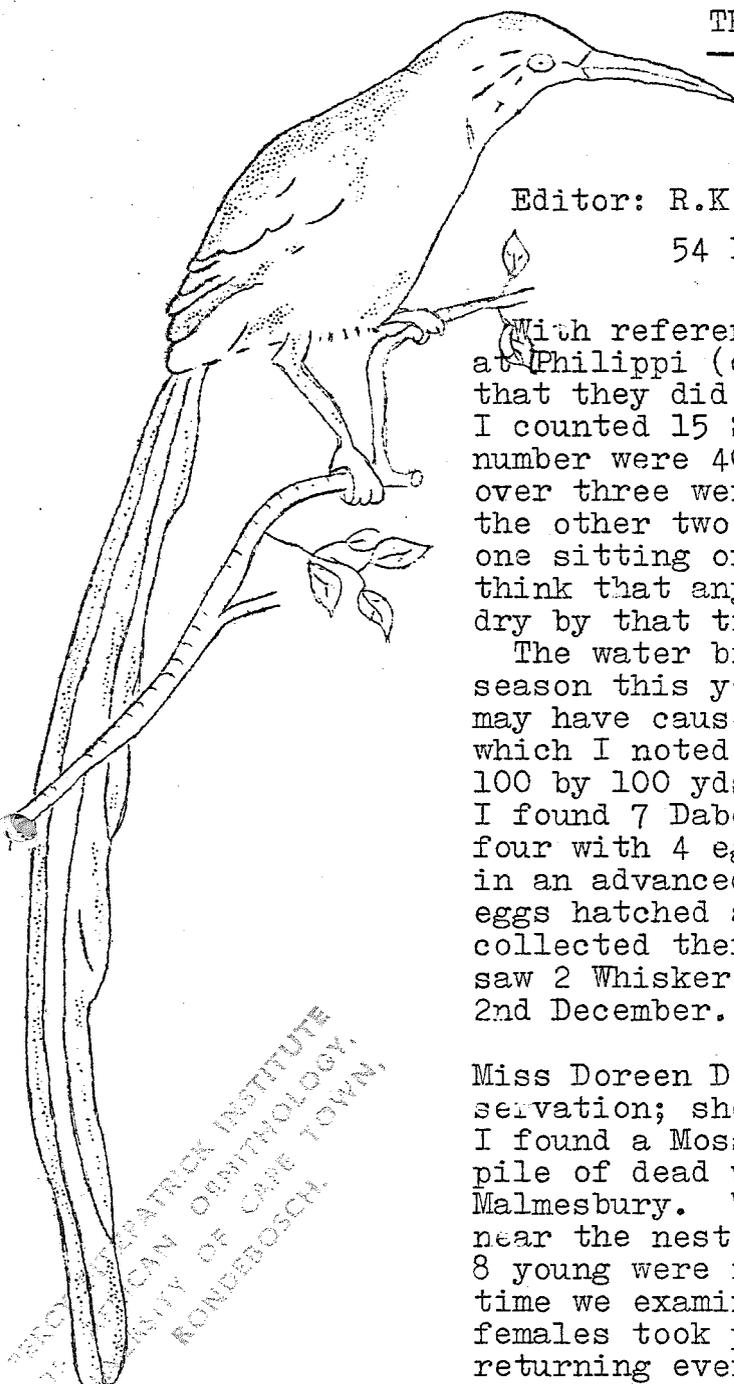


December 1961

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With reference to the absence of the Stilts at Philippi (cf. News Letter 63) I can report that they did come eventually. On 21st October I counted 15 Stilts at Jacobs Vlei, the biggest number were 40 on 3rd November. On 31st October three were sitting, one nest contained 3, the other two nests 4 eggs each. I saw the last one sitting on 19th November, but I do not think that any young grew up as the vlei was dry by that time.

The water birds must have had a difficult season this year owing to the drought. This may have caused the density of Cape Dabchick which I noted on a water-uintjie vlei (approx. 100 by 100 yds.) at Philippi. On 31st October I found 7 Dabchick nests there, one with 6, four with 4 eggs each, one with 2 eggs and one in an advanced state of building. Most of these eggs hatched although water-uintjies were collected there regularly. At this same vlei I saw 2 Whiskered Terns in breeding plumage on 2nd December.

Miss Doreen Deeks sent me an interesting observation; she writes: In October my brother and I found a Mossie nest containing 8 eggs in a pile of dead wattle branches on the road to Malmesbury. We noticed a male and two females near the nest. The eggs hatched, and all 8 young were fairly well-feathered the last time we examined them. The male and both females took part in the feeding of the young, returning every few minutes with caterpillars, two to wait their turn while the third was busy inside the nest. And what a time it seemed to take to get rid of one little caterpillar. On most occasions all three parents would be on the spot at the same time, carrying food.

Near this spot we noticed a dove making use of what we feel sure was a bulbul nest. We had seen the bulbuls slip out of the bush and found an unlined nest which quite fitted Roberts's description of a bulbul nest. The following week a dove flapped out on our approach. There was the nest with some additional strands of grassy stems strewn across the edges and two irregularly shaped pure white and screamingly conspicuous eggs. Each had a definite 'pimple' at one end. On our visit the following week we discovered the remains only, bits of shell and yolk stuck to the nest. We did not identify the dove - though I think it was a Cape Turtle Dove.

Here is Mr. Jack MacLeod's report about some Karroo birds he watched during his holiday at Fraserburg (June 23 - June 30): I was surprised to find quite a number of birds nesting. I do not know if it is usual for Karroo birds to nest in the wintertime (cf. Dr. Winterbottom's report in No. 63), but I saw nests of Mountain Canary, Ground Robin, Cape Mousebird, Three-banded Plover, and Masked Weaver all with eggs, and I noticed a Mountain Chat carrying

food/...

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food. The thorn bushes were fruiting and I watched a Thick-billed Lark feeding on the small orange berries. This bird was perched in the top of a bush and picking off berries for all the world like a bulbul. At the nest of the Mountain Canary I was astonished to see a wonderful distraction display by a female which had laid its second egg only that morning. She fluttered to the ground and crept away with her wings quivering and tail spread, then rising and flying off. Had the eggs been hardset or young in the nest this might be normal behaviour, but I was most surprised to see such a display before even the clutch was complete. A common bird in the village is the European Sparrow which was nesting under the eaves of many of the houses, our Mossie seeming to prefer the thorn bushes for its nest, so there is no competition for nesting sites. Of larks I saw Longbilled, Karroo, Red-capped, Thick-billed and Spike-heeled, and of warblers, Prinia, Chestnut-eared, Karroo Green, Grey-backed and Krombek. In all I identified 53 species.

Some more reports by Mr. MacLeod: An unusual record from Saldanha Bay was a Pied Wagtail seen there on the 14th September, 1961. This bird, while flying, called just like our Cape Wagtail.

Recently at Stompneus Bay a male Namaqua Dove was seen to feign injury when John Martin and I approached a nest containing a single newly hatched young bird. On two separate occasions while we were in the vicinity of the nest this bird was seen to creep along the ground with fluttering wings and outspread tail. On both occasions the bird was at least 50 yds. distant from the nest when it displayed.

At the end of October I found a Robin's nest with two eggs at the Eerste River. Nothing unusual in that but what I did find unusual was that the nest was in a small bush just inside the factory boundary fence and all the other bushes had been recently cut down by a gang of natives. They had discovered the nest and spared this bush to enable the bird to hatch its young. Quite a nice gesture!

Mr. Jan Hofmeyr was thrilled to see a fully grown eagle looping the loop, when he was climbing Table Mountain on 14th October.

A pair of Black Eagle appeared as we reached the top of Valken Ravine on the Camps Bay side. A stiff South Westerly breeze was blowing off the sea straight up Kasteelspoort at the time, so the eagles were gliding straight into the wind. At no time did they ever find it necessary to flap. While in the upper reaches of Kasteelspoort and gliding on the level the one eagle suddenly looped the loop quite effortlessly and proceeded on its way as if nothing had happened. I was sure I was seeing things, but in the next two or three minutes it looped another three times thereby confirming my sight as normal. The loops were all tight and executed with effortless ease with the wings outstretched, while I watched some 100 or 150 yds. away.

I can only assume that the motive for this behaviour was nothing but sheer joy and pleasure experienced by "playing" in the air. There did not seem to be any courtship significance, although the possibility of this cannot be ruled out. I would be interested to know whether eagles commonly loop the loop as it is a phenomenon I have not heard of before. Are there any other birds which perhaps do the same thing?

It might be mentioned that Konrad Lorenz in 'King Solomon's Ring' mentions that Jackdaws quite often "play" in strong winds in built-up areas in Europe. Similarly, I am sure that much of the flying of Black Swifts on Table Mountain is nothing but play. I am thinking of a specific occasion when I watched them at the top of Platteklip Gorge when a moderate breeze was funnelling up the gorge and they seemed to take a particular delight in rocketing in great arcs. Perhaps play in birds is more common than we think.

Mr. G.K. Lestranger reports on 2nd November: I had an opportunity recently to observe the behaviour of the Pigmy Falcon (Poliohierax semitorquatus) while photographing Sociable Weavers in the Kenhardt district, Northern Cape.

Two exceptionally large nests are located in the same tree there and my hide was placed under one so that I could photograph a pair of feeding weavers that invariably alighted on a branch extruding from the nest. All of a sudden the serenity of the colony was interrupted by the arrival of a male Pigmy Falcon which, as you know, is a truly miniature hawk having an overall length of about six inches. The weavers obviously live in fear of this falcon for he only had to change position on the branch on which he had alighted for consternation to reign, and I can well believe that a whole colony will vacate the nesting site when one of these miniature falcons takes up residence therein.

The falcon then entered nest after nest, remaining in some for several minutes, and, it being spring, I imagined he was in search of a suitable nesting site, but this was not so for he eventually emerged from a nest carrying a small fledgeling in his talons which he consumed on a nearby tree.

Roberts quotes these birds as feeding on lizards and insects, but they do most definitely also feed on the young of the Sociable Weaver.

One can only assume that the quest from nest to nest was in search of young of a size that could be carried away.

To my delight, the falcon at one stage sat on the branch on which my camera was trained and I was rewarded with a splendid picture.

The above report by Mr. Lestranger is especially interesting as W. Hoesch and G. Niethammer: Die Vogelwelt Deutsch-Südwestafrikas (Berlin 1940) state: It seems that the Pigmy Falcons live in friendship with their hosts, the Sociable Weavers, (in Damaraland) and perhaps are useful for the weavers by keeping away from the nests, their greatest enemies, the tree snakes.

Dr. Broekhuysen reports: Mr. Middlemiss caught a Yellow-billed Egret in the duck trap at Rondevlei on 24th October, it had a ring D 234. In the card index I found that this ring was put on this bird as a juvenile in a nesting colony at Philippi on 20th October, 1951. Ringers were P. Zoutendyk, G.J. Broekhuysen and N. Payne.

The bird was released by Mr. Middlemiss with its ring on and may be we will get another reading. This bird was 10 years plus 3-4 weeks old. The ring was still in perfect condition. It is also interesting that this bird apparently did not leave the area where it was born.

Mr. Martin reports on 19th October: The daughter of Mr. Myburgh, Clavervlei, Faure, brought home a White-eye nest which had been blown down by the wind. Later she found two small birds at the same place. Her father told her to take nest and young back to the place; this she did, tying the nest to a wire fence. Shortly afterwards the parents were busy feeding their young. Later Mr. Myburgh constructed a suitable cup-shaped container for the nest from wire and attached it to a tree close by. No sooner had he done this than the birds were feeding again. But he noticed that every now and again one of the parents would fly down to the ground, and there he discovered a third young which was then also transferred to the nest. Last reports state that all are doing fine.

Mrs. I. Taylor was quite surprised to see a White-breasted Cormorant above her when she was on the summit of Lion's Head on 28th October. It glided down to the sea and then seemed to soar up again until it was outlined against the grey clouds in the direction of the Apostles.

Dr. Winterbottom writes: The Tulbagh district has been sadly neglected by our members. On 7th December, Gordon Maclean and I went there for the day. If you take the tarred road from Tulbagh through Drostdy, you come just before the tar ends, to Theron's Bridge where there is a plantation of oaks and wattles. Almost the first birds we saw there were a pair of Olive Woodpeckers. Other birds worth noting were Paradise Flycatchers and a young Dusky

Flycatcher/.....

Flycatcher. We also suspected Masked Weavers, but were not able to confirm it.

From there we returned through Tulbagh and along the Gouda road; and then, going left at an angle of 145° on a gravel road towards the western side of the valley. We passed a large dam, on which were 3 broods of Yellow-bill duck, one or more Maccoas, Great Crested Grebes and other water birds, and then came to an avenue of tall pines, leading to a farm house. Three of these trees near the house were in a parlous state - and the reason was that they were the site of a colony of about 100 nests of Cattle Egrets, plus a few of the Little Egret. Most of the nests, which were too high to reach, held young.

Between Wellington and Gouda, on this very hot day, we noted at least a dozen Richard's Pipits, each standing in the narrow band of shade cast by a telegraph pole.

Dr. Broekhuysen received from Mr. Degenhardt ring D 2654 which was found on a dead Cape Cormorant lying on the beach at Saldanha on 22nd November, 1961. This ring was put on a nestling Cape Cormorant at Dassen Island by Mr. R. Rand on 6th December, 1952. This bird practically reached 9 years of age. The ring was still in good condition.

Mr. A.B. Hazell from Kenilworth reports hearing the Diederik Cuckoo in November and December. I heard its distinctive call at Philippi on 19th November. Would members please look out for that bird which the Check List mentions as 'A rare straggler to Cape Town.' I heard it regularly during January 1950 at Philippi, and on 18th February and 2nd March, 1950 I saw a fully-fledged young Diederik being fed by a Cape Sparrow there. Later I have heard it calling and occasionally saw it at Philippi, but never found it breeding again, although I watched the Mossie nests. But on 19th December, 1961, I saw a fully fledged young bird, with a red beak feeding in the grass there.

During my recent stay at the Breede River Mouth (Swellendam district) from 4th to 8th December, I saw a young fully-fledged Jacobin Cuckoo (black-breasted phase) being fed by a Cape Bulbul. I also saw one Jacobin Cuckoo with the white breast there. During my two short stays I recorded more than 80 species in this area which I can warmly recommend to any bird-watcher.

I wish to thank all those members who contributed to the News Letter in 1961 and ask them to continue supporting the News Letter in future. I wish everybody a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and enjoyable bird-watching in 1962.