

# Rhodesian Ornithological Society Bulletin No. 20

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The response to Major Trollope's query about African Fish-eagles has been most gratifying. Several readers have written in and the consensus of opinion is that not only does the fish-eagle regularly call in flight, but that when it does so it puts its head back between its shoulders. Thank-you for the following communications.

From Roger Day, Salisbury

Having just spent three weeks at Monkey Bay, where there are several pairs of fish-eagles, I can assure Major Trollope that the bird does give tongue whilst on the wing. On one occasion I spotted two birds flying very high, and was about to turn my binoculars on them when the characteristic cry came ringing from the sky, settling their identity in no uncertain fashion. I also heard the bird calling on other occasions, and my impression is that it threw back its head when doing so but I cannot be certain of that as I made no note of it.

From Fitzroy McLean, Gwelo

Regarding the call of the fish-eagle, I have heard it many times, and in every case it was uttered when the bird was in flight; never once when perching. The first time, I heard this call or scream was in Natal about 1925, when I saw a pair of fish-eagles flying very high on a cross-country flight, apparently from the Umlaas River towards the Umsindusi or Umgeni, in the direction of Table Mountain, (Natal). At the height these birds were flying, it was impossible to detect any notion of the head when screaming. No display was noticed, nor was it possible to say if both birds or only one was screaming.

From N.E. Holmes, Echo Farm, Salisbury

I have on many occasions seen and of course heard, fish-eagles calling while in flight. This farm is situated between two fairly large dams; the eagles favourite route is directly overhead, and they frequently give their unmistakable call on their journeys to and fro. The flight does not appear to be hampered because of the call being uttered.

From Miss I. Rorke, Essexvale

Referring to the call of the fish-eagle, I may be mistaken, but I usually bear it in July or August, a clear call which appears to come from above me. The river is some distance from the house.

From Dr. J.M. Winterbottom, Cape Town

May I say that I have frequently heard the fish-eagle call on the wing, both in Northern Rhodesia and here at the Cape; chiefly, as Mr. Jubb found in the case he mentions, when soaring high. I can't actually recall a case where the bird called when flying low, but now that Major Trollope has called attention to it, I shall make a note of it if I do.

From L.D.E.F. Vesey-Fitzgerald, Abercorn

Fish-eagles do call in flight, and their wild, three-syllabled cry is uttered as the head of the bird is thrown upwards and backwards. In this part of the country, the Northern Rhodesia-Tanganyika borderlands, I have witnessed the performance many times as a pair soared round and round; both birds called in turn. My records have been during May and June; that is at the close of the rains and during the early part of the dry season.

The fish-eagle occurs in every suitable locality, that is wherever there is a lake, river, lagoon or swamp, one or two birds are sure to be seen. All the large birds of prey tend to be rather widespread, but not usually abundant in one place. But in Rhodesia, where one long dry season alternates with one long wet season each year, suitable habitats for the fish-eagle are liable to vary greatly in extent with the season. This accounts for irregularities in the distribution of the fish-eagle. When surface water dries up, fish and frogs become manoeuvred in pools. At such places a great assemblage of fish-eagles may gather. In the Rukwa valley in Tanganyika, when the last water in the channels crossing the open plains dries up, several dozen fish-eagles may collect together. Trees are scarce there, and in the scattered groves in the grassland, fifty or more fish-eagles may come in to roost each evening. Such an unusual gathering of large birds of prey is an impressive sight.

From G.W. Parnell, Bantket

I have heard and seen the call over my dam here, but I must say that I did not notice whether they threw their heads back to do so or not.

From A.B. Fletcher, Gatooma

I may say that I have repeatedly heard the Cape Sea-Eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) calling in flight. The last occasion was somewhat curious in that the call was delivered when both birds of the pair were together, wheeling round one another at an altitude of several thousand feet above Sticklen's Dam, my favourite ornithological point. The birds were so high that but for the repeated calling I should very probably not have noticed them. It was impossible to tell whether the noise came from one or both birds. On other occasions the call has always proceeded from a single bird and so might be construed into a method of attracting the attention of its mate.

Mr. Fletcher goes on to say,

Oddly enough I am also in a position to assert that the Palm-nut Vulture or Vulturine Fish-Eagle (*Gypohierax angolensis*) also calls in flight. On the morning of Sunday March 4<sup>th</sup> I was sitting at my writing table, when I heard a cry which could only proceed from one of the larger Raptors. Running out with the glasses, I was surprised and delighted to find a pair of the above-named birds flying northward up the Umsweswe River at no great height, and giving no doubt as to their identity. This is only the second time I have met with the species in Southern Rhodesia, and I should be glad to know from other members of its status in other parts of the colony.

Major Trollope draws one's attention to the account in W.T. Miller's *Wild Life of Southern Africa*.

"Male and female reply to each other, either from their favourite lofty perches or in flight. With heads flung right back they call across the water, a loud, gull-like bubbling scream that is one of the most memorable and nostalgic sounds of the African bush."

Major Trollope comments "So Jubb's observations are correct, but I still have to see the manoeuvre! I say manoeuvre advisedly, for it must be very awkward while flying to fling one's head back".

Finally Mr. Jubb writes.

As regards Major Trollope's query, yes, I have heard fish-eagles call on the wing quite frequently. This is particularly noticeable when fishing on Lake Nyasa. Soaring fish-eagles can easily be observed, and what appears to be a pair of fish-eagles will greet one another fairly frequently. When a bird is robbed of its prey by another eagle, the injured party will often rise to a height and proceed to tell the robber what it thinks of him.

As pointed out by Major Trollope, the fish-eagle's call involves much muscular effort, the head being thrown well back and the throat extended. When a call is made in flight, the eagle is soaring, the head is thrown right back and the wings dip down at the same time, the tips nearly meeting beneath the bird. There is also a slight check in the flight. This can be observed quite easily with the aid of a

pair of field glasses, especially when one is in a boat and has an unobstructed view. Only last week my wife and I observed a pair of soaring fish-eagles near the Devuli weir and they called frequently. I have mentioned it before, but I would like to place on record again, the fact that I have observed fish-eagles rest on the water, with wings outstretched, after stooping at a fish and missing it. After looking around, they appear to have no difficulty in getting airborne again from this position. At Chiromo on the Shire River, I observed a fish-eagle connect with a catfish far too big for it to lift out of the water. With beating wings the fish-eagle virtually dragged the fish along the surface, and on reaching the steep bank, its mate came down to assist in dragging the squirming catfish up the bank. This process took nearly 30 minutes, and on several occasions the large fish nearly got back into the water. Beneath their nest nearby, I counted 14 heads of quite large catfish (*Clarias* sp.)

### *Black-breasted Harrier-Eagle [Black-chested Snake-eagle]*

Mr. N.E. Holmes sends an interesting account of this bird pestering a Secretarybird. He writes "Very interested and rather amazed the other day to see a Secretarybird forced to earth by a Black-breasted Harrier-Eagle. I had my attention drawn to the incident by the cries of the Secretarybird – a harsh, very loud and deep groaning cry, or rather croak, repeated several times.

"The eagle made three stoops, each time driving the Secretarybird lower, until eventually it was forced to land, whereupon the eagle soared away. It appeared as if it was teasing the bigger bird because there was no attempt to actually strike or steal anything. After the Secretarybird had been forced down he showed no further inclination to take off, but stalked off across an unploughed field.

Mr. P. Linton writes from Beatrice.

My neighbour skilled in bird observation, reports that on June 22<sup>nd</sup> he saw 14 Black-breasted Harrier Eagles perched on a tree in the vicinity of Beatrice. He was able to watch them from close up, fly to a nearby dead tree presumably to spend the night. Is it not unusual to find so many of this eagle together; or is it common as with some of the other smaller predators?

N.B. Captain Stevenson recorded a communal roost of the Black-breasted Harrier-Eagles in the August 1953 issue of the *Bokmakierie*, and see Mr. Vesey-Fitzgerald's note on the fish-eagle on page 2 of this *Bulletin*. However the Black-breasted Harrier Eagle would not be influenced by drought as the fish-eagles were.

### *Secretarybird*

From Mr. G.W. Parnell, Kashwao, Banket comes an interesting series of records made at an out-of-season nest of the Secretarybird between the 20 April and the 25 July 1955. The Secretarybird, of course, unlike many of the larger raptors, usually breeds in the spring and summer months.

The nest was discovered on the 20 April, in a Bauhinia tree on an anthep, and some 12 – 15 feet from the ground. The owner was incubating 2 eggs, which were found to be chipping one week later. This would suggest mid-March as the time the eggs were laid.

At one week old, the chicks were covered with down, and about the size of one's fist, but already there was an appreciable difference in size. Two weeks later this difference was more pronounced, and it was noticed that while the larger "froze", the smaller raised its head as if begging for food. At this stage also, it was noticed that while there was no food in the nest, lumps of dried cow-dung were arranged around the edge, a feature that continued throughout fledging. At four weeks they were as large as a native fowl, and both froze and showed fear on inspection.

A week later, for the first time, both parents were absent from the nest, and the young showed signs of feathering. At six weeks the larger appeared to be nearly fully feathered, and for the first time they were seen in the nest, newly regurgitated rats, lizards and grasshoppers. The smaller bird died during the 7<sup>th</sup> week. The survivor continued to flourish, and eventually flew after 12 weeks and five days in the nest.

Mr. Parnell goes on, "One pellet which I examined from under the tree was composed of unmistakable buck hairs, which my gun boy identified as oribi. There are several pairs of these pretty buck on my farm and it looks as if the Secretarybirds are not above killing a new-born one when they find it. At that age it would be hardly bigger than a hare. At no time have I found any signs of feathers in a pellet, although I am sure they would eat any young birds they found in a nest.

However it is noticeable that they never seem to be mobbed by smaller birds as are most predators. Other species will perch in the same tree in full view of and close to the young bird and show no signs of fear or resentment.

"It would be interesting to know whether this was merely an out-of-season nest, or a second brood due to an accident to the nest or young the previous November or December. But it would appear that the birds may be able to rear a brood at any season of the year, although the mild winter may well be a contributing factor to their success in this case."

### *Birds attacking a dead snake*

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The following vivid account comes from Mrs. J. Farrant, Marandellas.

In October last year, the Red-headed Weavers were, as usual, building in their accustomed place in our gum trees. In a Tecoma, a bulbul was brooding, and in a Cecile Brummer rose, a Scarlet-chested Sunbird. One day, drawn to the spot by the excited twittering and chattering, the borehole driller killed a green grass or tree-snake that he found climbing the gum tree towards the weaver's nest. He looped the dead snake over a branch of a nearby bush.

There was no mistaking what happened next. The three females – bulbul, sunbird and weaver – summoned their mates, and the six birds proceeded to wreak such vengeance on that dead snake that it was almost painful to watch such a display of naked hate. Swooping, soaring and diving, they tore the body to shreds, utterly oblivious of dogs, children, natives, driller and myself. When hardly a vestige of the snake remained intact, they retired to their nests; but the excited chatter continued even after dusk, and one could almost hear the weary males saying "yes, yes, my dear. I know you were very brave and I know it was the most dreadful experience of your life, but COULDN'T we change the subject".

### *Lesser Jacana*

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Mr. Fitzroy McLean writes that he came across one on March 19<sup>th</sup> on a recently constructed dam about twenty miles west of Gwelo – the first of its kind he has seen in the area, although the African Jacana is quite common. The dam is one on which there is little water vegetation as yet and it was easy to keep the bird under observation.

### *White-winged Tern*

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Concerning the query regarding this bird in *Bulletin* No. 19, Dr. Winterbottom writes that it is very common on the flooded area about the Chobe-Zambezi-Machili confluence, the Barotse Plain, and the Kafue Flats.

### *Moselikatse's Roller [Lilac-breasted Roller]*

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Mr. P. Linton reports finding in March this year, a dead but still warm Moselikatse's Roller on the ground, with a large locust part of the way down its throat, and which had presumably choked it.

### *African Golden Oriole*

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In reply to Mr. Vernon's query, Mr. Fitzroy McLean writes.

The nest of this bird is similar to that of the Black-headed Oriole, and also the eggs, although one in my collection is slightly smaller than those in four Black-headed Oriole clutches. I have found at least ten nests of the Black-headed Oriole, most of which have been made of a yellowish-green moss, although a few were made of similar-coloured fine grass. Apparently the usual moss was unavailable in these cases.

Only two African Golden Oriole nests were discovered during the same period; one very high up at the top of a large tree and almost inaccessible; the other suspended in the fork of a branch about 18 feet up. The branch was rather slender and swayed a lot in the wind. One egg was seen in the old nest which I kept under observation for three days before deciding to take the eggs. By standing on top of a truck, I managed to reach the nest fairly easily, and found still only one egg. A second egg

was broken on the ground below the nest, and I concluded that it may have fallen out when the nest swayed in a high wind.

Both these nests were found in November and both were in isolated trees near fairly dense bush, whereas the Black-headed Oriole has a penchant for building its nest on a tree overhanging a road or path, or even a fence. Could it be that they make use of the roads or fences as a quick guide to their nests? If no road or fence is available, a large outstanding tree is chosen, even if the nest is built quite low down.

-5-

### *European migrants*

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Mr. Parnell writes: I wonder whether you or others have noticed how late some of the European migrants are in leaving us this season. Yesterday afternoon (19<sup>th</sup> April) a small party of European Bee-eaters passed over, calling. This morning (20<sup>th</sup>) quite a few Barn Swallows were flying low, hawking insects disturbed by my tractor ploughing down a late green manure crop. Late last week a mixed party of Barn Swallows, House Martins [Common House-martin] and bee-eaters were doing likewise over the same field.

Mr. Fletcher says: The Willow Warbler mentioned in my last letter has not been heard singing since March 10<sup>th</sup>, though the species was seen in the Gatooma area by me up to March 25<sup>th</sup>. No migrants have been noticed since that date except the Barn Swallow and European Bee-eater, both of which were still present on April 6<sup>th</sup>.

From Que Que, we hear from Mr. R.K. Brooke: Apropos of the Willow Warbler in *Bulletin 19*, I have only heard this species sing once and that was on February 19<sup>th</sup> this year in a Que Que garden. Quite a song-bird of this area is the Red-backed Shrike, both adult males and others (I am not sure that I ever distinguish females and juvenile males in the field). This surprised me because round Gatooma where they are equally common I seldom heard them sing, possibly about once a season. Witherby's handbook says no song has been recorded from their winter quarters, but it has since the book was published.

Concerning his holiday on Lake Nyasa [Malawi] in April, Roger Day writes: On a trip round the lake on the Ilala, I was interested to note that the Wire-tailed Swallows were present at every port of call, often coming out to perch on the ship. They certainly seem to be the common swallows in those parts.

When anchored one night at Mwaya at the north end of the lake there was a fierce tropical storm and I thought I heard the cries of waders. Looking out, I occasionally made out a white form as a bird came within range of the ship's lights. I suppose they were disturbed by the storm and attracted by the lights of the ship. The only waders I happened to come across otherwise were an occasional Common Sandpiper. The call of these birds was "Tee-tee, Tee-tee, Tee-tee-tee-tee-tee, which might be sufficient identification for the expert, but not for the enthusiastic amateur.

Your editor observed a small passage movement of Willow Warblers through Bulawayo between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> March and also has a record of the Great Reed-warbler. This bird inhabited a particularly tall and untidy India rubber hedge (presumably thinking it some Rhodesian variety of reed). It was first heard on the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1955, and was very noisy at first. Later it became less vocal, and was last heard on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March.

The winter is nearly over, but it is not too late to send in any records of migrants you may have. Also be on the look-out for first arrivals in the spring, and send your records in.

### *PROGRESS ON THE NEST RECORD CARD SCHEME*

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The indefatigable Mr. Miles prepared the following report on the scheme up to the 30<sup>th</sup> April when he proceeded on 6 months' overseas leave. During his absence, Mr. R.K. Brooke, of P.O. Box 8050 Causeway has undertaken this task.

The thanks of the Society are due to those members (there were 45 in 1955) who have contributed to the scheme since it began. Annual reports have been issued each year to contributors, and last year a record number of nests was reported, the actual number being 841. The ROS collection now consists of nearly 4100 cards, and the number of records is even more as can be seen in the SAOS first Annual report in the *Ostrich*.

The ROS Collection can now be said to be authoritative, and all known and published breeding records available to me, going back to the beginning of the century have been put on cards. This has made it possible to put our records into the form of breeding tables (records by months in which eggs were laid, as in the Nyasaland Check list). But there are still an alarming number of species where it has been found that for one reason or another there are no breeding records. Others have all too few records, while we could do with more data even on some of the very common species, so as to establish not only the peak breeding months, but the start and end of the season.

When sufficient cards have been received, it will be possible for any member to borrow the cards of any species they want to work on.

-6-

Over one thousand cards have been duplicated for this purpose. This year the collection has been consulted on a number of occasions. Dr. H. Friedmann, the world expert on parasite species, asked for a summary of cuckoo records. Dr. J. Winterbottom wanted to know the localities of breeding records of Fringillidae for the new book. The Game Officer has been given a summary of our breeding records of Francolin, as he has been asked if the open season should be extended. And lastly there is the African Wild Fowl Enquiry, and the Society's records have been made available through our duplicate cards.

### THE PAN-AFRICAN ORNITHOLOGICAL CONGRESS

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#### A message from the President.

Almost everyone, if not everybody, has heard of the Pan African Ornithological Congress, but there appears to be a number of our members who are seeking information about this proposed gathering, which will be without doubt, a milestone in the history of Ornithology in the Rhodesias.

The Congress will be held at Livingstone in July 1957 – from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup>, as far as can be said at the moment. There will probably be two or three excursions, which will take the delegates into one or more of the Game Reserves, either before or after the Congress. Details of these are being worked out at present, and will be communicated to all members at a later date. Accommodation will be booked through an agent, to be appointed by the SAOS.

The congress will be attended by eminent ornithologists from all over the world, and affords a wonderful opportunity to meet and hear such people as Peter Scott, James Fisher, Charles Sibley and Professor Berlioz, who have already indicated their desire to attend if circumstances permit.

A committee has already been appointed to draw up the scientific programme, but I have been informed that many papers will be of general interest, so that the Congress will not be exclusively a meeting of specialists. Membership of the Congress is open to any ornithologist at a fee of £2.2.0. which includes the right to attend all meetings. The cost of the published proceedings will be an additional charge.

Here then, is a golden opportunity for every member of the ROS to attend a Congress which will take place within our own territory – an opportunity not likely to be repeated for very many years. It is to be hoped that the ROS will be there in full force. If it is your intention to attend – even if you cannot make a firm decision at the moment – it will be a great help if you will let our Hon. Secretary (Miss M. Paterson, P.O. Box 240, Bulawayo) know as soon as possible. It will help the organiser to estimate requirements, and we, for our part, will know who to advise as further details of the Congress become available.

\_\_\_\_\_ C.S. Mitchell

Annual General Meeting. This is due to be held this year in October in the Midlands. Look out for further announcements.

Essay Competition. It has been decided not to proceed with this at present, as the SAOS has thrown the Llewellyn Andersson bequest competition open to Rhodesian Schoolchildren. Ideas are sought for a competition to replace it.

Your editor wishes to apologise for the long delay since the appearance of *Bulletin* No. 19. But he hopes a six-page issue will be accepted as compensation. Thank you to all contributors, and please carry on with the good work. If any points strike you after wading through this issue please don't hesitate to write in.