the secondaries and tail, almost as much as a Monteiro's Hornbill T. monteiri.

Recently I was able to visit Namibia briefly, to begin to explore this problem and it seems sufficiently exciting to ask the help of local bird enthusiasts in effecting its solution. On my travels to the Daan Viljoen Game Reserve near Windhoek, to the farm Otjongoro north-west of Omaruru and to Okahandja and Otjiwarongo, I only encountered the Damaraland race of this Hornbill. By superimposing the map of specimen localities from Sanft's (1960) monograph on the that of sight records from the Namibia Bird Atlas, supplied to me by Dr Chris Brown, one can expect a possible hybrid zone to lie just east of a line passing through Otjiwarongo and Ruacana (see figure).

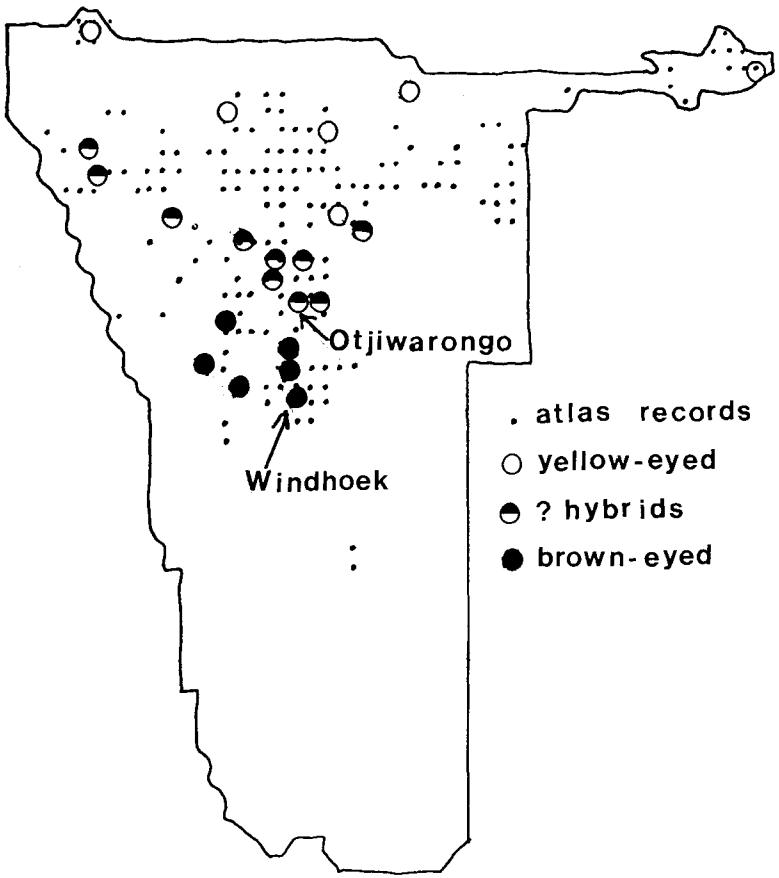
What is required now is to find the exact position of the contact zone between the populations, and I therefore ask for any sightings, old and new, of Redbilled Hornbills whose eye colour is known. Old photographs, quick checks while driving around or previous recollections will all be welcome. Please send your records to Dr Alan Kemp, Department of Birds, Transvaal Museum, P.O. Box 413, Pretoria 0001, South Africa.

The importance of the question is that this may prove to be yet another 'South-west Special', the Damaraland Redbilled Hornbill, a good species in its own right. Its known range fits that of many other endemics, and its distinctive coloration, including much more extensive pink throat patches than found in other Redbilled Hornbills, as well as possible differences in behaviour, all support this viewpoint.

It is interesting to note that the isolated East African population of Redbilled Hornbills, the nominate race T. e. erythrorhynchus, also seems to prefer drier habitats than the southern form T. e. rufirostris, and has a brown eye and white face. It differs somewhat in its

bobbing display and calls, its throat patches and details of plumage, but it may yet prove to be more closely related to the Damaraland form than its yellow-eyed neighbour. Joris Komen of the State Museum of Namibia assisted me to obtain tissue of the Damaraland form, and plans are being made to compare its proteins and mitochondrial DNA with those of the other populations, to another angle on its status. Your help in discovering the contact zone, where possible cases of hybridization can be studied, would be much appreciated.

Dr Alan Kemp, Department of Birds, Transvaal Museum, P.O. Box 413, Pretoria, South Africa.



LEAVES AND FLOWERS IN THE DIET OF GREY LOURIES AND YELLOWBILLED HORNBILLS IN NAMIBIA.

Both the Grey Lourie Corythaixoides concolor and Yellowbilled Hornbill Tockus flavirostris are well known species in southern Africa, yet information on their diets is scanty. This is especially true for information on plant material in their diet. During October 1988 both these species were seen feeding on young leaves of several tree species and, in one instance, Aloe leaves.

At CDM camp, about ten kilometres west of Tsumkwe, Bushmanland, both species were seen feeding on young leaves and leaf buds of Boscia albitrunca. Several Grey Louries could be found in Boscia trees at any one time. Leaf buds were selected in preference to leaves and considerable time was spent "choosing" the right bud, on occasion buds being picked and then rejected. Yellowbilled Hornbills were observed doing this on only one occasion, and they were not selective in their choice of leaves or buds. One hornbill (presumably male) would occasionally feed the other bird (female?) with a leaf or bud, but only after the female "demanded" the bud or leaf by hopping close to the male and extending her beak towards him.

Grey Louries were observed feeding on leaf buds and young leaves of Acacia erioloba at Leeupan in the Kaudom Game Reserve, Kavango. In the surrounding deciduous Burkea woodland they were seen to eat the flowers of Burkea africana. The flowers of this tree are probably wind-pollinated and are therefore likely to be low in nectar. The direct benefit to the birds is probably only as raw vegetable material, not the high energy sugars normally found in nectar.

At CDM Camp, a large stand of Aloe zebrina plants have been cultivated near the house. Several Grey Louries were seen foraging in this stand of plants and were initially thought to be catching insects. On closer inspection they were found to be feeding on the leaves of the plants. The soft fleshy base of the leaves was eaten first and then the central portion was eaten outwards leaving only the tough marginal spines. Several plants were reduced to a spiral of leaf "stumps" in this way.

Yellowbilled Hornbills are normally insect eaters and although Grey Louries are known to eat a range of plant parts their preferred food is fruiting material. The behaviour and observed diet of these birds is ascribed to a shortage of preferred food items at this time of the year. The high temperatures and dry conditions, and the phenology of the food plants at the time when the observations were