

Namibia Bird News



No 8, March 2014

New Year, new...

It feels like New Year was only yesterday, and yet, a quarter of the year has already passed before I even could wipe my eyes.

The year started for me, as usual, with the wetland bird counts but this time I managed to slip in a trip to the Kunene Mouth. It will be part of Namibia's contribution to as complete as possible a count of the East Atlantic Flyway, an initiative organised by Wetlands International and BirdLife International in order to determine the status of wetland bird populations on this very important flyway for migratory birds. The results will be very interesting indeed.

On a very positive note, rain has returned to Namibia! I believe it is very patchy and some farmers are enviously eyeing the greener grass on the other side - but at least we are not having another dry year like the last one. Lets hope that our birds respond to the rain too and provide us with many hours and days of excellent birding.

Happy birding!
Holger



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Paul van Schalkwyk

It is with great sadness and shock that we learned about the untimely death of Paul van Schalkwyk. Paul was an avid supporter of Vultures Namibia and generously gave his time, equipment and photographs to help conserve Namibia's vultures. Our sincere condolences go to his wife, children and family. RIP Paul, you will be missed!



Vulture Ringing in the Namib

by Chrissie Madden

In October last year I had the most amazing opportunity – to accompany Holger and volunteers for Vultures Namibia in tagging & ringing Lappet-faced Vultures in the Namib-Naukluft Park. We met the team under a tree in the reserve. Wildebeest were grazing in front of us, and silhouetted gemsbok wandered over the dunes in the distance. We were told to grab a tree and make ourselves comfortable. We met all the volunteers, interesting people from diverse professions, but all like-minded with the passion for the conservation of vultures. Around the campfire Holger thanked everyone for their contribution, explained the general process of vulture ringing, and ended with ‘Holger’s rendition of vulture songs’ made-up in the field ~ ‘Ag, please Peter won’t you take us vulture ringing’. We were in stitches! A great start to what I could tell was going to be a lifetime experience.

At 7am we were rolling! Packed up and eager, our nine car convoy left for our first vulture nest to find a chick. Driving along the trees on the plain we arrived at our first vulture nest, in a small 5 meter thorn tree. This was the first time I saw the process of ringing a vulture chick. The vulture bakkie (the mobile processing table with all equipment) took out a large pole with a mirror on the end and popped it over the nest. There it was; a vulture chick in a messy nest, sitting right on the treetop. The ladder got shoved into the branches of the tree and Holger climbed up, gently tucked the chick into a velcro bag, and carried it down the tree like a little parcel. When you think of a chick, you think small, blind, and mostly featherless. A little squishy and ugly even. Not a lappet-faced, no way. This looked almost exactly like an adult, except it had some down feathers fluffed over its folded lappets, which added to its cuteness. The chick was placed at the back of the bakkie and surprisingly didn’t flinch, didn’t try to fly away, it just sat there looking at us with those big black eyes and long eye-lashes. The huge bone-coloured beak was impressive, and its talons were as big as my hands. I never thought I’d think of a vulture as cute!

Holger and the volunteers knew the ringing process by heart and it ran smoothly. First the wings and tail are measured, then a metal SAFRING ring on the right leg. A blob of cotton-wool soaked in dettol, the affectionately named ‘apricot’, was dabbed onto the bend in the wing for disinfection. Clip – the tag was in, and the bird acted like nothing happened. It is only chicken skin after all, and the chick seemed completely relaxed. We weighed the vulture and placed it gently back into the nest. We all had the chance to climb the nest and see the chick in its natural habitat. These birds are black, nest on the treetop (hence no shade!), in the middle of the oldest desert in the world. How these birds thermoregulate is amazing.



A very chuffed Chrissie with ‘her’ first vulture.



This was a high tree!

This was an unexpected treasure on this trip – We reached our next vulture tree, and Holger said “Chrissie – go fetch”. It was my turn. I climbed up the tree and saw this beautiful creature cowering in the nest. You can tell they have no natural predators as it looked perplexed at my presence. I stood with one leg into the nest, then slowly the other. That bunch of loose twigs and branches were surprisingly stable, and it held my entire body weight, plus an 8kg vulture. I slowly put the velcro bag over his eyes, placed my hand on its back to secure it and bundled him up into a neat package, which I brought down to the vulture bakkie. Holger patiently assisted me in collecting all the necessary data, including the correct procedure of tagging. In just a few minutes I had experienced something life-changing – my first up close & personal vulture. Holding this vulnerable species made me think of how lucky I am, and if only more people could see how fascinating vultures are, how each part of the body has evolved for a specific function, maybe they wouldn’t be under such threat of extinction. The rest of the trip was absolutely eventful – we drove over plains, riverbeds, to the deep-red dunes of the Tsondab Vlei, and through ‘deadvleis’ where the river changed its course, leaving the trees to die of thirst. We camped at the base of some

dunes on the Tsondab Vlei, ate a fantastic Namibian Rietfontein lamb potjie (thanks to Hanno) and set out the next day to find more vulture chicks. That day two of the chicks flew from the nest as we approached. Luckily a volunteer was teaching me all about the desert “morning newspaper” – tracks from all sorts of creatures in the sand- when the vulture flew and landed close-by.

Each day we drove through rough terrain, found the nest, watched the strong men assembled the ladder and climb into the nest. We had to endure difficult 4x4 terrain to reach the vulture nests. They really are difficult to access, and highly spread out, which shows the large home ranges of these species. Some trees were ridiculously high, and I’m relieved no chick was in the >15m trees. After lunch under the shady riverbed trees, we said good-bye to half the crew (they do this thing called “work”), while the rest of us continued to the northern part of the Namib-Naukluft reserve.



Chrissie being taught how to ring a vulture chick.

The next day we drove for miles, without a tree in sight. The vulture bakkie stopped and ramped up and over a dune – much too steep for our cars, which stayed behind. In the middle of two dunes, literally in the middle of no-where, a single tree managed to grow, and a Lappet-faced Vulture decided to make its nest. Well done to the aeroplane observers for spotting this one! It was my turn again to get this chick, and I was a little nervous. Seven meters doesn’t seem high, but it felt endless. As I approached the nest the monster chick was feisty, spread wings with his beak open. That could do some damage. I was scared it would try and bite me and I’d fall off the ladder from reflex. It’s all part of the experience I thought, and carefully tucked the chick in the bag and brought it safely to the ground. It was a big one – 8kg, nice and strong, it will fly far and prosper, tag number L437.

The last day we drove far, over plains with thousands of Hartman’s zebras congregated on the slightly more nutritious plains. The scenery kept changing, with different shades of greens and yellows, framed by the red and brown mountains in the distance. We arrived at the last chick of our trip, and Holger went to fetch it. It was not pleased at all with the ‘new bling’ Holger wanted to add to his feathers, and Holger’s hand got nailed with a huge talon. My mono-lingual father was highly impressed with the colourful curses in three different languages! Never a dull moment. The last night was at a beautiful ranger’s camp, with quiver trees on the koppie. We cheered and thanked Holger and Vultures Namibia for this amazing opportunity. Although this was immensely fun, it was also tough and quite challenging. It’s encouraging to see such dedicated and professional people leading the battle to understand vultures and prevent these magnificent birds from extinction.

A huge thanks to Holger and all the others for a memorable trip!



The convoy in the dunes.



Enjoying the sunset at Tsondab Vlei.

Editorial note: Chrissie has since taken up gainful employment with the Albatross Task Force in South Africa. We wish her success in this venture with one of the most threatened groups of birds in the world!

10th Annual Conference of the Birds of Prey Programme

The Birds of Prey Programme (BoPP) of the Endangered Wildlife Trust will hold its tenth Annual Conference from 19 to 23 May 2014 at El Dorado B&B and Camping, near Etosha National Park. The day-and-a-half long meeting will be preceded by a workshop on vultures and poisoning and an optional visit to Etosha National Park.

At the conference feedback is given on the various projects hosted by the BoPP (and this includes cranes and Ground Hornbills) and it is also an opportunity for post-graduate students to present their research work. The meeting is attended by many of southern Africa's bird of prey experts and provides an excellent platform to make contacts, exchange experiences and form networks. You do, however, not have to be an expert to attend—if you are interested in birds of prey and want to hear and learn what is happening in terms of bird of prey work in southern Africa, then this is a meeting you shouldn't miss.

The cost for participation is N\$950 per person (this pays for the venue, lunch and two teas a day) and the trip to Etosha will cost you N\$450 per person. Deadline for registration is 15 April 2014. If you want to give a presentation or need more information please contact Andre Botha andreb@ewt.org.za



CONSERVATION IN ACTION



Martial Eagle with Guineafowl prey photographed in the Huab by a client of Hugo Haussmann.

These breeding Paradise Flycatchers were photographed by Hugo Haussmann in his garden in Otjiwarongo. The interesting observation here was that a youngster, probably from the previous brood, appeared to be assisting the two adults.



Bird Atlas Update

It's a new year and judging by the number of ORFs I've received since January there is no weakening in the enthusiasm for atlasing. It amazes me that nobody seems to get disheartened when they get sent 30 ORFs which are dutifully completed and forwarded to me—even if it is the umpteenth time you get an ORF for the same species for the same pentad!

A group of us spent the first week in January in north-eastern Namibia and we managed to complete quite a few atlas cards although the primary objective of the visit was to do wetland bird counts. At Kaisosi Lodge near Rundu we managed 27 species notwithstanding severe interruptions by rain. Next stop was the Mahango/Buffalo area where we managed to get 81 and 90 species in two pentads. Finally, on the Kwando we managed 112 and 79 species for the two pentads we covered.

There are several long weekends coming up, starting with the independence weekend at the end of March, and this is an ideal opportunity to get some atlasing done. I am planning to visit some virgin areas but also some previously atlased areas and will hopefully be able to make a serious contribution towards the atlas. The Namibia Bird Club is planning outings for every long weekend, so there too, is an excellent opportunity to get some atlasing done.

In the mean time we have snuck up to 521 pentads covered or 4.9156% of the total with 86 active observers having submitted 1395 cards. Well done, keep 'em coming!

Keep atlasing!

Holger Kolberg

Regional Atlas Coordinator for Namibia



Calendar of Events

21 to 23 March 2014: Namibia Bird Club outing to farm Ovita, contact Gudrun gudrunm@iway.na.

26 March 2014: Namibia Bird Club annual general meeting at 19:00 at the Namibia Scientific Society, contact Gudrun gudrunm@iway.na.

12 April 2014: Namibia Bird Club at the Biomarkt.

13 April 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at the Gammams water works.

18 to 21 April 2014: Namibia Bird Club Easter weekend outing to Ganab.

27 April 2014: Namibia Bird Club day outing to farm Wildbad.

11 May 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at Avis Dam.

19 to 23 May 2014: EWT Birds of Prey Programme annual meeting at El Dorado B&B near Etosha NP, contact Andre Botha andreb@ewt.org.za.

24 to 26 May 2014: Namibia Bird Club long weekend outing.

29 May to 1 June 2014: Namibia Bird Club long weekend outing.

8 June 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at the Gammams water works.

22 June 2014: Namibia Bird Club day outing to farm Neuheusis.

13 July 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at Avis Dam.

19 and 20 July 2014: Walvis Bay wetland bird count.

26 and 27 July 2014: Wetland bird counts inland.

10 August 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at the Gammams water works.

18 to 24 August 2014: 26th International Ornithological Congress, Tokyo, Japan, website ioc26.jp

24 to 26 August 2014: Namibia Bird Club long weekend outing.

14 September 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at Avis Dam.

28 September 2014: Namibia Bird Club day outing.

11 October 2014: Namibia Bird Club at the Biomarkt.

12 October 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at the Gammams water works.

9 November 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at Avis Dam.

23 November 2014: Namibia Bird Club big birding day at Monte Christo.

14 December 2014: Namibia Bird Club morning walk at the Gammams water works.

