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Editorial

Tim Osborne

I must apologize to the members for the delay in Vol. 37 (1). It was at the printers in late January but due to unforeseen circumstances it was delayed until April. It also had a distortion error and a double entry of the map accompanying Holger Kolberg's ringing report, which was my fault. Not having a printer, I only work on my laptop and sometimes I cannot see what the final page will look like.

The rains are past and those birds dependent on insects have bred. The seed-eaters are enjoying the harvest and the large raptors are prospecting their nests as they also have lots of prey in the form of young birds. The Monotonous Larks are still singing their hearts out day and night on our farm. The African Scops Owls are also calling throughout the night. From our place we can hear 5 pairs, one of which is right outside our window. Funny how one gets used to natural sounds in the bush. When we come to Windhoek we cannot sleep with the car alarms, dogs barking and traffic, but here with a Scops calling all night we sleep right through.

From the Chairman's Report you will be able to see that the club membership is declining. If you want to keep the club viable you must also do your part and try and get new members to join.

There are a lot more sightings reported in this issue, which is a welcome change. Keep sending those in. So far this year we have added three new species to the Namibian list: Gull-billed Tern, Streaky-breasted Flufftail and European Blackcap (more on this species in the next volume).

With such musings in mind, Raju Raman, a friend and colleague at Cambridge, and I set out last August to examine weavers at three sites in Namibia: Aandster Farm, on the NamibRand property, Bakenkop Farm, north-west of Outjo, and finally Claratal Farm, south-west of Windhoek. For the possibility of working at these sites, and for their tremendous hospitality, we're most grateful respectively to Peter and Marilyn Bridgeford, Tim and Laurel Osborne, and Ekkie Freyer.

The best method of catching complete Sociable Weaver colonies, developed by Mark Anderson in Kimberley, is to creep out well before dawn and surround the nest tree with a triangle of mist-nets (more picturesquely referred to by Tim Osborne as the "wall of death"!). Shortly before sunrise, the birds are flushed into the nets, with the help of hand-clapping and invective, and processed as quickly as possible – bills are measured, parasites counted, and blood smears taken, amongst other phenotypic measures. However, no quantity of nocturnal weaver ordeals in Kimberley had prepared Raju and I for the marathon of working through four weaver colonies in two days at Outjo (with Tim's energetic help), or solid nights of processing birds in the Namib. Days later, Raju memorably tried to pass blood slides across the tent to me in his sleep, and was heard to sleep-talk about whether we would have sufficient bird-bags!

Namibian weavers certainly were an education. Statistics aside, birds in the Namib had, for example, strikingly bulbous, almost parrot-like bills, Etosha weavers were almost parasite-free, and those close to Windhoek had slender bills yet perplexingly had similarly high levels of parasite infestation to those at the desert fringe. As at Kimberley, birds in nearby colonies seemed to differ statistically in several traits. What can variation in aridity explain? The somewhat anticlimactic answer thus far must be that little can be inferred from just four sites, and I must await next spring's fieldwork, during which I hope to dash about the southern Kalahari a little, before the picture can approach being complete enough to generate convincing patterns. Certainly, there is scope for applying slowly growing understanding of fine-grained adaptation within the Kimberley population on a broader scale, and perhaps explaining the basis of the variation among Namibia's four weaver sub-species.

Further to the generosity of the people already mentioned above, I'm much indebted to Rob Simmons, Holger Kolberg and John Mendelsohn for their kind advice and support.

Red Data Book draft

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The following is a draft of the Red Data Book entry for the Martial Eagle. I would like all readers of the *Lanioturdus* to please read the draft and send me any comments, corrections, observations that will improve the document.

MARTIAL EAGLE

Polemaetus bellicosus

Endangered

Range: Widespread, uncommon Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe

Area of Occupancy: 242 956 km²

Population estimate: < 350 pr

Population trend: declining

Habitat: Grasslands, scrubland and wooded savannas

Threats: Shooting, drowning, poisons, diminishing food resource

Distribution and abundance

This species is a widespread but uncommon Afrotropical species found from the Sahel south (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994). It is locally common only in protected areas where nesting trees occur (Boshoff 1997), but it avoids dense forest habitat (Steyn 1982). It occurs right across southern Africa with concentrations in Kruger NP, and the Kgadikgadi Trans Frontier Park of South Africa, and the Chobe NP, Botswana (Boshoff 1997). In Namibia it is thinly spread throughout the country, with gaps only in the Namib sand sea and some central-south farmlands where small-stock farming occurs (Brown 1991). Population concentrations occur in Etosha NP and communal land to the west, Bushmanland (Tsumkwe District) in the east, and central Namibian farmland (Brown 1991, Boshoff 1997).

The global (African) population is un-estimated but in southern Africa the highest density populations occur on rich basalt soils in Hwange NP, Zimbabwe with

nesting pr 10.0 km apart. In the Kruger NP and surrounding conservation areas, pr are 11.0 km apart, and in central Namibia they are spaced 18.9 km apart in farmland (Tarboton & Allan 1984, Hustler & Howells 1990, Brown 1991, Boshoff 1993). In the Karoo, eagle densities are known to be highest (pr 7 km part) where farms are stocked with indigenous ungulates (as opposed to livestock) and primary productivity is lower (Machange *et al.* MS).

Two density estimates of breeding pr are available for Namibia, one inside a conservation area and one outside. In central farmland 3 breeding pr were found in 840 km² giving a breeding density of 3.6 pr/1000 km² (Brown 1991). In the 22 700 km² Etosha NPT, Osborne (in litt) estimated 13 pr (1 Namutoni Sandveld, 1 south of Namutoni, 3 on the s border of the Park, 1 in Goas, 1 at Homob, 1 at Olifantsbad, 1 Leeubron-Sprokieswood area, 1 Arendsnes, 1 Nomab area, 1 Rateldraf, 1 Kaross). This gives a lower density of 0.6 pr/1000 km² (T Osborne unpubl), but populations have not been systematically studied, and large areas of Etosha are tree-less and unsuitable for nesting.

Based on the size of the South African population which is estimated at less than 600 pr (Barnes 2000), the Namibian population with similar to lower breeding densities across an area approximately 60% the size of South Africa is estimated at less than 350 pr.

Ecology

Martial Eagles inhabit a wide range of habitats including open grassland where large trees occur, and scrubby Karoo areas to wooded savanna. In modern times it has become more common in otherwise tree-less habitat such as the Nama Karoo where it nests on pylons – (Boshoff 1993, Machange *et al.* MS). This has yet to be reported in Namibia. It avoids closed-canopy forests and hyper-arid desert but it penetrates the Namib along suitable major ephemeral rivers that flow intermittently and harbour large trees (Boshoff 1997). It is not generally found in montane areas (Steyn 1982). The diet is mainly medium-sized mammals especially hares and mongooses (63% of 403 prey) with only 8% small stock (mostly scavenged) even in areas dominated by small stock (Boshoff & Palmer 1980). In ne S Africa, however, birds dominate the diet (45%), especially game birds, with reptiles (38%) and mammals (17%) forming a smaller proportion than in Nama Karoo habitats (Tarboton & Allan 1984, Boshoff *et al.* 1990). Diet

is unknown in Namibia but is probably similar to the mammal-dominated diet of the Nama-Karoo study.

Adults are generally sedentary and are found in the vicinity of their large tree-nests year-round (Brown *et al.* 1982, Steyn 1982, Herholdt & Mendelsohn 1995). In Namibia and in the Nama-Karoo areas of South Africa (Boshoff *et al.* 1990) Martials generally begin breeding in winter with Namibian records from Apr (2), May (4), Jul (2), and Aug (2) (Jarvis *et al.* 2001);

Clutch size recorded in Namibia is invariably 1 egg (n = 7) and thus 1 young is the only recorded brood size (17 nests) but success is more difficult to gauge. In the only study Brown (1991) followed 3 prs over a 6 yr period and pairs laid on average every other year (6 eggs over 13 pr-yrs) and fledged 5 young in 6 attempts (83% success or 0.38 young/pr/yr). Only 3 young reached independence giving a lower success of 0.23 young/pr/yr - all from the same pair. From other nests in the Nest Record Scheme where young were monitored for more than 2 months, success is estimated also at 5 of 6 attempts or 83% (Jarvis *et al.* 2001).

Threats Suffers direct persecution through shooting and drowning in farm reservoirs (Steyn 1982, Brown 1991, Anderson *et al.* 1999). In one study of a small breeding population of Martial Eagles in central Namibia, 3 breeding pr were reduced to 1 breeding pr over a 6-yr period: 4 adults were found shot and another drowned in a farm reservoir. Assuming all nests found in the 840 km² study area were used at one time, the population probably numbered 5 breeding pr and the decline was at 80% was even steeper than originally recorded. Elsewhere it suffers from some poisoning in South Africa so it is likely that the Namibian populations also suffers to some extent. This was recorded for Namibia's oldest ringed bird and its probable mate (below) near Ondangwa, in n c Namibia (Greenwell unpubl). A more surprising threat is that of drowning in sheer-walled reservoirs. In southern Africa Martial Eagles ranked highest of all eagles as victims of drowning: of 65 eagles found dead in reservoirs, 38% were Martial Eagles (Anderson *et al.* 1999). These deaths were especially prevalent in more arid parts of South Africa, where an estimated 8% of the adult population may succumb to drowning (Anderson *et al.* 1999). This link with aridity suggests that drownings in Namibia may be more prevalent than recorded. Some mortality is associated with collisions with power lines (van Rooyen 1999): 10 birds were reported killed under powerlines by Eskom (S African supply company) in the 4

yr period from 1996-1999 (van Rooyen 1999); another 2 collided with the lines in the same period. The numbers killed in Namibia are unknown.

A further threat that may have a wider impact on Martial Eagle populations than the obvious mortalities uncovered in Brown's (1991) farmland studies is a general decline in suitable eagle prey which limits populations (A Jenkins pers comm.). This may be reflected in the larger than predicted territories of > 1000 km² uncovered by van Zyl (1992) and the commonly reported result of higher population densities of eagles in areas where natural prey assemblages are intact (Kruger and Hwange NPs : Tarboton & Allan 1984, Hustler & Howells 1990). This may also explain the greater eagle densities in game farms in the Nama-Karoo where large ungulates have been re-introduced compared with small stock farming areas outside (Machange *et al.* MS). The adult turnover in each area is needed to explain if the higher density areas are indeed source as opposed to sink populations.

Recovery from persecution will be low without immigration for several reasons - the small clutch size, the rather low breeding success varying between 0.23 young/pr/yr (Brown 1991), 0.29 young/pr/yr in the Kgadikgadi Transfrontier Park (Herholdt & Mendelsohn 1995) and 0.58 young/pair/yr in Nama Karoo (Boshoff 1993), and the fact that Namibian and South African birds fail to lay eggs in 66%, 50% and 38% of nests prepared (Tarboton & Allan 1984, Brown 1991, T. Osborne in litt). This is peculiar to all large species but the loss of adults that can be very long-lived (oldest ringed Namibian bird 22 yr old and found poisoned: S Braine unpubl data) is a significant blow to slowly breeding species.

Conservation status

This species is classified as *Endangered* because in central parts of their range they have declined by as much as 80% in little over 5 years through direct persecution (Brown 1991). Given that this occurred in commercial farmlands supporting mainly cattle and sheep (Brown 1991) and at least 50% of Namibia's Martial Eagles are estimated to occur on commercial farmland (Boshoff 1997, Mendelsohn *et al* 2002), it is likely that populations elsewhere have suffered the same declines. This is supported by the lack of recruitment into populations that have lost adults due to poisoning (Brown 1991). The small population estimated at less than 350 pr (or about 1000 individuals) also places this species in the

Endangered category. While it is not classed as globally threatened because of its widespread distribution (Stattersfield & Capper 2000), it is classed as *Vulnerable* in South Africa where it may have lost 20% of its population in the last three generations (Barnes 2000).

Actions

Education of farmers, especially in the small-stock farming community is a priority, given the large number of Martial Eagles that die directly at the hand of man. There is little doubt that Martial Eagles do take domestic stock but studies have shown that most items are probably scavenged and form a minor proportion of all prey (Boshoff & Palmer 1980). Some adult pr tend to be much more successful than other pairs (Brown 1991), and there is strong fidelity to nest sites (Herholdt & Mendelsohn 1995). Thus highly successful (source) nests should be identified and directly protected as they are likely to add significantly to the recruitment of pairs elsewhere where breeding is less successful (sinks). Since persecution may be limiting their population size in Namibia, education and direct protection are two important aspects of conservation. Covering of farm reservoirs in arid areas will also reduce the number of birds drowning, which is high in arid areas of southern Africa (Anderson *et al* 1999).

Finally and most important, additional research on important population processes such as adult survival and turnover, and the breeding frequency and success of colour marked birds (well) inside and outside protected areas should be undertaken. This will determine if protected areas remain sources for Martial Eagles in Namibia, and help differentiate between

(i) degraded habitat (and low prey base) or (ii) direct mortality through persecution as the reasons for a lack of recruitment and reduced populations in Namibia. These ideas are important because a low level of persecution can be sustained by an otherwise healthy population where prey and nest sites are abundant as in certain Black Eagle populations in the Karoo that are heavily persecuted (R Davies pers comm.).

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Namibia Big Birding Day 2003

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In November and December the Namibia Bird Club held a Big Birding Day like last year. This event took place for members outside of the Windhoek area on 29 and 30 November 2003 and for members within the Windhoek area on the 6 and 7 December 2003.

Congratulations to the following teams:

- 1st with 123 species: Hanjo Böhme, Rolf Adrian, Dieter Ludwig and Torsten Ludwig (Windhoek area)
2nd with 70 species: Alet van der Westhuizen, Bill van der Westhuizen and Leona Compion (Okahandja area)
3rd with 64 species: Gudrun Middendorff, Ilona Middendorff and D. Ridley (Windhoek area)

Statistics from Namibia Big Birding Day 2003:

4 team participated, 2 within Windhoek, 2 elsewhere in Namibia
14 birders entered.
A total of 309 species were identified.
A total of 187 species were identified in the Windhoek area.

Birds listed below were seen by all four groups:

Redbilled Francolin, Helmeted Guineafowl, Cape Turtle Dove, Laughing Dove, Grey Go-away-bird (Grey Lourie), Purple Roller, Yellowbilled Hornbill, Familiar Chat, Chestnut-vented Titbabbler, Marico Flycatcher, Pririt Batis, Cape Glossy Starling, Redbilled Buffalo Weaver, Whitebrowed Sparrow-weaver,

All birds listed below were seen only by some groups:

Great White Pelican, Cattle Egret, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Blacksmith Plover, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Diederick Cuckoo, Little Swift, Redfaced Mousebird, Swallowtailed Bee-eater, African Hoopoe, Pied Barbet, Rock Martin, Forktailed Drongo, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Groundscraper Thrush, Anteating Chat, Cape Wagtail, Redbacked Shrike, Palewinged Starling, Southern Masked Weaver, Lesser Masked Weaver, Melba Finch, Violet-eared Waxbill, Blackcheeked Waxbill.
I hope that next year's Birding Day attracts greater participation.