



CAPE BIRD CLUB : KAAPSE VOËLWAARNEMERSKLUB

NEWSLETTER - NUUSBRIEF

No 103

N^o 103

January 1973 Januarie

On December 1st, 1972 Mr. C.F. Beverley of Plumstead asked me to identify a bird whose call he had taped a few days before at Constantia. When I heard the mournful three-syllabic call I was completely puzzled and could not remember having heard this very distinct call near Cape Town nor anywhere else in South Africa. Mr. Beverley told me that he had first recorded only this call. A few days later he went back to the same place and played the recording. Very soon the bird appeared and started calling, but in addition to its usual call it uttered a long giggling sound which, when I heard it on the tape, left me even more puzzled.

To solve the mystery Mr. Beverley suggested that we should go to Constantia and try to attract the bird which, he said, showed itself quite boldly.

On December 2nd, at 6.50 am. we were in the Constantia forest at the top end of Price Drive and started playing the tape. At 7.09 we heard the first call of the bird which seemed to come from far away. Within a very short time the bird flew past us several times, giving both calls and later settling on a tree nearby. I thought immediately that it might be a cuckoo, and as it appeared completely black, we looked up Roberts No. 344, Black Cuckoo. After reading the description of the voice, we no longer had any doubt that this was our bird. Soon there were two of these birds flying round and calling madly at the loudspeaker.

When I walked around a bit in order to get a better view of our Black Cuckoo, I met Mr. W.P. Batley to whom we played the tape. He recognised the call at once and told us that the birds had been in that area for about ten years and did a very good job in keeping down the hairy caterpillars.

I played the tape over the phone to Mrs. Rowan, who certified our identification and said she had heard the Black Cuckoo in the Constantia/Kirstenbosch area since the 1950s. The Cape Bird Club Check List of 1963, however, gives it only as a rare straggler, recorded from Retreat and Stellenbosch. Professor Siegfried recorded it from Jonkershoek in Dec. '69, c.f. Newsletter No. 92. The Third Edition of Roberts 1970 states under distribution: Recently in the Cape Peninsula.

A second attempt to attract the birds through playing the tape proved unsuccessful and the mist-nets which we had hopefully put up near the loudspeaker, remained empty.

It would be a great achievement to record a young Black Cuckoo to establish breeding in the Cape Peninsula. There are many Boubou Shrikes, the main hosts, in the Constantia area, but the only guide that Roberts gives, is that "Young Black Cuckoos asking for food make a 'sweet' noise."

Feeding Behaviour of Mousebirds

Mrs. Y.M. Barron, Kenilworth, sent the following interesting observation: On 20th October '71 at 7.15 a.m. one adult White-backed Mousebird, showing its red legs, settled on the end of a short branch in my garden. Another adult flew down and sat in the middle of the branch. Then a youngster flew and settled on the second one's chest and clung there fluttering its wings to keep its balance, while the second adult bird fed the little one by pushing food down its throat while it was still clinging on.

Apparently the second adult bird ran out of supplies, so it moved towards the first adult and something was passed from beak to beak, while the youngster still fluttered, clinging to the chest of the second and was fed again by the second one which had got supplies from the first.

Finally both adult birds flew off to another tree. Youngster was left clinging to a branch, looking rather non-plussed. It ate a berry or two from nearby before flying after the parent birds to cling once more to the chest of one of them expecting more food.

What Wader is that?

Just in the right season Mr. John Harwood sent the following guiding notes for the identification of these tricky little shore birds, our migratory waders from Europe. I am sure members will be most grateful to him.

Identifying Waders at Langebaan.

Early this year the Cape Bird Club will enjoy another camp at Langebaan Lagoon. Perhaps many members may be perplexed by the seemingly hopelessly obscure identification features of the waders there. ~~The identification of waders~~ ~~there~~ The identification of waders is not an impasse (the pipits and warblers are far more formidable groups!) - but the difficulties may be ascribed in the first place to the "books" - plate 18 in Roberts' is atrocious and other useful references are not generally available.

A further difficulty is that throughout the austral summer the waders are in moult. When they arrive in September they are moulting from breeding plumage (BP) into winter plumage (WP); and almost as soon as this moult is completed in December, they start moulting back into BP in February. Hopeless? No -- we simply conclude that plumage pattern is not a primary identification character for this group. I shall try to stress the general form of the bird and hope

that the following notes may be a useful vade mecum & supplement to Roberts'.

If you wish to identify a wader try to note as many of the following points as possible :-

1. SIZE: a vital character, and difficult to judge through binoculars, especially on featureless mudflats. Note also the bird's 'figure'.
2. BILL: relative length; curvature; build i.e. is it stout, tapering, slender etc.?
3. LEGS: length (short, medium, long) and colour.
4. WING BAR (in flight): conspicuous, obscure or absent; and is it in the centre of the wing or on the trailing edge?
5. RUMP (in flight): uniform white, or with central dark line, or dark?
6. BACK: spotted, streaked, scaly, uniform etc., and are the markings faint or are they conspicuous?
7. EYE-STRIPE: conspicuous, obscure or absent?
8. CALL
9. FEEDING HABITS
10. ANY OTHER CHARACTERS

Most of us are familiar with the smaller plovers (all except the Chestnut-banded occur in reasonable numbers at Langebaan), so I shall only deal with the Grey Plover. There are many waders which could pitch-up at Langebaan as vagrants from America or North Africa, the East coast or local freshwater habitats. However I shall include only those waders which may be expected, - notes on rarities belong elsewhere. The birds are arranged in three groups according to size.

1. LARGE WADERS (> 12")

- 1.1 GREY PLOVER. Fairly common. A large, plump bird with a large head. Short, straight, heavy bill. Fairly long dark slate legs. Wing-bar and white rump. WP Speckled brownish-grey above; BP More marked above, black face & underparts. In flight shows black axillaries ('armpits'). Hint of a white ring about eye. Call a lovely, liquid 'tleee-lu-ee'. Feeds by running and stopping to pick up food. Does not feed with head down.
- 1.2 BAR-TAILED GODWIT. Occasional. Very long, slightly up-turned, slender bill, with pinkish-orange base. Long grey-green legs. No wing-bar. White rump & lower back,

with light (barred) tail. WP Streaked grey-brown above; BP brick-red underparts. Slight eye-stripe. A silent bird which feeds head down, probing the mud to the full extent of the bill.

- 1.3 GREENSHANK. Fairly common, seldom in large numbers. Bill is long, slightly upturned, slightly heavy in build. Long pale green legs. No wing-bar. Conspicuous white rump & lower back. WP Greyish above, only slightly marked; BP darker. Generally grey above, pure white below. Call a characteristic clear whistle of 3 (occasionally 2 to 7) syllables 'tew-tew-tew'. Often feeding in deeper water than other waders usually with head up; sometimes searches vigorously.
- 1.4 WHIMBREL. Fairly common. Long, fairly stout bill, decurved, and definitely less than $\frac{1}{2}$ body length. Legs slaty black, medium length. No wing-bar. White rump & lower back. Back heavily streaked grey-brown. Dark streaks on crown give effect of an eye-brow. Call is a raucous, rippling 'tetti-tetti-tetti....'. When feeding brings head up between probes.
- 1.5 CURLEW. Uncommon. As for Whimbrel, but bill about $\frac{1}{2}$ body length (males have shorter bills) and no 'eye-brows'. Call is a lovely, haunting 'courli'.

See also Ruff (2.3)

2. MEDIUM-SIZED WADERS (9" - 11")

- 2.1 TURNSTONE. Not common. A medium-small, stockily built wader. Short straight, stout bill. Legs are short, orange. Characteristic 'harlequin' flight pattern. WP Heavily mottled back with blackish chest; BP markings bolder, richer, more contrasty. Call 'ticker-ticker-ticker'. Feeds in horizontal posture on the surface of exposed sand and pebbles.
- 2.2 KNOT. Common, in large flocks. A plump, short-necked wader with a medium-length, stout, tapering bill. Legs short, olive. Obscure wing-bar and pale (barred) rump. WP Slightly scaly ash-grey back, flanks 'marbled'; BP Strongly mottled black/chestnut above, chestnut below. Eye-stripe. Usually silent, occasionally a quiet 'knut'. A 'busy' feeder, keeping head down and jabbing at the mud.
- 2.3 RUFF. Rare at Langebaan. A very confusing bird! Bill is straight, medium length, light patch at base. Legs are medium/long, and vary from red through yellow, to green.

Faint wing-bar. Two oval white patches on the sides of a dark rump. WP Boldly mottled or scaled brown/sandy above; BP Browner above, copious dark mottling on neck and breast (full BP never seen here). No eye-stripe. Silent.

2.4 MARSH SANDPIPER. Occasional. A rather pale, slenderly built wader. Bill is long, straight, very fine. Legs are long; slate, green or yellow. No wing-bar. White rump and tail. Above uniform grey-brown. White face. Call a loud whistled 'tchick'. A surface feeder. Reminiscent of a small Greenshank.

3. SMALLER WADERS (<8")

3.1 CURLEW SANDPIPER. Very common. Long, decurved bill (both length and curvature are somewhat variable). Legs slaty black, medium length. Narrow white wing-bar and narrow white rump. WP Back ashy-brown, lightly marked; BP Mottled chestnut/black above, chestnut below. Eye-stripe. Call is a liquid 'chiirrp'. Feeds in a hunched posture, lifting head from the mud between probes.

3.2 LITTLE STINT. Locally common. Much the smallest wader. Bill straight, short and rather fine. Legs fairly short, black. White wing-bar, and dark line in the centre of a white rump. WP Back clearly mottled grey-brown; BP Above more rufous, rufous-tinged breast. Eye-stripe. Call a soft 'twit'. Feed in a very intent manner, keeping their bills to the mud.

3.3 SANDERLING. Common. Small, plump, pale wader. Short, stout bill. Legs short and black. Conspicuous wing-bar, dark line in the centre of white rump. WP Back lightly marked, pale grey; BP Back and chest chestnut, speckled blackish. (Note that the 'dark shoulder-patch' is not always conspicuous.) Eye-stripe. Call a whistled 'tooit-tooit'. In the lagoon the Sanderlings feed where the sand is only just exposed, furrowing their bills through the sand and probing in a 'sewing machine' fashion.

3.4 TEREK SANDPIPER. Occasional. A plump, stocky, medium/small wader. Bill long, distinctly upturned. Legs short, yellow/orange. White trailing edge to wing. Pale rump. Generally pale colour, uniform light brown back. Conspicuous eye-stripe. Call a fluty 'dudududu'. A lively bird, bobbing and jabbing bill into mud.

European White Storks in our area.

On 16th October, 1972 Mr. Lockhart observed a large flock of 55 White Storks circling fairly high over Somerset West town. This is the largest flock he has ever seen of this species anywhere. He saw them in the morning of a hot, sunny day. After about 15 minutes of circling the whole flock moved off towards the Helderberg range.

Nest-building by Flamingoes.

Gerry and Mariette Broekhuysen have sent in the following observation on flamingoes at the Strandfontein Purification Works.

On the 1st of December 1972, we visited the Strandfontein Sewage Works. One of the pans had been emptied and large numbers of Greater and Lesser Flamingoes had accumulated there, providing a magnificent sight, feeding in the shallow water, each bird reflected in the mirror-like surface. A large number of the Lesser Flamingoes were immature; as the 'Lessers' had a successful breeding season in 1971 at Etosha Pan, these may have been Etosha Pan birds.

A few days later Mrs. Munro phoned to report that the flamingoes at the Strandfontein Sewage Works were building nests. On December 7th we visited the pan again and were able to count 18 nests, eight attended by Lesser, and about 10 by Greater Flamingoes. The nest-mounds were completely surrounded by water and most birds were building. On the next day the number of nests had increased and it was interesting to see that several nests were attended by immature Lesser Flamingoes. Some adult Greater Flamingoes attended nests, but one bird was seen to have grey tibia-tarsus joints and a whitish bill, so must have been an immature bird.

We kept a close watch on developments. The number of Flamingoes gradually dropped and the Lesser became the dominant of the two and after a while were the only ones attending to nests. On December 21st we counted 27 nests with adult Lesser Flamingoes sitting on them. Things looked very promising and exciting. On January 3rd 30+ nests were counted and at one stage we saw 33 Lesser sitting. However, no eggs were laid. On February 6th large numbers of Lesser and a small number of Greater Flamingoes were present, but the nests were not occupied.

In summing up, we can say that there was an attempt to breed but that it only reached the nest-building stage. It is known that flamingoes only breed successfully if a large number of factors are optimal. Maybe in this case only some of the required factors were optimal, and these insufficient to induce the birds to lay eggs.
