

October 1961.

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A problem that puzzles me is the absence of Stilts near Cape Town. Since the end of August I have looked out for them especially on all the vleis around Philippi, but have never seen more than 2 or 3 occasionally at Jacobs Vlei. In 1960 I found the first three Stilt nests containing 1, 2 and 3 eggs at Jacobs Vlei on 31st August, and on 11th September there were 14 occupied nests all containing eggs. This year not a single Stilt seems to breed at Philippi.

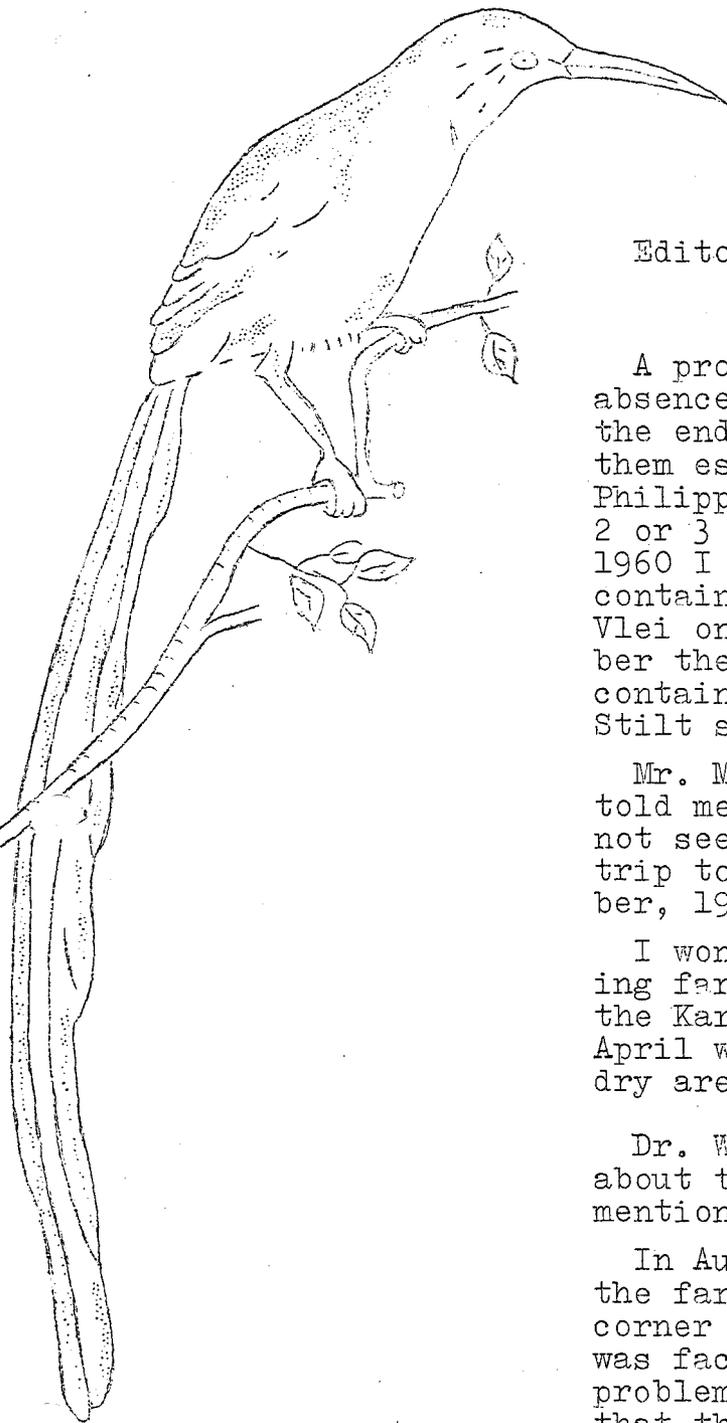
Mr. Martin with whom I discussed this, told me that he and Mr. J. MacLeod did not see any Stilts either during their trip to Stompneus Bay on 13 to 15 September, 1961.

I wonder whether our Stilts are breeding farther north this year, perhaps in the Karroo where heavy rains fell in April which caused vleis in a usually dry area.

Dr. Winterbottom sent me a report about those areas (without, however, mentioning Stilts), he writes:

In August, I went for five days to the farm Dikbome, in the north-east corner of the Laingsburg district, and was face to face with a fundamental problem. Members will probably recall that the great drought on the Karroo broke in March and April this year. Now what statistics we have on breeding seasons in the Karroo indicate clearly that most birds breed in September and October, with a slight but definite recrudescence in April, which I interpret to mean that when the normal summer rains are delayed until autumn, some of the birds postpone their breeding until, or breed again, then. In order to find out what the effects of the 1961 rains had been on breeding, Mrs. Rowan and I made a trip to Van Wyk's Vlei and Brandvlei in May. We found broods of wigeon, Kittlitz's plover, avocets and prinias, nests with eggs of Kittlitz's plover and masked weaver; and specimens of red and spike-heeled larks and yellow canary, which were collected, confirmed that breeding had been stimulated. Mr. Jack Macleod, who was in the Britstown area at the same time, also found birds breeding.

At Dikbome, similar evidence was forthcoming in the presence of fledged young of the quail, thick-billed and spike-heeled larks, long-billed pipit, fiscal, bokmakierie, Karroo robin, tractrac chat and dusky sunbird. Now the problem that arises is: Will the birds, having bred four months early (or eight months late/.....



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months late, whichever way you like to look at it) breed again at the normal time?

I believe they will. I noted song flights and territorial behaviour in Karroo and long-billed larks; and tit-babblers, crombees and lark-like buntings were in full and persistent song. Moreover, the sex organs of the larks, bunting and tit-babbler, at least, indicated that they were not yet ready to breed. On the other hand, breeding was still going on while I was there - nests being found of the red-capped lark (building), grey-backed sparrow-lark (eggs), familiar chat (eggs), Karroo chat (young), and masked weaver (eggs and young). Mrs. Rowan will be going up to the Karroo again in October to check this point; but any additional information members can give will be most welcome.

Mr. Lestrangle told me that on 20 September he saw a pair of Avocets with two downy young in the middle of the road near Pofadder (Great Bushmanland), there seemed to be no water for miles around.

On 10 September I found a breeding colony of Wattled Starlings at Mr. Versveld's farm Slangkop about 6 miles beyond Darling on the Yzerfontein road. There are approximately 35 communal nests each occupied by 2 or 3 pairs, high up in the trees of a Blue Gum plantation near the farm buildings. The males were in full breeding plumage with a long black wattle hanging under their bills and a bright yellow patch on the back of the head. The birds were busily feeding young still in the nests. According to Mr. Versveld these starlings have been breeding at his farm for several years. The Check List of Birds of the S.W. Cape states of the Wattled Starling: A rather uncommon visitor in the south-west and probably not breeding.

When Mr. Martin and Mr. MacLeod visited the Slangkop colony on 15 September they found a second breeding colony of Wattled Starlings along the road about 2 miles nearer to Darling; I had seen about a dozen Wattled Starlings sitting on the fence there on 10th September. Mr. Martin checked one of the nests there, it comprised 2 breeding chambers with 1 and 3 eggs respectively. On 17 September I checked another nest in this colony which had 2 chambers with 4 eggs each. This seems to indicate good rains for this region as it has been found in South-West Africa that Wattled Starlings lay 4 eggs if the rains are good but only 3 if the rains are poor.

I wish to draw the attention of members to the Wagtail Investigation sponsored by The Percy FitzPatrick Institute (cf. The Ostrich; December, 1960, page 177). Dr. Broekhuysen sent me a note showing what surprises you may expect even from our common wagtail.

Cape Wagtail 502/05236 ringed by Mr. R.A. Brown on 26.4.61 at the Athlone Sewage Farm was found inside a factory at Paarl in August 1961. This shows that even wagtails may sometimes cover considerable distances. When Mr. Brown ringed the bird it was an adult.

Dr. Winterbottom sent the following appeal:

The Percy FitzPatrick Institute is very anxious to acquire a complete run of the Cape Bird Club News Letter and at present they lack Nos. 20-40 incl., 45, 48, 51, 53, and 55. Any member who would be prepared to donate all or any of these numbers to the Institute would be conferring a considerable benefit upon it.

Mrs. E. Chaundy saw a pair of Stanley or Blue Cranes along the road from Klipheuwel to Durbanville; Blue Cranes have been reported from that area before.

Dr. Winterbottom sent an interesting note about the Clapper Lark:

I have always found that the Clapper Lark is an early bird and the earlier you go out, the more and the more often you hear it "clapping". This has been my experience in localities as far apart as Cape Agulhas and Philipstown and with the races marjoriae, apiata, adendorffi and hewitti; and I think most birdwatchers would agree that it is normal. I was therefore somewhat astonished, when camped in the new Bontebok National Park, near Swellendam, in August to find that the local birds (subspecies algoensis) did not behave in that way at all. I remember at Leipoldtville, hearing adendorffi performing about 5 a.m., when only the first streaks of light were showing: but at Swellendam, the birds did not begin before 9.30 or 10.00 and went on until 11.30 or later. They make up for their late rising by having a second session in the evening and I often heard their "whee-oo" call alternating with the "Good Lord, deliver us" of the South African nightjar.

Several possible explanations may be advanced: (i) meteorological -early mornings at Swellendam were mostly either overcast or with a heavy ground mist and the birds did not start up until the sun broke through; (ii) a local tradition of the Park birds; (iii) a subspecific variation in habit; (iv) the earliness of the season. Perhaps members can at least dispose of some of these explanations from their own experience?

Dr. Broekhuysen is waiting for arrival records of migrants from members. My swallow records are: White-throated Swallow at Mud River 20 August; Pearl-breasted Swallow at Philippi 29 August; Larger Striped Swallow at Philippi 1 September. Cape White-rumped Swift back in nest at Plumstead on 3 September, they are laying earlier than in 1960 when the first Swift egg recorded was laid on 10 October. This year a pair at Plumstead had 2 eggs on 1 October, and the pair at Philippi had the first egg on 30 September, 1 October they missed and will probably have 2 on 2 October. Larger Striped Swallows lay normally, one pair at Philippi (which is back at the same nest for the fourth successive season) had a full clutch of 4 eggs on 26th September (last year on 21 September), and a pair at Plumstead had 3 eggs on 29 September.

May I remind members of Mr. Martin's Nesting Records as well as of Mr. Morgan's Red Bishop Bird Investigation, both schemes need the support of all members.