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Editorial

Another hot dry season is upon us and birding is slow as we await the rains. Soon, however, the palearctic and intra-African migrants will arrive to increase the numbers of species. Our drab non-breeding local birds will get dressed up for the ladies and identification of most of the weavers, bishops and whydahs will be a lot easier. Unfortunately, the bird guides usually only illustrate these birds in breeding dress. In Namibia we only see them dressed up for 3-5 months of the year and identification is often frustrating.

Recently I caught non-breeding Shaft-tailed Whydahs in my mist net for ringing. After consulting all the reference books I found it is impossible to sex any of the birds. either in the hand or in the field. It would most helpful if members who know of any special aids or resources for identifying Shaft-tailed Whydahs would publish that information in the *Lanioturdus* for all of us. Another bird I have been trying to sex in the non-breeding season is the Chestnut Weaver. In the hand there is no problem since the male has a larger wing length and is heavier, but free-flying in a tree then identification becomes difficult.

The new Roberts VII will be about 1200 pages and will be out in April 2005 at a cost of R799. It will be nice to have all the up-to-the–date data on the birds but it is obvious from the draft texts on the website that information is missing on many of the species. See www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za/docs/roberts.html. Perhaps after the book comes out I will try and summarize where gaps in information on Namibia birds occur so we can try and fill the gaps.

Grey Go-away Bird
Jacobin Cuckoo
Coppery-tailed Coucal
African Wood Owl
White-faced Scops Owl
Pearl-spotted Owlet
African Barred Owlet
Giant Eagle Owl
White-bellied Sunbird
Village Weaver
Fan-tailed Widowbird
Brown Firefinch
Pin-tailed Whydah
Long-tailed Paradise Whydah

New Breeding Record for Greyheaded Gulls *Larus cirrocephalus* at Kunene River Mouth, Namibia

John Paterson
Ministry of Environment and Tourism
Skeleton Coast Park, Private Bag 5001 Swakopmund, Namibia
john@paterson.alt.na

Grey-headed Gulls, *Larus cirrocephalus*, are seen regularly at the Kunene River Mouth, 17 ° 15' S 11 ° 45' E, on the northern Namibian coast. Clinning and Jensen (1979) regarded them as being common, but more recent observations seem to suggest that they are a regular visitor rather than common (*pers. obs.*). Breeding has not been recorded there.

On 26 July 2002 a Grey-headed Gull chick was noticed walking down to the water's edge of a large vegetated island in the Kunene estuary. More detailed scanning of the area revealed 3 more chicks further away from the water beyond vegetation fringe. There were several adult Grey-headed gulls in the vicinity. No other gulls except Kelp Gulls, *Larus dominicanus*, were in the area.

During a subsequent visit on 29 August 2002 a landing was made on the island and the area around where the chicks were observed was investigated. Although there were no gulls present, 6 abandoned nests were found. The nests were placed on the short spiky grass, *Odyssea paucinervus*, that covered that section of the

island. The platform was made of reeds with the cup lined with grass. The nests were situated 20 meters back from the water's edge with a minimum distance of 2 meters and a maximum distance of 4 meters separating them.

On the mud flats approximately 1 kilometer upstream of the island, 2 flying juvenile Grey-headed gulls were observed begging food from an adult. Both chicks were begging from the same adult. Presumably these chicks were from the breeding site on the island at the mouth.

Grey-headed Gulls are a winter breeding species between April and November with the peak laying period from May to June (Tarboton 2001). The recent successful breeding event of this species at the Kunene River mouth falls well within this period. Grey-headed Gulls breed regularly at the Swakopmund Sewerage Works (R. Braby *pers. comm.*). This record extends the known breeding range of this species on the Namibian coast by at least 700 km.

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Red Data Book Draft

Rob Simmons
Associate Researcher FitzPatrick Institute
University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7700, South Africa
harrier@botzoo.uct.ac.za

The following is a draft of the Red Data Book entry for the Tawny 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.

TAWNY EAGLE Status: Endangered
Aquila rapax

Range: Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe
Area of Occupancy: 237 369 km²
Population estimate: *c* 380-530 pairs, or (maximum) 1400 birds
Population trend: 50% decline in last 3 generations
Habitat: Mopane, Kalahari and arid savanna woodlands
Threats: Poisons, declining prey base, drowning farm reservoirs, vehicle collisions

Distribution and abundance
This species is widely distributed across West and East African woodland savannas, in nw Africa and as far east as India (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994). It is absent from Africa's tropical rainforests and appears again in central-s Africa, extending into arid Karoo regions of South Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982, Boshoff *et al.* 1983). From historical records pre and post 1970 it is clear that this eagle has decreased in numbers in Namibia (Brown 1991), South Africa (Boshoff *et al.*1983), and has largely shrunk into protected areas such as Etosha NP, Chobe NP and Kruger NP (Steyn 1982, Tarboton & Allan 1984, Simmons 1997). However it is more widespread than the Bateleur occurring in small numbers in both Namibia and South Africa outside protected areas, and as far s as 32° S in the grassy Karoo (Simmons 1997). In Namibia it is largely absent from the south and west, thinly spread in eastern farmlands, more frequently seen in central farmlands (reporting rate ~ 20%), and in Etosha (reporting rate > 27%) and spottily distributed through n Namibia and the Caprivi (Simmons 1997). The area of occupancy in Namibia is 237 369 km² (Jarvis *et al.* 2001).

It has been estimated that about 5000 pairs occur in southern Africa (Simmons 1997), and 800 pairs occur in South African populations (Barnes 2000), but Namibian populations are un-estimated (but see below). Population in s Mozambique number *c* 20 pairs (Parker 1999).

Nesting density varies according to soil type from 0.83 prs/100 km² on Kalahari sands in Zimbabwe to 1.2 pairs on mica-schist farmland in Namibia (Hustler & Howells 1989, Brown 1991). In Etosha NP, 21 nests sites are known in 11 400

km² of suitable habitat, a density of only 0.2 pr/100 km² (T Osborne *et al. unpubl.* data). Outside conservation areas density is similar at *c* 0.2 -1.0 pr/100 km² in South Africa (Tarboton & Allan 1984). From these figures we can estimate both the extent of the decline in population and the likely present population in Namibia

In commercial farmlands they are heavily persecuted and in one study declined 89% in less than 10 yr. (Brown 1991). The area of occupancy on commercial land is 104 411 km² (Jarvis *et al.* 2001), and at a previous (1983) density of 1.2 prs/100 km² the population in this area would have totalled about 1250 pairs. At present densities of 0.24 prs/100 km² (Brown 1991), the population will be about 250 pairs. In Namibian conservation areas (where Tawny Eagles have an area of occupancy 31 728 km²: Jarvis *et al.* 2001), and a density of 0.2 prs/100 km² (T Osborne *et al. unpubl.* data) populations number about 63 pairs. The remaining non-conservation areas (area of occupancy of 102 000 km²) holding birds at a density of 0.1 - 0.24 prs/100 km² (Brown 1991, Osborne *et al. unpubl.* data) holds 102 - 250 pairs. Thus Namibia holds a maximum of 416 - 560 pairs of Tawny Eagles (maximum ~1510 individuals).

Assuming (probably unrealistically) that no declines have occurred on communal lands or in conservation areas, the total population in 1983 would be 1532 pairs compared with today's population of (maximum) 560 pairs - a decline of 63% in the last 2 decades.

Ecology
Found mainly in open woodland savanna especially Mopane (34% reporting rate) and dry and mesic Kalahari woodlands (reporting rates average 22%), rarely found in Miombo woodland (Tarboton & Allan 1984, Simmons 1997). Its presence in the largely tree-less Karoo, and other grassland areas is explained by the fact that birds have adapted to man-altered environments, breeding on pylons and in tall alien trees (Boshoff *et al.* 1983, Tarboton & Allan 1984). Where it breeds, large Knob-thorn *Acacia nigrescens* are often used (92% of 88 nest trees in ne S Africa) in preference to most other trees (Tarboton and Allan 1984). On pylons they also chose the top-most cross bar (Tarboton & Allan 1984, Barnes 2000).

Tawny Eagles take a very wide spectrum of prey including scavenged carcasses, especially bones of plains and woodland ungulates (e.g. kudu and duiker) live-caught mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. In South Africa's lowveld reserves where more large game are available, 65% of the prey were scavenged bones of ungulates. The remainder comprised 63% birds, 34% mammals and 3% reptiles (Tarboton & Allan 1984). Tawny Eagles are known to take nocturnal mammals such as Spring Hares and Genets and an observation of a Tawny Eagle drinking in full moonlight suggests they are opportunistically active at night to take such prey (Steyn 1982). There are no published diets for Namibia. Egg-laying records for Namibia show a peak in May (16) and June (12), with a spread from March - August (Brown & Clinning *unpubl.* data). Lays 1-2 eggs (Tarboton 2001) with c/2 (n = 8) being more common than c/1 (n=3) in Namibia (Jarvis *et al.* 2001). Nestling productivity in Namibia is poorly known but averages about 0.65 - 0.78 y/pr/yr elsewhere in southern Africa (Steyn 1982, Tarboton & Allan 1984,); c/2 nests are more productive (0.81 y/pr/yr) than c/1 nests (0.50 y/pr/yr: Tarboton & Allan 1984).

Threats

The scavenging and hunting behaviour of this species makes it particularly vulnerable to the whim of irate farmers who may lose livestock to Tawny Eagles. Consequently, it suffers poisoning at both large and small carcasses (Steyn 1982, Tarboton & Allan 1984, Brown 1988) and from direct persecution (shooting and gin trapping) on central Namibia farmland (Brown 1991). Birds found poisoned were located up to 18 km from their active nest sites (Brown 1991); thus like Bateleurs they are at risk from even a small proportion of farmers who abuse strychnine in Namibia (Brown 1991). This is also apparent for wide-ranging eagles in South Africa (Davies 1988). Farmers frequently use poisons on the edge of conservation areas such as Etosha NP (Komen 2002) regularly killing vultures and some Tawny Eagles which undoubtedly came from within the park (Bridgeford & Simmons *unpubl.* data, T Osborne *unpubl.* data).

Other causes of mortality include drowning in steep-sided farm reservoirs where it is the second most frequently killed eagle in arid areas of South Africa (Anderson *et al.* 1999), and collisions with motor vehicles when they are apparently feeding on road-killed carrion (Oatley *et al.* 1998).

Obvious mortality factors such as poisons may not account for all reductions in population density, despite the good data from Namibia. Reduced wildlife populations in areas now farmed for cattle, also see less dense Tawny Eagle populations, despite poisons rarely being used in this form of farming (Brown 1988). This suggests that the reduction of large ungulates from intensively cattle-farmed areas, reduces food available for Tawny Eagles ultimately reducing their numbers. Less intensive farms however, probably retain large kudu populations.

Pesticides (DDT residues) reduce breeding success in some eagles (Davies & Randall 1989), but this has not been investigated in this species. Human interference accounted for 45% of 20 known failures in ne South Africa due to collecting of eggs or chicks (Tarboton & Allan 1984).

Conservation status

This species is classified as *Endangered* because of a suspected decline in the Namibian population of at least 63% in the last 20 years (above). Given that 3 generations in Tawny Eagles are about 15 years (Steyn 1982), the rate of decline is about 50% in 3 generations. The Tawny Eagle also has a population of about 1400 individuals in Namibia, which given its decline also qualifies it for the *Endangered* category. As a long-lived species, that produces less than 1 fledgling/yr (Steyn 1982, Tarboton & Allan 1984), this species like other slow maturing, slow-breeding species will probably decline for years to come under the high frequency of poisoning. It is not common in large protected areas such as Etosha NP (T Osborne *unpubl.* data) so conservation areas alone are insufficient to protect it. It is attracted to vulture restaurants (M Diekmann pers obs) and this may reduce the likelihood that some individuals will pick up poisoned baits, especially within conservancies where other prey types are available.

It is not classified as globally threatened (Stattersfield & Capper 2000), but in South Africa it is classified as *Vulnerable* because it is thought to have lost 20% of its population in the last 3 generations through poisoning and direct persecution (Barnes 2000). Given the declines in Namibia this may be an under-estimate and require re-appraisal.

Actions

Eliminating the frequency of abuse of poisons is one essential ingredient in preventing further population declines in all scavenging species. There are opposing viewpoints on the way forward in Namibia where poison use is high (Komen 2002). One proposal is to ban completely the poisons used for killing small carnivores from the Namibian environment (Brown 2002). This view advocates the following principles: It sets a standard that using poisons for killing predators is unacceptable and not in the national interest. It will cause the thinking farmer to choose other, more environmentally friendly methods. And when poisons were banned in western Europe vulture, populations showed a remarkable recovery. The opposite view is that the total ban is (i) impractical, (ii) threatens the agro-chemical industry and (iii) is too idealistic to work (Verdoorn & Komen 2002). The only way forward is to concentrate on stopping abuse and work with farmers to apply poisons responsibly. In Namibia it is apparent that awareness campaigns and farmer education programmes have not stemmed the tide of poisonings in Namibia, because of the continuing high rate of scavenging birds that are poisoned each year (Bridgeford 2002, Bridgeford & Simmons *unpubl.* data). The critical point is that *all* farmers need to be convinced of the need for sound farming and poison-free methods, given that it is estimated that 0.1% of the farming community is responsible for the decline of scavengers (Brown 2002). The draft Parks & Wildlife Management Bill (2002) will ban the use of poisons in predator control, and permits will be required from the Ministry of Environment & Tourism in order for farmers to use poisons in exceptional cases. The Tawny Eagle is protected under this Bill.

A research monitoring programme is required to gauge the success of awareness programmes where groups such as NARREC and REST and other NGOs are intensively targeting farmers. It will determine the success of the poison ban on scavenging raptor populations in selected parts of Namibia, and the density and breeding success of pairs inside and outside conservation areas in Namibia. Encouraging vulture/eagle restaurants where Tawny Eagles are still present on central farmland and in conservancies where ungulates are re-introduced will assist the re-population of such areas once other limiting factors such as poisons are removed.

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