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EDITORIAL

Summer has almost come and gone without my noticing it. It has been an odd summer in terms of weather but judging from my discussions with other people, the birding has been excellent this year. The thing I have noticed while putting this edition of *Lanioturdus* together is the really good numbers of rare birds that were seen during these last few months. These records raise the question of what brings these spurts of rarities about.

Is it the unusual rainfall and general climatic patterns experienced over much of the subcontinent? Is just that we are getting more reports of rarities because there are a lot more birders out there at the moment? Is it a consequence of the "Patagonia effect" described by Peter Kaestner in a previous edition of *Lanioturdus*. Whatever the situation is, we have had two new birds added to the Namibian list in the last six months. A presumed Pied Flycatcher at the Windhoek Sewerage Works (October 1998) and a Red-throated Pipit in Swakopmund (March 1999). These records may represent interesting biological indicators of broader environmental processes influencing the sub-continent. These records are interesting in themselves but seen against a background of a large number of other rare birds in the same period we have to admit the possibility of large scale climatic (or other) factors influencing their occurrence in Namibia.

So what happens to these records? Currently nothing much!! All records reported to me are put into the Short Notes section and I encourage people to write up their sightings. My feeling is that a tremendous amount of

THE COUNTS OF MONTE CRISTO

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Lets face it, after spending a weekend wader counting in Walvis Bay, the inland wetland count following on the next weekend falls a bit in the shadow of an invariably stupendous and remarkable birding experience. Back in Windhoek you scan through a map of the Khomas Hochland hoping to locate a good dam full of coots, the odd Dabchick, and maybe, a pelican!!! No point in going to the sewerage works, many other will have had the same original and adventurous idea. Leave Avis for those who enjoy panting doggies, and Otjivero – well thank goodness for Suzan Mallet-Veale. On this weekend, I am glad I took Martin Britz's advice to cover the dams and backwaters of the farms Monte Cristo I and II and Ongos north of Windhoek. These three farms lie along the Augeigas River as it flows north towards the Swakop River. Ongos farm is adjacent to Daan Viljoen Game Reserve, Monte Cristo I follows on and borders onto Monte Cristo II.

For most of its geographical course the Augeigas is normally another dry riverbed, until it meets up with one of its tributaries, the Aretaragas, into which semi-treated waters from the Goreangab sewerage plant are spewed. Although the water is semi-treated you could hardly tell unless you took a swig of them. That they are full of nutrients is truly an understatement. These waters support a prolific fauna and flora, everywhere you look there are fishes, terrapins, snakes, insects, birds of course, and a myriad of aquatic invertebrates supporting all the above. As vegetation goes, there are huge Soetdorings, Camelthorns and Ana trees growing along the margins and a dense carpet of kikuyu grass fringes either side of the river. Considering this is the only perennial flowing water body to be found between the Cunene and the Orange Rivers, you soon start wondering what has happened, or is happening, to all those aquatic lifeforms that were shaped through thousands of years to survive on flash floods and ephemeral pools. A fascinating freshwater study awaits any eager biologist

adventurous enough to travel a mere 12 km from the nations capital.

Organising the walk with the owners of the farms was a real pleasure, they were all inviting and genuinely welcoming. In fact Ms. Rothel at Monte Cristo II hoped to join us with the count and that is why we decided to start from Monte Cristo II and work our way upstream. From Windhoek it is a short, 45 minute drive. Our early start caught the baboons by surprise who were still perched right on top of the power pylons.

The dam at Monte Cristo II is not very large but it has enough variety of small different habitats to tense up any birders focusing finger. The dam is surrounded by young and older Ana trees, covered in Southern Masked Weaver nests and flocks of Chestnut Weavers. Great Spotted, Diederik's and African Cuckoos were also around calling and possibly searching for unwary potential hosts. A quick scan of the water surface yielded Red-knobbed Coot, Moorhen, Egyptian Goose and a female Knob-billed Duck. The islands in the dam had Hamerkop and Green-backed Heron standing motionless while hunting. Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper and Three-banded Plover tried their luck walking the waters edge. There are several standing dead trees, on top of which several Reed Cormorant, White-breasted Cormorant and Darter were perched, as well as a nesting Grey Heron. The dam slinks off into a well-wooded section with running water and some low sedges, where, try as we might, we could not spot a Painted Snipe. A group of 36 Blacksmith Plover had congregated along the grassy banks of the river, quite a nice sight altogether. A White Pelican glided above us, and seconds after the first biggie of the morning, a Yellow-billed Stork flew over. Not a bad first 30 minutes along 200 metres of water edge in central Namibia!

A series of flooded depressions behind the main dam were home to numerous Wood Sandpiper and Three-banded Plover, lots of Groundscraper Thrush with chicks, plus a fleeing Warthog. There is a good 3-4 km walk of cobbled river bed until you reach the dam at Monte Cristo I. The river was full of nice pools and muddy puddles with more waders including Greenshank. Along the river edge we came across several

perching African Fish Eagle, a group of six Yellow-billed Stork and four Black Stork – not too bad for central Namibia. As the morning progressed the count rose rapidly and by mid-morning we were well beyond 110 species. This was achieved without even spending time birding the riverine forest. In fact a visit to this riverine forest should be a compulsory outing for the bird club especially at this time of the year. What I found really nice is that you could walk in the shade of large Acacias, with a midcanopy close to the ground and several glades of green lush grass. We came across several noisy parties of Pied Babblers, Redbilled Woodhoopoes and Grey Louries. Rosy-faced Lovebirds were abundant, and although we missed Rüppell's Parrot, Mrs. Rothel confirmed she had seen them around the farm. We were also lucky enough to see the brown, pallid form and the more common yellow form of Icterine Warbler. Willow Warbler was also seen flitting about in a mixed flock of Burnt-necked Eremomela. With more time I am convinced this section would produce really interesting sightings. In fact, not far from here we spotted a bird I was really hoping to add to the count and expecting to see, Grey-hooded Kingfisher. But something I did not expect at all was to come across a Woodland Kingfisher. We had good views and its characteristic blue back, black shoulders and black lower mandible were clearly seen.

Nothing prepared us for what was coming at the water reservoir on Monte Cristo I. A largish flock of Cattle Egrets and Little Egrets burst off their roost in a *Prosopis* as we topped the dam wall. Along the water's edge we had several Squacco Heron, as well as Great White Egret. But would you believe it – fishing in shallow waters near the shore were two Black Egret. It has been a long time since I last saw a Black Egret, and this dam was certainly the last place I expected a reunion. The dam was literally covered with birds including Ruff, Marsh Sandpiper, Kittlitz's Plover and Blackwinged Stilt. A large flock of Whitewinged Tern fished over it.

When we finished counting the edges and islands I did a thorough scan in case we had missed anything hiding in the vegetation or on the opposite sides of the islands. I think the surprise of seeing the waters rising over one of the islands caught me completely by surprise, especially when I realised

it was the island it was sinking and the island was a large crocodile submerging. "Crocs", I muttered as we all scrambled up the bank faster than we had come down, putting a safe distance between us and the murky brown waters. By the end of the count we had seen three crocodiles in the dam, one less than 50 cm, one over a metre and a three-metre "flat dog". We also found evidence of their presence in the river, but only near pools that were deep enough to conceal their submerged bodies. So be warned, the rumour is true and we better keep it in mind for future counts.

Walking along the dam edge we came across a little pond covered in bulrushes from which the grating calls of a Great Reed Warbler were heard. During our attempt to spish it out we managed to get a whole family of Black Crake to move from one side of the pond to the other providing us with really nice views of their young.

By 12h00 it became too hot to proceed onto Ongos, though the thought and expectation of increasing our species list was rather tempting. But the heat got the better of us and we decided to return to Windhoek and call it a day. I for one would like to return to the dams at Ongos and the stream up to the fence of Daan Viljoen, possibly sooner rather than later and hopefully just as rewarding.

All in all a stonking good way of spending a Sunday morning, 130 species in total, of which 32 were wetland species. I have sent copies to all the farmers who allowed us onto their farms – our thanks to all of them for their hospitality.

