



Letaka

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TOUR REPORT DESERT, DELTA & OCEAN 11 – 26 JANUARY 2010

LED BY GRANT REED



Desert, Delta & Ocean Birding

A Birding Safari with Letaka Safaris led by Grant Reed

Participants: David & Barbara Henderson, Julia Irving, Jan and Paul Farmer, Alex Kutt

Day 1 Maun to Lake Ngami

After meeting at Maun International it took us a little more than an hour to reach Lake Ngami. We arrived to find an exceptionally full lake that severely limited access to the shore which was now deep into the acacia woodland. There were several open areas where we could do some water bird viewing and some of the species on offer were Black Crake, all the white egrets, Glossy Ibis, Black-crowned Night-Heron and Saddle-billed Stork to mention but a few. However we concentrated on the *Acacia* woodland on the southern shore due to the rather difficult and muddy approaches to water bird viewing areas. The acacia woodland and thickets as always was filled with Burnt-necked Eremomela, Chestnut-vented Tit Babbler, Icterine Warbler, Marsh Warbler, Meve's Starling, Crimson-breasted Shrike and Black Cuckoo with many other species such as Marico Sunbird, Common Scimitarbill and African Cuckoo (calling) also present. We had some wonderful views of a Barn Owl that we flushed bringing a close to our first afternoon.

Day 2 Lake Ngami to Shakawe

The drive up to Drotsky's Cabins in the Pan-Handle of the Okavango was a fruitful one with several birding breaks along the way. Wonderful views of Lesser-spotted Eagle and also good looks at Yellow-crowned Bishop, Barred Wren-Warbler and Diderik Cuckoo. Other species were Monotonous Lark, Common Ostrich, Meyer's Parrot, European Roller and Green-winged Pytilia. Oddly enough the road to Drotsky's Cabins was our only Lesser Kestrel of the safari! Our afternoon walk in the grounds produced Narina Trogon, Brown-throated Weaver, Thick-billed Weaver, African Green Pigeon, Greater Honeyguide (guide bird), White-browed Robin Chat, Terrestrial Brownbul and many other riparian woodland species but frustratingly we failed to find the Brown Firefinch at its regular haunt (possibly due to the construction of new chalets in this area).

Day 3 Shakawe- Okavango Pan-Handle

We set out on the boat in the morning with our major targets being Pel's Fishing Owl, White-backed Night Heron and Greater Swamp Warbler. Within a short space of time we had achieved our targets and were treated to some wonderful sightings of Lesser Jacana being chased persistently by African Jacana. We also had great views of Spectacled Weaver, Chirping Cisticola, Little Rush Warbler and Great Reed Warbler. Rufous-bellied Heron, Purple Heron and Green-backed Heron were common but mostly seen in flight.

In the afternoon we attempted once again to locate the Brown Firefinch and the ever-difficult Black-faced Babbler. We were rewarded with only a 2 meter black mamba and a host of more common bird species such as Yellow-breasted Apalis, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Green-winged Pytilia, Meve's Starling and Blue Waxbill. A brief visit to our camp by the Wood Owl that evening was very welcome with its haunting call.

Day 4 Drotsky's Cabins to Rundu

A short birding stop in Shakawe while waiting for the fuel station to open gave us Mosque Swallow, Black Cuckoo and Eurasian Golden Oriole. Mahango Game Reserve produced tantalizing glimpses but inconclusive sightings of both Spotted Crake and a juvenile Egyptian Vulture.

A walk into the miombo woodlands of the Caprivi in search of the rare and elusive Sousa's Shrike produced Steppe Buzzard, Black Cuckoo Shrike, Yellow-fronted Canary, Pale Flycatcher, Green-backed Honeybird, Amethyst Sunbird, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Red-headed Weaver and White-crested Helmet-Shrike.

A hatching of winged alates near Rundu produced a wonderful African Hobby Falcon as well as a good number of Eurasian Hobby. A number of smaller birds including Icterine Warblers were hawking alates from the near-by bushes.

We stopped in camp just long enough to drop the trailer and headed for the famous Rundu Sewage Works. Always a great spot for Baillon's Crake and as always Rundu met expectations with 3 good views of Baillon's Crake with one cracking view of the bird at under 3 meters in the open for a good few seconds. Purple Swampphen, Black Crack, Common Moorhen, Red-knobbed Coot, White-browed Coucal, Kittlitz's Plover, White-fronted Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Sedge Warbler and Lesser Swamp Warbler were present in good numbers.

Day 5 Rundu to Namutoni (Etosha National Park)

First order of the day was a dawn-strike on the sewage works before setting out on the road south. Another 4 Baillon's Crakes as well as Osprey, Painted Snipe and Allen's Gallinule amongst others were our reward. We aimed to be at Roy's Camp before the heat of the day and so did little birding along the way. Roy's is famous for the ease of finding the otherwise elusive Black-faced Babbler. After a long search we finally met up with the birds on the lawn of the main area and had great views. We also had Crimson-breasted Shrike, Barred Wren Warbler, Violet-eared Waxbill, Acacia Pied Barbet, Rosy-faced Lovebird and White-crowned Shrike.

On our afternoon drive along the Fischer's Pan Loop we had the first of hundreds of Sabota Larks to come. Red-necked Falcon, Blue Crane and Northern Black Korhaan, Buffy Pipit, Red-capped Lark, South African Shelduck and Grey-backed Sparrowlark were all new birds for the trip. The day was topped with a large male lion that decided to walk by only meters from our vehicle and his piercing gaze was met by the sound of slamming windows from the back of the minibus!

Day 6 Namutoni, Etosha National Park

In the morning we took the Fischer's Pan Road from the western side as we had not had enough time to complete the loop on the previous day. We were treated to masses of water birds along this stretch both in the morning and the afternoon. Black-tailed Godwit, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Hottentot Teal, Cape Teal, Southern Pochard and Pied Avocet were some of the species present. Among the dry-land birds that we encountered were Chestnut Weaver, Barred Wren Warbler, Lesser Masked Weaver, Icterine Warbler, Secretarybird, Western Red-footed Falcon, Great Sparrow, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Cape Crow and Spotted Eagle Owl.

We finished the day with a close-up view of the endangered black rhinoceros near Chudob water hole.

Day 7 Namutoni to Okaukuejo, Etosha National Park

We left Namutoni early and headed directly to Halali Camp where we set out in search of Violet Wood-Hoopoe, Bare-cheeked Babbler and Carp's Tit. Shortly before Halali we picked up a Peregrine Falcon. On arrival at Halali we had several great views of Carp's Tit as well as an up-close view of African Scops Owl (in the mopane tree behind unit 42 at eye level) but after scrambling over the hills

and going around the camp until we were almost dizzy we gave up our search for the babbler and wood-hoopoe. En-route to camp we had African Hawk Eagle, Lanner Falcon, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Dusky Lark and Neddicky as new birds for the trip with our second and last Monotonous Lark encounter.

Our afternoon drive north-west of Okaukuejo was productive with Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark, Double-banded Courser, Bronze-winged Courser, Capped Wheatear, Abdim's Stork and Namaqua Sandgrouse. We however failed to locate the Burchell's Coursers which are often in this area.

Day 8 Okaukuejo, Etosha National Park

With the road to Okondeka closed we decided to head once again to the north-west towards the Moringa Forest and search for Pink-billed Lark, Eastern Clapper Lark and Burchell's Courser. With none of the above forthcoming we had to settle for Eurasian Hobby, Lanner Falcon, Greater Kestrel, Pygmy Falcon and Lapped-faced Vulture. A walk around the camp grounds turned up Sociable Weaver, Pygmy Falcon (guide bird), Ashy Tit, Cardinal Woodpecker, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, Icterine Warbler, Little Swift and House Martin.

The highlight of the afternoon drive was finally finding the usually common Spike-heeled Lark as well as our first Rufous-eared Warbler of the trip and tolerably good views of a Montague's Harrier. An evening visit to the waterhole produced Double-banded Sandgrouse, Verreaux's Eagle Owl, Wattled Plover and Shaft-tailed Whydah.

Day 9 Okaukuejo, Etosha National Park to Twyfelfontein.

A short pre-breakfast walk around the camp was productive with Ashy Tit, Cardinal Woodpecker, Pririt Batis, Willow Warbler, Icterine Warbler and Violet-backed Starling. On various stops along our way we picked up White-tailed Shrike, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Short-toed Rock-Thrush, African Hawk-Eagle, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Brown Snake-Eagle and Martial Eagle.

At Twyfelfontein Country Lodge we were met by a host of birds in the garden including White-throated Canary, Cape Bunting, Pale-winged Starling, White-tailed Shrike and Mountain Wheatear.

Day 10 Twyfelfontein

We opted for an early start towards the Aba-Huab Riverbed to look for Violet Wood-Hoopoe and Bare-cheeked Babbler. We had good views of Benguela Long-billed Lark in the grasslands before the river. In the river-bed we found Ruppell's Parrot, Great-spotted Cuckoo and Pearl-spotted Owlet (heard) and Damara Red-billed Hornbill flying (guide bird). Striped squirrel *Paraxerus flavovittus* was our only mammal of the morning. Heading back to camp for breakfast we had the first of many Ruppell's Korhaan sightings. On our afternoon excursion to Burnt Mountain we saw a pair of Karoo Long-billed Lark with a markedly longer beak than the Benguela Long-billed lark seen in the morning as well as a pair of Double-banded Sandgrouse in the dry river bed at the Organ Pipes. We returned to the Aba-Huab in the afternoon opting to drive east along the river. While I was looking for a suitable track to continue along the river 2 of the guests spotted Bare-cheeked Babbler. In a high wind we set out after the birds but only I managed another glimpse of the birds before they disappeared on the wind. Spirits were lifted on the way back to camp when Alex spotted a Ludwig's Bustard in an open field.

The camp also offered great views of Dassie Rat *Petromus typicus*, Round-eared Elephant Shrew *Macroscelides proboscideus* and Jameson's Rock Hare *Pronolagus randensis*. But without doubt the highlight of the day for me was the rare and endemic Western Keeled Snake *Pythonodipsas carinata* found along a dry river course near the lodge.

Day 11 Twyfelfontein to Walvis Bay

The roads in to Twyfelfontein from the east as well as the short-cut road to the C35 junction near Brandberg were in very poor condition and driving more than 30km/hr was impossible. The slow drive was complimented with some good birding and in the morning we had good views of Burchell's Courser, Ludwig's Bustard, Karoo Chat, Karoo Long-billed Lark, Pink-billed Lark, Klaas's Cuckoo, Bradfield's Swift and one of Africa's great mammals- the Meerkat *Suricata suricatta*. In Uis we decided to take a detour and go to Walvis Bay via Spitzkoppe to search for one of Namibia's most sought after endemics, the Herero Chat. With only an hour to bird the Spitzkoppe we decided to split up into pairs and ferret around the base of the mountain. David and Barbara were blessed with a wonderful view of the bird sitting up in the open, possibly responding to the call that I was playing higher up the valley, but sadly before we could get anyone else on the bird it vanished for good. Monteiro's Hornbill greeted us at the gate where we departed Spitzkoppe. We arrived in Walvis in the late afternoon to the wonderful Free Air Guesthouse situated on the lagoon.

Day 12 Walvis Bay

We awoke to a foggy morning and after breakfast we took a drive along the lagoon shore to Paaltjies. It was baptism by fire for those not familiar with seabirds with thousands of terns and gulls swirling in flight and sandbanks with countless waders. In a short space of time we had seen Damara, swift, sandwich, black, white-winged, common and Arctic terns. Cape, Hartlaub's and grey-headed Gull were also common. The most exciting wader of the morning was Terek Sandpiper but there were masses of other good birds such as Bar-winged Godwit, Chestnut-banded Plover, White-fronted Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Curlew Sandpiper (in the thousands), Little Stint, Common Greenshank, Ruff, Pied Avocet, Ruddy Turnstone, Cape Shoveller and Spoonbill. To celebrate Barbara's birthday we did an afternoon excursion to the Walvis Bay Sewage Works. The sewage works rated 9/10 for odour but a disappointing 3/10 for birding. With the evaporation ponds empty and only a long deep canal of effluent the habitat was sub-standard. African Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Common Moorhen and Common Waxbill were about the extent of the birds present. We gave up fairly swiftly on the sewage lark and headed down to Rooibank where we found our target, the Dune Lark, with ease. Good long views of this subtly beautiful endemic lark were certainly one of the highlights of the day.

Day 13 Walvis Bay and Swakopmund

Breakfast was interrupted when a few Jaegers moved into a feeding frenzy of terns and gulls in the lagoon. Inconclusive views through the scope of distant birds left us frustrated, believing that they were Parasitic Jaeger but the birds were too distant to be sure. Later from the Yacht Club we were treated to great views of breeding and non-breeding Parasitic Jaeger and a single breeding Pomarine Jaeger. Damara Tern was seen on the road to Swakopmund. We passed through Swakopmund and more for humour than anything else we searched the palm trees along the sea-front for the feral population of Budgie that now thrives in Swakopmund. Our brief attempt was futile and we headed for the salt works some 10km north of Swakopmund. The southern evaporation pans were disappointing and the usual site for Gray's Lark also proved fruitless. The northern evaporation pans near the guano platform however had good numbers of similar species to Walvis Bay. Bank Cormorant was a "guide-bird" and our only Lesser Flamingo was seen here amongst large numbers of greater flamingo. Tractrac Chat was seen for the first time about a kilometre inland of the salt works. We passed through Swakopmund for lunch on our way back to Walvis and Julia went for a stroll along the coast and found a group of feral Budgie. A scenic drive along the back of the dune field that runs parallel with the coast between Swakopmund and Walvis Bay produced more adventure than we had bargained for. After being bogged in the sand for more than an hour and

trying all the tricks in the book we finally opted to phone a friend. Pretty soon after calling we received a tow out of the sand from Paddy Hill of Pride of Africa Safaris, a friend and fellow safari operator. A heavy afternoon wind made birding along the Paaltjies road difficult. No new species were turned up. An evening spotlight drive with Alex, our Australian naturalist, in search of southern Africa's most endearing gecko was a great success. By the end of our nocturnal foray into the dunes we had found no fewer than 12 of these magnificent geckos. The herp nuts returned to the guesthouse around midnight for a short sleep before our trip inland the following day.

Day 14 Walvis Bay to Erongo Wilderness Camp

We opted to take the coastal road to Henties Bay to search for the Gray's Lark and lucked out at our first stop (the same place we failed the previous day!) After good views of the Gray's Lark, Tractrac Chat and Rufous-eared Warbler we continued north and stopped briefly at a breeding colony of Damara Tern. From Henties we headed east towards Usakos and along this road we had further sightings of Burchell's Courser, Ludwig's Bustard and Grays Lark as well as our first look at Stark's Lark. Shortly before the lodge we had Alpine Swift and Long-billed Pipit. We arrived at Erongo Wilderness Camp in the mid-afternoon. This was my first visit to this lodge in its magnificent setting and realised immediately that we were not going to have enough time to do the area justice with only one night. First order of the afternoon was to walk the best Hartlaub's Francolin sites in the vain hopes that one may show itself in the heat of the day but also to scout the area for our pre-dawn strike on the resident francolin. We had wonderful views here of Violet-backed Starling, Rosy-faced Lovebird, White-tailed Shrike, Cape Bunting, Lark-like Bunting, Mountain Wheatear and Short-toed Rock-Thrush. In the late afternoon we headed to the Omaruru Riverbed in search of Violet Wood-Hoopoe. A long walk down the dry riverbed was rewarded with 3 Violet Wood-Hoopoe. On our way back to the camp we had a surprise fly-over from an African Hobby Falcon and heard our first Rockrunner. A spotlight drive that evening produced Freckled Nighthawk as well as an African wildcat and klipspringer (a rock dwelling antelope).

Day 15 Erongo to Windhoek

We met half an hour before first light and gradually made our way up to the top of a massive boulder overlooking a slope of the mountain where the Hartlaub's Francolin are known to call. Hearing the first calls we resisted the impulse to approach closer and chose to observe through the scope. Within an hour we had seen 3 different groups of the Hartlaub's Francolin and no fewer than 12 individual birds. At one stage we had 6 of the birds sitting together in the scope with a male and female in full call. On our later walk we would flush another 2 francolin at close range and David and Barbara were treated to a private viewing at close-quarters when checking out from tent 10. The morning walk also produced Cape Penduline-Tit, Black-faced Waxbill, Violet-eared Waxbill, White-browed Scrub-Robin, Carp's Tit, Monteiro's Hornbill, Rockrunner, Burchell's Sandgrouse, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, White-backed Mousebird and Dusky Sunbird. After a good morning's birding and a hearty breakfast it was time to head to Windhoek where we arrived in the mid-afternoon. For the super-keen there was an afternoon's excursion to the Botanical Gardens which often produce great views of Rockrunner. After massive rains the gardens were overgrown and Rockrunner was only heard. However there was a good variety of the dry Acacia-veld species and some wonderful plants to make the excursion worthwhile. A farewell dinner at the famous Joe's Beerhouse was a great ending to a wonderful fortnight of birding.

For a full bird checklist for this safari please visit www.birdingsafaris.com/birdlists.html