

NEWSLETTER - NUUSBRIEF

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The Ornithological Sensation of the Year
House Martins nesting at Somerset West.

Mr. Lockhart reports: On 21 August 1969, at 11.50 a.m. I was fortunate enough to catch sight of 4 European House Martins (2 pairs) flying round a block of flats in the middle of Somerset West. On closer inspection, one pair of birds was seen to fly up and enter a completed nest under the eaves of the roof. Nearby another nest was in the process of construction by the other pair of House Martins in a similar position. Both nests were situated high up against the wall of the building under the eaves. The second pair was seen to take mud to the nest under construction from a gutter on the roof of a neighbouring house. The completed nest was oval-shaped and composed of dried mud with a small opening near the top for the birds to enter. Unfortunately European House Sparrows were molesting the House Martins. I was lucky enough to find John Martin available to confirm these observations and later Prof. Broekhuysen who photographed both birds and nests. It is to be hoped that the birds will breed successfully. According to Roberts' Birds of South Africa, only one breeding record exists in the Western Cape of December 1892 in Cape Town.

When this great news was announced at the Cape Bird Club Meeting 22 August, I immediately took the chance of seeing the birds myself. On the afternoon of Aug. 23rd I found the nests but not the birds. When I returned towards evening I met Mr. Martin and his son there and they showed me that the House Martins had moved from their first nesting site and were busy building new nests under the eaves of a nearby house. There were now three pairs all busy building, often two birds were clinging to the little ridge of mud which was the beginning of their new nest¹/₂. Apart from their conspicuous white rump, their white-feathered feet make it quite easy to identify the House Martins. Their twittering, behaviour and nests to me did not seem different from what I saw in House Martins in Germany, with the exception that I had never seen them collecting mud from a gutter, a duck-pond usually supplied the building material.



Spring has come.

Mrs. Rowan writes: At Neethling's dam near Vlottenberg on 13 July, the still sunny weather felt like spring to Mrs. Lipp, Dr. Bennet and myself, and the birds evidently thought so too, to judge from their behaviour. A Blacksmith Plover was plainly incubating eggs, though it had chosen to nest on a sandspit so surrounded by marshy ground that we lazily decided not to disturb it. White-breasted Cormorants had three or four nests on the drowned tree in the middle of the dam, but none were occupied, presumably because a juvenile Fish Eagle had chosen the tree as its loafing spot. It certainly had the bare branches all to itself, while the cormorants swam restlessly up and down, like a troop of soldiers, so precise was their manoeuvring, with all heads always facing the same way.

Cape Longclaws were indulging in display, rising to 20 or 30 feet and hovering on fluttering wings, calling before plummeting down into the grass again. These activities brought two birds into conflict, and they had a brief fight in the air, fluttering breast to breast and apparently claspng feet, while two others hung around on the outskirts of the fray. They also dropped to the ground and were briefly lost to sight in the rank vegetation. Then one bird, possibly one of the fighters, flew up to perch on a fence post, where it sat for a few seconds, blown out and puffed up to quite enormous dimensions for a Longclaw. Its orange throat was almost scarlet in its brilliance, and the expanded belly a beautiful yellow, while its tail was fully fanned to make a handsome white-tipped background to this bright splash of colour.

Perhaps, however, the Ethiopian Snipe were the most exciting birds at Vlottenberg that sunny afternoon. We were watching a group of four Blacksmith Plovers, when we noticed something fluttering helplessly in the grass beside them. One of the plovers poked at the moving creature with its bill, and it fluttered a little farther away. The plover seemed mildly aggressive and followed, stabbing occasionally at the other apparently disabled bird. They moved for some distance through the grass, until the helpless fluttering suddenly ceased, as a Snipe rose strongly on the wing and flew away. It circled back to the spot where we first noticed it and there was joined by a second Snipe. The two then disappeared, but within a few minutes the Blacksmith Plovers were back in the area, and the whole performance started all over again. Altogether, we watched this remarkable and prolonged distraction display by the Snipe on three separate occasions. Each time it occurred when the Plover wandered into the one specific area (possibly the Snipe had a nest there), and each time it ceased, once the bigger birds had been led away.

At 5.15, sated with good birding and beginning to feel the chill, we were on the point of going home, but the Snipe had not yet finished the treats they had in store.

As we moved towards the car, one rose high in the air and swooped in a shallow dive towards us, drumming as it came. In an instant three more birds were also on the wing, and suddenly the fields around us seemed filled with drumming Snipe. There must have been eight or nine at least, and possibly more, circling up and swooping down in rather shallow drumming dives. The performance went on for a full seven minutes by our watches and then ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Within seconds there was not a Snipe in sight.

A fitting end to a lovely afternoon.

(If Cape Town members want to hear Ethiopian Snipe drumming nearer home, I can recommend the marshy pasture of Strandfontein Sewage Farm. During July, around sunset, I watched them from the tarred Zeekoevlei road, which turns off Strandfontein Road. Stop at the turn-off to the speedboat slipway, and you will hear about half a dozen, provided no boats are drumming at the same time. Editor)

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with which every member can help.

At the 1969 Annual General Meeting of the Cape Bird Club: "The incoming Committee was instructed to arrange outings with specific work projects and to find means of encouraging individual members to adopt single species of birds for concentrated study and recording."

At the August Committee meeting it was decided to try and organise bird counts in Orchards and Red Bishop Colonies in collaboration with Members willing to assist with this work. If suitable venues can be found, members will be informed.

The Somerset West Ringing Group has been most successful in ringing European Swallows and has had most interesting recoveries (cf. Newsletters 87 and 90). Their main object is to trace the migratory routes of European Swallows in South Africa, but after more than five years their only worthwhile recovery in this respect is a bird found near Humansdorp.

In order to get more such recoveries, it is essential to find roosting places (mostly in reed-beds) of European Swallows at some distance from Aldermans Vlei (Somerset West), where these birds could be caught in large numbers. So, dear member, please look out and report any place where you see numbers of European Swallows gathering to roost for the night. The Club might then organise a Ringing Outing to such a place.

In the Western Cape most birds are now in the middle of their breeding season and this is the best time for a keen member to adopt a species of bird as his or her own bird for concentrated study. This usually turns out to be a most fascinating thing. If you want to know what can be achieved in one season, look into Bokmakierie June 1968 and read J.S. Pringle's prize-winning essay: The Common Fantail Cisticola.

Additions to the List of the Birds of the
Swellendam District (by Prof. Winterbottom).

Dr. J.L. du Plessis, a newcomer to Swellendam (ex Wits Bird Club), reports: Op 5 April '69 te Suurbraak in die Swellendam distrik het ek 'n Witrug-eend (Roberts 104) waargeneem. Daarna het ek verskeie male twee opgemerk in dieselfde dam.

Op 10 April '69 het ek 'n Skoorsteenvēer (R 81) by die Buffeljagsrivierdam opgemerk.

Beide hierdie voëls word nie genoem in "List of birds of Swellendam district" nie.

Op 1 Julie het ek die mannetjie van die Gryskopspegel (R 452) in my tuin opgemerk, en op 5 Julie in die rusplek van die Bontebokpark, oop en bloot vir almal om te sien, Klaas's Cuckoo of Meitjie (R 351), interessant was die feit dat die voël aanhoudend geroep het.

Interesting Records.

On a trip to Augrabies Falls, 5 - 16 June, Prof. and Mrs. Winterbottom were lucky enough to see no less than four Black Harriers on the way up. Two of these flew across the Berg River at the bridge on N 11, the third was a few miles north of Piketberg, and the fourth between Kenhardt and Keimoes.

Coming back they spotted two Grey-headed Gulls at Elands Bay, close to the causeway carrying the Velddrift road over the exit from Verloren Vlei.

Miss D. Clark saw a Black Harrier at the Cape Town side of Botmas Pass on 6 July. On 8 June she and Miss Bayly watched two Black Eagles at the Wemmershoek Dam.

On 28 June Miss A. Windham and Miss M. Vane saw a pair of Brown-hooded Kingfishers in Shaw's Pass, Hermanus. They had an excellent view of them from their car on the road.

On 24 May Mr. Lockhart saw one African Jacana feeding on De Hoop Vlei on the Melkkamer side of the vlei.

Notice

The South African Avifauna Series of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute was established to provide detailed local lists of South African birds. While by no means complete, the 70 numbers now published or awaiting publication give fair coverage of the western, southern and south-eastern Cape, south-western and central Transvaal and the Rhodesian plateau. What are badly needed are lists for areas (magisterial districts are the most appropriate) for: Botswana, Mozambique, South-West Africa, Orange Free State, northern Cape, karoo areas of eastern Cape, eastern, northern and north-western Transvaal and the lowveld areas of Rhodesia. We have no titles for the Limpopo valley, whether from the Transvaal, Rhodesia or Botswana, and none for the Zambezi valley below the Victoria Falls. May I appeal to any of your members with first-hand knowledge of any of these areas to submit MSS.?

Prof. J.M. Winterbottom 5 June '69.