



CAPE BIRD CLUB : KAAPSE VOËLWAARNEMERSKLUB

NEWSLETTER - NUUSBRIEF



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February 1966 Februarie

From 14 - 18th December I had the pleasure of staying with Mr. Boddam-Whetham on his farm Kirklington, near Ficksburg in the eastern Free State. My main object had been to watch the Long-tailed Widows which, owing to the terrible drought, however, did not breed in their usual numbers. Even so I was shown some nests and could see the males displaying.

I had not been in this area before and did not know what rarities would be in store for me, and never in my life had I been out with a bird-man who knows his area as thoroughly as Mr. Boddam Whetham does. Like a conjurer he produced one after the other of the species I had marked as unknown to me on his list. It started with the Lesser Honey-guide in a tree plantation near the farm house; in the grasslands and fields I had excellent views of the rare Rudd's Lark, which, owing to its very restricted range, I had never dreamt of seeing; there I also saw a family of the beautiful Blue Korhaan as well as the only White-bellied Korhaan occurring on the farm; the only Red-collared Widow male present was shown to me; and at dusk on my last day I was carefully led up a small dam wall to see at the water's edge 8 - 10 of the lovely little Quail Finches, males as well as females,

which had just started to arrive in the area. During the 3½ days at the farm we saw 104 species, nine of which I had not seen before.

During the whole trip to Kirklington via Graaff Reinet and Bethulie and back via Queenstown and the Garden Route I counted White Storks. The total number was about 740 of which only four were seen north of the Orange River at a dam near Kirklington. The other parts of the Free State through which we travelled, especially along the road Winburg - Bloemfontein - Smithfield, were so dry that they could not support the storks usually seen there in summer. Their absence there probably accounted for the many we saw in the Cape with maxima near Calitzdorp (80), Middelburg (250) and between Albertinia and Riviersonderend (300). These White Storks must have been in the area Riviersonderend to Mossel Bay for quite a time. Dr. Broekhuysen saw many of them there at the beginning of December and Mrs. Murray reported about 400 near Riversdale on January 28th, 1966.

When I passed through this area on 22 December I noticed several Wattled Starlings carrying food. As they were flying along the National Road it was easy to locate their nesting colony in some Blue Gum Trees next to the road about 10 miles west of Riversdale. The young must have been rather big already, as their loud food-begging calls could be heard from the nests.

Miss Clare Robinson saw about 300 White Storks on her return from Cape Agulhas at the beginning of February.

BLACK HARRIER RECORDS IN OUR AREA.

Mr. Siegfried writes: Professor Winterbottom's delight at seeing a Black Harrier near Wellington (Newsletter 79) has prompted me to check my records for this species in the southwestern Cape for the year 1965.

Here they are: Caledon Dist. 5 Oct. and 8 Nov.
Velddrift 24 Aug. Darling 24 Aug.
Agter Paarl 11 June Malmesbury 16 May
Klapmuts 3 April
Stellenbosch (all in the same area) 2 Jan.,
20 July, 1 Aug., 2 Aug., 20 Sept. and 27 Nov.

The Stellenbosch records are the first I have for the species in five years of observation in the district. This, I am pleased to say, perhaps supports the statement in Roberts - "A rare species, once thought to be becoming extinct but seen quite regularly recently."

Now that the nesting season is over, I can say a little more about the unusual nesting attempt made by a pair of Black Harriers reported in the last newsletter. The somewhat aberrant attempt was mentioned only briefly then, as I had hopes that the birds would try again. To my knowledge Black Harriers normally nest on the ground in reeds or sedge and, according to farmers, in the uncultivated areas of natural vegetation in wheat fields. The attempt to build 40 ft. up in a grove of Spider Gum Trees is therefore regarded as very un-harrierlike. The small grove of gum trees is on a low hill near a bare earth dam used for irrigation; the slopes of the hill are almost entirely clothed with grape vines and lead down to the Stellenbosch golf course. All my Stellenbosch records come from this area - the bird was seen to quarter low over the course and vineyard. Only on the morning of 1st August and the following day more than one bird was seen. The day that the nest was found, one bird was seen high over the gums and another came in low over the dam carrying a stick - this bird stood on the nest platform briefly, dropped the stick and flew off; by this time the other bird had disappeared as well. On my next visit the nest platform had disappeared. Since then I have seen lone birds of the species in the area on two occasions.

CLIFF SWALLOWS AND THEIR TENANTS.

Mr. Miles Markus from Pretoria mentions two more species which may be included in Mr. Martin's list of birds which sometimes breed in Cliff Swallow nests (cf. Newsletter 79):

"Grey-headed Sparrow and Red-headed Finch. About a dozen of the latter were seen to fly from Cliff Swallow nests situated under a culvert near Rouxville, Orange Free State, on 30 June 1960, where they were breeding during the swallows' absence for the winter."

NESTING OF WHITE-WINGED SEED-EATER.

Mr. P.S. Lockhart of Somerset West, one of our new members, sent me a most interesting and very rare record; he writes:

On the morning of 25 November I discovered a nest of a White-winged Seed-eater in the fork of a wild Protea tree about 5 ft from the ground. The hen was on the nest, and I approached quite closely before she flew off. There were three well-feathered young in the cup-shaped nest which, on the outside, was composed of reddish-brown fibrous vegetable matter and lined internally with whitish down from proteas.

On the afternoon of the same day Mr. John Martin accompanied me and we were pleased to see that the hen bird was sitting. My next visit was on the morning of 30 November and I found that the three young had vacated the nest, but that there was one unhatched egg in the nest which I had overlooked before, because the young had been sitting on it. The egg is white with a slight blueish tinge, heavily streaked with purplish black marks, especially at the thick end. Mr. D. Wood, ranger of the Helderberg Nature Reserve where the nest was found, gave me permission to take the nest with the addled egg which was handed to the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute.

Mr. Jack MacLeod sent the following three records:

TCHAGRA SHRIKE AS CUCKOO HOST.

In the revised edition of Roberts no mention is made of the Tchagra Shrike acting as host to the Jacobin Cuckoo. In a shrike nest, on the farm Melkkamer in the Bredasdorp district, there was a white egg together with two normal Tchagra eggs. The white egg was very much larger and I attributed it to a Jacobin Cuckoo as two birds of this species were seen in the area. One bird was all black with a white wing spot and the second was white below (see illustrations 348 and 349 in Roberts).

THREE ADULT ROCKJUMPERS AT SAME NEST.

At two of the three Rockjumper nests which I found this year, three adult birds (two males and a female in each case) were feeding the two young. John Martin recorded this unusual habit in "The Ostrich" and it would appear that this occurs more frequently than one suspects.

RECOVERY OF EUROPEAN SWALLOW.

One of the European Swallows ringed at Aldermans Vlei on 28 December 1964 was found dead on 1 June 1965 in Russia 50° 48' N 35° 18' E near Krasnopolie.

DARLING AREA BEE-EATERS.

Mr. P. Tongue reports: The last time I saw the Bee-eaters hereabouts, they were mainly concentrated in a quarry in the white limestone about 2 miles along the Geelbek Road. When I went to have a look about November 1965, I saw a few on the Darling-Ysterfontein Road about 3 m. from Darling, but the original quarry had been greatly disturbed and opened up, and though there are still a lot of holes there was only a pair of birds. Road-widening has made a wide turning and/or parking area exactly at that point, and egg shells (domestic, not Bee-eaters) in the road suggested that it was used for picnics.

I was there again on 20 December and saw no birds at all at this site. What I did see, however, was that they appear to have spread widely all over the low veld between the Geelbek Road and the coast, and I saw about ten in Ysterfontein itself and small groups along the road as far as the Geelbek turn. About 3 m. from Ysterfontein a pair were seen carrying food to a point apparently on the ground, and here there was a nesting hole in a low earth bank about 18 inches high; the hole itself was only two inches from the ground. Having seen a very large boomslang not far away, I wondered how long the nestlings would survive.

Almost at Donkergat, where the road, having come in sight of the Atlantic again, runs down to meet a westward-bearing arm of the lagoon of Saldanha Bay, where a dozen Sacred Ibis INSIDE a wire netted enclosure, snatching food from a trough in company with half a dozen pigs. This looked quite wrong in such hieratic-looking birds.

The following two observations come from Mr. R. Siegfried, Stellenbosch:

CANNIBALISM OF YOUNG EGRET.

While ringing egrets at a heronry at Paarl in November 1965, we caught a juvenile Night Heron about 6 weeks old. On being handled this bird, like other herons when alarmed, regurgitated a young Cattle Egret. The nestling weighed 150 gm and was estimated to be about two weeks old. The corpse was intact and with the exception of the injured skull had been swallowed whole.

ALBINISTIC SHELDUCK.

On 27 January 1966 two of my assistants, while ringing Shelduck and Egyptian Geese at Vogelvlei/Gouda, reported seeing a leucistic or albinistic Shelduck. The bird was uniformly coloured pale creamy-white and stood out

among a flock of its normally coloured fellows.

GARDEN BIRD COUNT.

For the information of those taking part and others interested, there are nineteen people at present sending in regular returns, distributed as follows:

South West Cape: Cape Town 6; Somerset West 3;
Betty's Bay 1; Paarl 1

Eastern Cape: Port Elizabeth 1; Uitenhage 1;
Stutterheim 1

Natal: Tongaat 1; Port Edward 1

Orange Free State: Guntree 1

Rhodesia: Bulawayo 1

S.W. Africa: Windhoek 1

We obviously need many more helpers. Although the Transvaal is at present unrepresented, we hope to have several contributors soon. It is particularly in areas where there are a number of contributors that we can hope for significant results. This does not mean that more isolated records are valueless - they can be most important in checking conclusions drawn from other areas, and indicating whether changes in numbers are widespread or merely local. Apart from that, they can throw light on the geographical variation in the species of garden-frequenting birds.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank those who have already responded and to say how much we at the Institute appreciate what they are doing.

J.M. Winterbottom, Director,
Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African
Ornithology.

S.A.O.S. CAR STICKER.

The Council of the Society has decided to issue a car sticker to those members who wish for it. The design, in white on black, shows a Blue Crane, with the Society's name in English and Afrikaans in a circular band round the outside.

Stickers will be issued free to members who apply for them to:

The Hon. Secretary, S.A.O.S.,
c/o Percy Fitzpatrick Institute of African Ornithology,
University of Cape Town,
RONDEBOSCH.

GREY PHALAROPE SEEN AGAIN AT TAMATIE VLEI.

Mr. D. Pelteret reports: On 12 January 1966, Bruce Mackenzie and I saw a bird at Strandfontein Sewage Works which we are positive is a Grey Phalarope. Our attention was drawn to the bird because it was swimming on its own some yards from a large group of waders. Although there was a stiffish south easterly breeze blowing the bird did

not allow itself to drift to the shore where the other waders were. It had a shortish, straight black bill. The body colour was white with a grey smudge behind the eye which according to James Fisher: Bird Recognition I, is a characteristic of the non-breeding plumage.

In Newsletter 77 Mr. A. Morris reported seeing a Grey Phalarope at Tamatie Vlei several times from 13 to 27 March 1965.

Mr. Pelteret and Mr. Mackenzie visited the Paarl Sewage Farm on 22 January and were fortunate in having superb views of the Jacana which has been reported there several times previously. Also of interest was a Cattle Egret with its wings tinted a pleasant shade of light blue. The painting was done very artistically and it really looked like some new and exotic species of egret. The bird had a ring on its leg. (This is the first report of a colour-marked Cattle Egret sent to me. In Newsletter 76, December 1964 Mr. R. Siegfried asked for reports of colour-marked egrets. Let us hope that he got some reports.)

FLOCKING OF BIRDS.

Mr. P. Lockhart from "Ridge Acres", Somerset West reports:

On 3 January at 4 p.m. I observed a flock of 18 Pearl-breasted Swallows which flew and rested on the telephone lines in my garden together with 6 European Swallows. This is the largest gathering of Pearl-breasted Swallows I have ever seen at the same time.

On 8 January a flock of 21 Larger Stripe-breasted Swallows flew over my house and on to the Helderberg. On the same day a large assembly of eight Hoopoes took place on my lawn. My family spent the best part of the afternoon watching these eight birds, voraciously eating ants.

On 29 January Mr. Pelteret was umpiring a cricket match on Greenpoint Common. He and the players were oppressed not only by the excessive heat but also by a plague of flying ants which invaded the field at about 5 p.m. followed by a party of 50 - 60 White-rumped Swifts. This made the game rather confusing as one was at times not sure whether it was a cricket ball or a swift coming towards one. They must have spent about an hour hawking over the field, but they did not do their job very efficiently as he still got ants in his hair, ears and clothes.

The Editor of the Newsletter wishes to thank all those members who contributed to it during the past year and extends an invitation to send in more material to them as well as all the other members of the Cape Bird Club.

Many thanks are also due to the Director and the Staff of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute and the Honorary Secretary of the Cape Bird Club for their help in duplicating and dispatching the Newsletter.