

NAMIBIA JULY / AUG 2013

(Trip report by Japie Claassen)

We recently returned from a trip to Namibia in which we saw 283 bird species and covered 6500 km. Namibia is the driest I ever saw it since I visit it the first time in 1987. The whole country from Orange River to Kunene River is in a severe drought (that after it was almost washed away 2 years before) and 90% of the veld has no real vegetation on it except the leafless trees. The bit of grass on the veld was still left overs of 2011 with no seeds in it. Therefore seedeaters were very scarce on the whole trip, which influence the raptors again.

We left Cape Town in sunny weather after the previous days of rain. We headed via the Swartland & Namaqualand for Namibia. Everyone has his or her target birds and towards Vanrhynsdorp the most notable species were Blue Crane, Black Harrier, Ludwig's Bustard, Jackal Buzzard and Greater Kestrel. The Salt River north of Vanrhynsdorp hosted some Lesser Flamingoes with Pied Avocet and Black-winged Stilt. Near Bitterfontein we saw another Black Harrier and towards the border some Grey-backed Sparrowlarks, Large-billed Lark and Dusky Sunbird. We went through the border without any hassles and stay the first night at Orange River Lodge just north of the border.

The lodge is a very good stay over (www.orlodge.iway.na; email: orlodge@iway.na; tel 00264 63 297012). The rooms are very neat and spacious and the restaurant serves a good dinner.

At first light the next morning we headed to the Orange River on the lodge's property. It was quite chilly but some people could add their first lifers and we saw Orange River White-eye, Namaqua Warbler, Pririt Batis, Brubru, a flock of Red-billed Queleas and Afr Darter.

We drove with the C12 along the Orange River and then headed towards Hobas with the C37. This area doesn't have lots of birds but the scenery was marvellous. In this remote area we found Capped Wheatear and Tractrac Chat and before we left the river some Afr Fish Eagle and Great White Pelicans. Moving through the rugged mountains we could add Dusky Sunbird, Black-chested Prinia, Karoo Chat, Red-capped Lark, Karoo Korhaan and Karoo Long-billed Lark.

In the Gondwana Canyon Park we saw herds of Springbuck, Gemsbuck and Hartmann's Mountain Zebra. There were also Ludwig's Bustards, White-throated Canary, Rufous-eared Warbler and the first Sociable Weavers. A Lanner Falcon was perching on a Quiver Tree and then we had magnificent view of a Martial Eagle soaring. While watching the Martial we found a group of Cape Penduline Tits.

We stayed over at Canon Village, but just dropped off our luggage before heading for the Viewpoint of the Fish River Canyon. The view here will be always breath-taking and you can just stand in wondering on the edge of the canyon. Around Hobas we saw Yellow-bellied

Eremomela, Cape Bunting, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Crimson-breasted Shrike and more Ludwig's Bustards.

Canon Village is a superb lodge. It is beautifully placed at the foot of a mountain and if you often visit Namibia it is worthwhile to get a Gondwana Card at only R100. It gives you big discounts when you stay at one of the Gondwana lodges. The staff was very helpful and friendly and dinners very good. Look at www.gondwana-collection.com or email info@gondwana-collection.com.

There are not many roads inside the Gondwana Canyon Park except the main roads, but the next morning we drove towards the Canon Mountain Camp. We had good views of Pritit Batis, Crimson-breasted Shrike and a herd of Gemsbuck.

We left Canon Village and with a hailing NW wind, headed for Aus. At Canon Roadhouse we stopped to fill up the fuel and in the garden the people could enjoy at beautiful male Dusky Sunbird. Further down the road we had another Martial Eagle.

The wind actually slow down as we nearer Aus. Klein Aus Vista was fully booked and therefore we had to go to Bahnhof Hotel in "town". Aus are no real town but the hotel was a good spot. After dropping down luggage we headed for Klein Aus Vista to look for Barlow's Lark. Birds in this area were few, but after flushing the lark once, all the people had excellent views of this near-endemic.

The Bahnhof Hotel (www.hotel-aus.com; email: bahnhof-hotel-aus@iway.na; Tel 00264 63 258091) is a very good alternative for Klein Aus Vista. Rooms and food are good and the town is very quiet.

The next morning we drove out to Garub waterhole about 20 km west of Aus to look for the Desert Horses. We were welcome by about 100 horses and it was interesting to see the horses survive in this harsh landscape. Except for the horses we saw a couple of Barlow's Larks along the track to the waterhole as well as Tractrac Chat. Huge flocks of Namaqua Sandgrouses came in to drink.

We continued to Sossusvlei and before we hit the D707 road, saw some Karoo Korhaan and Ludwig's Bustard. We took the D707 road which is always worthwhile for birds. It was not long before we got our first Ruppell's Korhaans, followed by some Grey-backed Sparrowlarks and numbers of Burchell's Coursers. We had Spike-heeled Lark, Greater Kestrel and Chat Flycatcher.

At the farmhouse where this road meets the C27, we saw our first Rosy-faced Lovebirds and soon afterwards a soaring Booted Eagle. A lonely Lappet-faced Vulture was sitting next to the road. As we moved through the Tsaris Mountains we found Pale-winged Starlings, Rock Kestrels, Yellow Canary and Sociable Weaver to mentioned a few.

We stayed at Betesda Lodge (www.betesdalodge.com; email kiero828@iway.na; Tel +264 63 693253) which has very good accommodation and the dinner as well. We organised a packed breakfast for the next day. Not many birds around the lodge due to drought but saw

Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Sth Masked Weavers, Scaly-feathered Finch and beautiful Mountain Wheatears.

The next morning we started early to go for Sossusvlei and along the road picked up Long-billed Pipit and Black-chested Snake Eagle, more Chat Flycatchers, Rufous-eared Warbler, Karoo Long-billed Lark and beautiful Short-toed Rock Thrush.

Just outside Sossusvlei's gate is an Engen Garage with shop where you will get about anything you will need. In comparison with that the NWR's shop inside is empty and machines are not working. After stocked up with water, cold drinks, etc we had a go for the Dune Lark. We couldn't find it low down the dunes, so decided to leave it for Walvis Bay. Along the road to Sossusvlei we had Lanner Falcon, Pririt Batis, Lappet-faced Vulture, Grey-backed Sparrowlark, Double-banded Courser breeding, Secretarybird, Stark's Lark and even a Fork-tailed Drongo at Sossusvlei. The dunes will remain just magnificent, don't matter which time of the day you visit it. Some of us shuttle down to Sossusvlei with the NWR vehicles (N\$100/p), but you can't get that close and miss the opportunity.

During the afternoon we returned and headed for Weltevrede Guest Farm (www.weltevredeguestfarm.com; email aswarts@mweb.com.na; Tel +264 63 683073). That is also one of those places in Namibia which has just a magic feeling and touch. We didn't have much birding time as the sun was already setting. Food was great and we organise for a packed breakfast which was excellent.

We planned to go for Spreetshoogte Pass early, but that night the well-known East wind arrived. It was from the start gail force and all the way to Solitaire it was just dust and sand. We made a stop at Solitaire, but then proceed to Swakopmund as it was senseless to go to the mountain in that wind. The wind had flattened all birds and to the Gaub River we didn't see much except dust. Even a stop at the Gaub River didn't get the people out of the vehicle. The road between Gaub River and the Naukluft Park's boundary was extremely corrugated. Inside the park we found a flock of Sabota Larks which feed with Red-capped Larks. There were about 150 birds and the first time I saw Sabota Larks in a flock. I got a permit at Sesriem and we visited the Kuiseb River Canyon viewpoint which is spectacular.

I heard from friends that the road from Kuiseb to Walvis was terrible, so we decided to take a desert detour to the C28 from Windhoek to Swakopmund. You also need a permit for this road, but it was worthwhile with good numbers of game, Stark's Lark, desert Ostriches and even some Helmeted Guineafowl. A stop at the Hotsas waterhole produced a couple of Lappet-faced and White-backed Vultures.

The C28 road was very good and en route we stopped at the ancient Welwitschias. The pool in the Swakop River hosted Greater & Lesser Flamingoes, Common Sandpiper, Cape Teal, Chestnut-banded Plover and Common Greenshank to name a few.

In Swakopmund we stayed at Alte Brucke Resort (www.altebrucke.com; email info@altebrucke.com; Tel +264 64 404918). The resort is one of the best around Walvis &

Swakopmund and can be highly recommended. The East wind arrived almost with us in Swakop and tried to blow you from your feet.

Next morning the wind was still hailing and we went with the back (salt) road to Walvis as I know that the tar road will be full of “dunes”. There was no chance for the Dune Lark in this weather, so we went to the lagoon and salt pans until the wind drops. We saw lots of birds on the pans including Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Common Whimbrel, Curlew Sandpiper, lots of Chestnut-banded Plovers, Bar-tailed Godwit and at least 2 Red-necked Phalaropes.

At about 1 pm the wind slow down and although very hot (into 30*’s C) we headed for Rooibank and the Dune Lark. After the 2011 floods the dunes are all flat and the Narra plants and grass covered with sand. It looks totally to a new place. After a search of about 30 mins, a Dune Lark flew in and gave everyone excellent views and photo opportunities.

Now it was towards the Mile 4 salt works for Gray’s Lark. With wind starting to charge up again we had good views of the white desert form of Tractrac Chat, before we spotted 4 Gray’s Larks. Some of them came right towards us within 20 meters and gave excellent views.

We hoped that the wind will go down during the night, but the next morning it was even blowing better. We went via Henties Bay to Spitzkoppe, stopping along the way at the magnificent lichen fields. Almost no birds in the wind to Spitzkoppe and as we nearer Spitzkoppe we had our first Northern Black Korhaan. Around the Spitzkoppe birding was better with Stark’s Lark, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Layard’s Titbabbler, Monteiro’s Hornbill, Great Sparrow, Cape Bunting, Melba Finch, Kalahari Scrub-robin, Long-billed Crombec, but no Herero Chat.

We were heading to Hohenstein Lodge north of Usakos. Along the way we saw an Ashy Tit, Red-billed Spurfowl, Ground-scraper Thrush and a beautiful pair of Afr Hawk Eagle, but no response from Violet Woodhoopoe at Kahn River. Hohenstein Lodge (www.hohenstein-lodge.com; email info@hohenstein-lodge.com; Tel +264 64 530900)

The chalets are very good and the staff friendly and helpful. Food is good although not enough for big eaters and could be a bigger portion for the price. It was very tasty. We were awaited by numbers of Great Sparrows, Violet Woodhoopoe and a Barred Wren-Warbler just off the stoep.

Some of us went on an early morning game drive, but in such dry conditions you will expect not to see much. We saw some Long-billed Pipit, Desert Cisticola, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Booted Eagle, Black-chested Snake Eagle and White-tailed Shrike. Not getting target birds like Hartlaub’s Spurfowl and Rockrunner, we went on a hike with the local guide. We had a glimpse of a Rockrunner, but it would not response to the call. Close to the lodge we found a flock of Hartlaub’s Spurfowl in a rocky area and they reacted quickly on the call, giving everyone excellent views and photo opportunities.

Back at the lodge Damara and White-throated Canary visited the drinking pond, followed by Violet-eared Waxbill, Sth Grey-headed Sparrow and Marico & Scarlet-chested Sunbirds visiting the Aloe flowers.

Next morning we went looking for Rockrunner, but couldn't find anything. We went for breakfast and afterwards while packing the trailer, Roy drove out to the same boulders and had the Rockrunner out singing. We all rushed there and all had excellent views of it, right on the rocks where we called for it an hour before. On the way to Kamanjab we stopped at the Omaruru River crossing and ticked Sth White-crowned Shrike, Violet Woodhoopoe, White-tailed Shrike, Sth Pied Babbler, Damara Hornbill and Rosy-faced Lovebird. Before we got to Uis we had brilliant views of a Benguella Long-billed Lark next to the road. Despite an intensive search beyond Uis for Herero Chat, we couldn't find any. We had more Ruppell's Korhaan and Short-toed Rock Thrush.

A dam along the road with some water produced Wood Sandpiper, SA Shelduck, Little Grebe, Yellow-billed Duck, Common Greenshank and Black-winged Stilt. Some Stark's Larks come in to drink. Further along the road we got our first Carp's Tit and Bare-cheeked Babblers.

In Kamanjab we stayed at Oase Guest House (email oaseguesthouse@iway.na.) which accommodation is good but it is inside the town although it is a small town. Food was good.

Next morning we took the road north to Kunene River Lodge, finding Red-headed Finch and White-browed Scrub-Robin along the way. Close to Opuwu we found a Shrika perching on a pole and then on an open veld more Burchell's Coursers and Stark's Lark. Past Opuwu we saw Red-crested Korhaan, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, Afr Harrier-Hawk, Ruppell's Parrot, Meve's Starling, Gabar Goshawk and Buffy Pipit. We arrived at Kunene River Lodge just before sunset.

Kunene River Lodge (www.kuneneriverlodge.com; email info@kuneneriverlodge.com; tel +264 65 274 300) is a fantastic lodge. Not only is Pete & Hilary's hospitality great, but all around the lodge is working well. The staffs are friendly and food is excellent, as is the birding.

Inside the lodge we had Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Rufous-tailed Palm-Thrush, Verreauxs' Eagle Owl, Golden Weaver, Afr Mourning Dove, Bare-cheeked Babblers and White-browed Coucal.

We organized with Pete to go for the Angola Cave Chat the next morning. It was an early start to arrive at the place at first light. On arrival a pair of Afr Hawk Eagles perched on top of the mountain. We waited and waited, but no signs of the Chat. We had some response on Pete's calls, but still no signs. After more than an hour and half we decided to climb the mountain – not an easy task at all. 5 of us climbed the mountain with Pete and then sat and wait again. Cinderella Waxbills flew over, but still no signs of the chat. More waiting, Pete climbed higher up to see if he can flush it, but no success. No and then the bird calls, but we couldn't find it. In a last attempt Pete saw the bird where it was turning leaves over. He called

us and we had great views of the bird, but it was too quick to get any photos. Down at the bottom the others saw Violet-eared Waxbill, Marico Sunbird and Golden-tailed Woodpecker.

Unfortunately it was not the biggest Angola Cave Chat day and we were sad for those who missed it. On the way back we had great sightings of Verreauxs' and Black-chested Snake Eagle.

Birding upstream from the lodge in the afternoon we found Luapula Cisticola, Water Thick-knee, Pearl-spotted Owl, Red-necked Spurfowl sp. cunensis, Common Sandpiper and Pririt Batis. Pete said that he didn't see the Cinderellas for a time in the lodge's garden, so we prepared to go on a search for it the next day. Next morning we birded around the lodge for a while, saw Afr Barred Owl, before heading for the Cinderella. Suddenly 2 Cinderellas flew into the garden and everyone had great views and photos. Grey Kestrel wasn't seen in the area for months, so we had a relaxed birding afternoon before the next day's long journey to Sachsenheim. In the afternoon we went on a boat trip with Pete upstream finding White-backed Night Heron, Ashy Flycatcher, Little Bee-eater and on the way back Square-tailed and Freckled Nightjar.

The next morning we left the beautiful place and heading south. Not far and we got a flock of Chestnut Weavers, then afterwards Red-billed Queleas, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Carp's Tit and Brown Snake Eagle. Near Ruacana we found our first Bateleur of the trip. A wetland along the road produced inter alia Afr Fish Eagle, Afr Jacana, Red-billed Teal and Wattled Starlings.

I got some co-ordinates from Maans of Weto Tours about a Grey Kestrel he saw and we found it close by the point. It has probably moved to an area where there is more food available. Other birds down south include Purple Roller, Lanner Falcon and Crested Francolin.

We arrived at Sachsenheim Guest Farm (www.namibweb.com/sachsenheim ; email sachse@iway.na; tel +264 67 230011) just in time for dinner. We settled down and had an excellent dinner – too much. The accommodation is excellent, its owner operating so service is excellent and the food very good and enough.

The next morning we looked for the Black-faced Babblers before heading for Etosha, but no luck. Barn Owl was calling during the night while Double-banded Sandgrouse came to drink at a waterhole close to the chalets.

We went to the Namutoni area of Etosha and started off with Damara Hornbill & Red-breasted Swallow. There were a couple of water birds at the Klein Namutoni waterhole including Grey-headed Gull and Cape Teal. No signs of Black-faced Babbler on Bloubokkiedraai and we headed north to Klein & Groot Okevi & Tsumcor. No water in Fischer's Pan but at the waterholes we had lots of game and Great Sparrow, Monteiro's Hornbill, Bateleur, Red-headed Finch, Barred Wren-warbler, Stark's Lark, Gabar Goshawk and Sth Pied Babbler. At Tsumcor we had lots of Violet-eared Waxbill, Lesser Masked

Weaver & Chestnut Weaver. On the plains to the west of Namutoni we saw Double-banded Courser, Red-crested Korhaan and lots of Grey-backed Sparrowlark.

Next morning back at Sachsenheim, we were up early for the birds. Just after sunrise we had a couple of Black-faced Babblers on the fence but they moved deeper into the trees before all people could see them. We call and look around for more with some answering in a distance. Then suddenly we saw the original group is back and this time they allowed the people good sightings and afterwards even good photos. Other birds around were Bearded Woodpecker, Gabar Goshawk & Shrika.

We left Sachsenheim and made a stop at Lake Otjikoto where we saw Green-winged Pytilia (a rare bird on this trip due to drought), Bare-cheeked Babbler and a Little Grebe in the lake. We proceeded to Okahandja and shortly after the turn off to Otavi at Tsumeb, an Augur Buzzard flew across the road, not seen by everyone.

Not any new birds on the road to Rock Lodge near Okahandja. Rock Lodge is situated next to a little mountain and the chalets are good except for 2 which they worked on and were not checked afterwards. Rock Lodge (www.rocklodge.com.na; email: therocklodge@gmail.com; tel +26462503840) should be look much better in summer. It was very dry, but the other chalets didn't have any problems.

Birding around the lodge was not bad with Black-cheeked waxbill, Carp's Tit, Ashy Tit, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Lesser Honeyguide, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Brubru and Marico Sunbird.

Next morning we were off to Keetmanshoop and near Kalkrand we got our first Pygmy Falcon. We were headed to Goibib Mountain Lodge, but before Keetmanshoop we decided to pay a visit to the Quiver Tree Forest and the Playground of the Giants. Most important of the Quiver Tree Forest that a number of Rosy-faced Lovebirds were gathering at a feeding troughs near the office. In the forest itself we had a very tame Pygmy Falcon as well as Dusky Sunbird and Pale-winged Starling. The Playground of the Giants is spectacular and it is strange to think that you are actually standing on the top of the cliffs of a new mountain.

Goibib Mountain Lodge (www.goibibmountainlodge.com; email goibib@mweb.com.na; tel +26463683130) is nestled in the magic Karas Mountains. The facilities are excellent and the food delicious. As it was in a drought birds were not plentiful, but we had lots of Rosy-faced Lovebirds, Brubru, Lark-like Bunting and Common Scimitarbill.

The trip down to Springbok didn't deliver very much and we stayed at Springbok Lodge (www.springboklodge.com; email sbklodge@intekom.co.za; tel +27277121321). Good accommodation at a good price.

A quick visit to the Goegap area produced White-throated Canary, Karoo Chat, Rufous-eared Warbler, Black-headed Canary, Damara Canary, Layard's Titbabbler and a very quick Cinnamon-breasted Warbler. Further along the road we found Karoo Eremomela, Jackal Buzzard and more Black-headed Canary.

The next morning was the last shift to Cape Town to end this wonderful tour. Notable birds along the way were Black Harrier and Booted Eagle before I dropped the clients off in Cape Town.