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Swifts on the Sebakwe River

Mr. C.J. Vernon and the writer visited the Sebakwe River on the 14th October because we thought it would be ornithologically profitable. We first visited Sebakwe Poort, some 5 miles northeast of Que Que, arriving there at about 6 a.m. Although the sun had already risen on the cliff tops, few swifts had as yet appeared, since, as a family, they are late risers.

Within the next quarter of an hour, some 50 Brown Swifts [African Black Swift] (*Apus barbatus*) and an equal number of Indian Swifts [Little Swift] (*A. affinis*) had appeared, to feed and indulge in their favourite wheeling and screaming. It is possible that other species were present, though they were not identified.

The swifts proved to be breeding on the precipitous west side of the southern half of the range through which the Sebakwe River passes. As the precipices are undercut, it is very difficult to climb to the sites occupied by the breeding birds. However Carl Vernon, at some risk to his person, secured an unoccupied swift's nest as a trophy.

As a result of Vernon's climb, the Indian Swift was discovered to be breeding in twos and threes in suitable places on the undersides of overhanging rocks. They made their usual nests of feathers and grass stuck together with saliva. The nest secured measured 10 x 6 inches across the top, and was 4 inches deep. It contained many poultry and swift feathers and odd ones of doves, canaries and other species.

The Brown Swift gave all the appearances of breeding in holes and cracks in rocks protected from the weather, but as none of these could be reached, it is not possible to be absolutely certain of this.

There were also about a dozen pairs of Rock Martins scattered over the cliffs. Their swallow-like mud-cup nests are readily distinguished from swifts when seen, though the colour blends readily with that of the rock. A pair of Peregrine Falcons appeared to have an eyrie, though it is doubtful whether they were breeding at the time. The Black Stork, of which we saw a family party, the Red-winged Starling, and the Mocking Cliff-chat, were other probable cliff breeders.

About midday we left the poort, and visited Dutchman's Pool Dam, about 4 miles north of Que Que, which we did not explore, but under the eaves of a pumphouse below the dam wall, a Mocking Chat was found breeding in a swallow's nest. It was a half formed igloo type of nest which had never been completed by the swallows; presumably because the Mocking Chats had moved in as soon as it was far enough built for their purpose.

We then walked a mile or so downstream to the railway bridge where the African Palm-swifts (*Cypsiurus parva*) breed. As before (Brooke — *Ostrich* 1955, p.134) 13 of the 16 girders were in use. But one pair had rebuilt their nest on the outer flange of the box-girder. The cheeping of chicks was not heard, and presumably the swifts were still incubating eggs. Carl Vernon tried to climb up to a nest, but was unsuccessful, as a rope of some sort is necessary to support the climber while he

examines the nest. So it is still not known whether the Palm Swift here glues its eggs to its nest with saliva as it is known to, when nesting in windblown palm leaves.

Subsequently, while Carl Vernon was taking a dip in the river, he noticed that the nests on the piers of the bridge were mostly those of Indian Swifts, a very few belonging to Wire-tailed Swallows. An Indian Swift flying out of a nest confirmed this. In all there were six nests of which three were certainly in use. They had mud bases, suggesting that the swifts had taken over swallows' nests and built then up with straw, feathers and saliva.

We then returned to Salisbury, having spent a most profitable day.

R.K. Brooke

Black-headed and African Golden Orioles

Commenting on Mr. Fitzroy McLean's notes in *Bulletin* No. 20, Mr. B.V. Neuby-Varty writes

Here at Marandellas both orioles are quite common, and every year I find nests of both. Last year, I found three African Golden and two Black-headed. Both species nest in all sorts of positions; in large and small trees, in thick bush, and in isolated trees. In both cases they are slung in the fork of a small branch, generally at the end of a larger one.

Here all nests of the Black-headed Oriole are made out of lichen (or if you prefer, Old man's Beard), and lined with grass. The ground colour of the eggs is white, with large spots and streaks of greeny brown, yellowish brown and mauve. Eggs from Bechuanaland are light pink with yellowy brown and mauve markings concentrated in a ring at the thick end. Measurements are 27.5-28 x 20-20.5 mm.

African Golden Orioles make their nests of woven yellow grass only. The lining is also grass, and they are much deeper and better constructed than those of the Black-headed. The eggs are pink, with round spots of rust and underlying mauve spots, generally more concentrated at the thick end, and the only variation I can find is that in some the ground colour is much darker. In three clutches the size variation is 28-33 x 20.5-22 mm with one very small egg 27.5 x 20 mm.

I may add that half these clutches and others I have exchanged were collected in land being stumped for tobacco, and I found it useless leaving the trees, as piccanins promptly try to trap the birds on the nests and generally end up by destroying them.

From Mrs. L.C. Webster come some interesting records made on two trips down the Zambezi from Chirundu to the Mupata Gorge, the first in 1955 and the second a year later, both during the last week in August and first week in September.

The East African Pratincole [Collared Pratincole] was found breeding in 1954 at the end of September 40 miles below Chirundu on a small island, in depressions in the sand. None were seen in 1955 but in 1956 about 30 were seen 65-70 miles below Chirundu. There was no sign of nesting. The White-collared Pratincole [Rock Pratincole] occurred from 85 miles below Chirundu and was abundant wherever there were rocks. 45 to 50 miles below Chirundu pools and pans are plentiful. Some are open, some completely blocked with weed. One was about 100 yards from the Zambezi bank and 700 yards long, tapering into small creeks. We stood at the closed end of this and counted roughly 250 duck packed thickly, with another heavy concentration at the far end. The following morning I sat near the lower end of the pool at sunrise. The White-faced Duck were greatest in number. I counted up to 200 in one flock and then gave up. If disturbed they were the first to rise and flew off whistling.

The Spur-winged Goose was next in density, showing all sorts of variation in colour: some few completely black, some with a little white on the abdomen, and others with varying degrees of white. There were also large numbers of Knob-nosed Geese [Comb Duck], very densely packed. Flocks of duck would continually rise, circle overhead, and then return to settle.

Three days were spent at this pool, and many birds were recorded in addition to the ducks. Herons and storks, cormorants, waders and kingfishers. Brief glimpses of Peters' Finfoot [African Finfoot] in and out of the reeds, and the coucals. One Great Coucal [does not occur; =Senegal Coucal], a

decidedly large bird, was at the edge of some reeds in a dried creek bed at the extreme end of the pool. The others were feeding in and out of reeds on the opposite bank, and were either Burchell's or White-browed Coucal [=latter].

Cape Sea Eagle: Notes on this species [African Fish-eagle] are still coming in. Mr. F.D. Matthyser writes

Up to now, I must admit, I have only heard these birds call in flight from a terrific height, and it has been extremely difficult to observe any particular action. I have, however, very recently (2.9.56) made some observations on a pair of these birds on Selous Island in the Zambezi. Both birds were flying at a great height calling to each other, then gradually planed down and settled in a large tree (species unknown) on Selous Island. They sat quietly for some time and then started calling. The head is thrown backwards with the first part of the call and then the neck is stretched out and jerked backwards and forwards in rhythm with the rest of the call. This is not unlike the "gesticulations" made by a turkey tom whilst gobbling, but certainly more elegant!!

They called again and again whilst facing each other, and next the mating of the pair was observed. The male flew up, settled on the female, and proceeded much as a common pigeon does. This lasted for approximately twenty seconds, and then the male flew off, to settle again to the left of the female. This is where I think a very important point arises. It was found that the MALE had a high-pitched call and the FEMALE certainly the lower pitch; as they called again some time after.

Mr. Neuby-Varty writes "I wonder how many people realise that they are just as big a scavenger as some of our other "noble" eagles. I was a little surprised to find them on the remains of lion kills in the Gorongosa Game Reserve in P.E.A. [Mozambique] but according to Captain Pitman this was common in Uganda. Fish Eagles are very plentiful in Gorongosa.

In her notes, Mrs. Webster mentions a Cape Sea Eagle twice knocking over a Goliath Heron, which was quite helpless, before flying off, as well as a Bateleur also attacking a Goliath Heron.

Many writers have recorded that the Sea Eagle and Goliath Heron seem to be perpetually at war with [each] other, of course. A rather astonishing observation when you come to think of it. The Sea Eagle is of course a confirmed robber, but ether victims, such as ospreys, seem to accept it with resignation. Your editor has never been fortunate enough to witness such an encounter, although he has seen a Saddle-billed Stork "see off" a Fish Eagle in a most determined manner. Have any other of our readers been lucky enough to see anything of the kind? If so, the editor would like to hear about it.

Migration arrivals. Mrs. D. Searson sends the following dates of first records of various migrants at Borrowdale:

African Paradise -flycatcher – one male September 12th

White Stork – one September 14, possibly one which wintered here.

Klaas's Cuckoo – September 30th

Diderick Cuckoo – October 6th

European Bee-eater – October 6th

Plum-coloured Starling [Violet-backed Starling] – October 23rd

The dates for the two cuckoos and the bee-eater correspond fairly closely to those for Bulawayo as recorded by the Editor, but one curious fact with regard to the two cuckoos may or may not be significant. For three years now, I have heard the Klaas's Cuckoo calling for a week to ten days before the Diderick; but when the latter does appear, the Klaas's fades out of the picture and is heard no more. Possibly it is merely a case of the larger Diderick taking over the Klaas's territory, but if anyone has any comments, send them in.

Mr. Fitzroy McLean has some further notes from the Gwelo district.

Arnot's Chat. During February and March this year, I saw many parties of Arnot's Chat in the Lower Gwelo area, and was informed by a friend that he had seen them about 25 miles west of Gwelo. I have not heard of them occurring east of this point.

Blue Waxbill. During March I found four nests, all built in small thorn trees, and in every case the nest was built within a few inches of a wasp's nest. When the birds flew out of the nests, the wasps started buzzing around as if to intimidate unwelcome visitors. Needless to say, I did not venture to inspect the contents. Only one nest, found on 22nd December 1955, had no protecting wasps.

Jardine's Babbler [Arrow-marked Babbler]. A clutch of three fresh eggs was found in thick bush in a rather waterless area on February 23rd 1956. Other nests I have found have always been in November and December, and usually near streams or rivers. In this case, apart from boreholes, the nearest water was a dam about 3 miles away.

Mr. F.D. Matthyser writes from Karoi (10th September); Today I watched a pair of Fork-tailed Drongos building their nest. They are building in an unusually low tree, only about ten feet from the ground, and on the only suitable projecting branch. I hope to get a series of photographs if the tree opposite the nest is suitable. They appear to be quite tame, but slightly aggressive now and then. Am also keeping "tabs" on an Emerald-spotted Wood-dove which is nesting on the new proposed road (in a tree, I mean!). I only hope she finishes before the contractors start with their bulldozers!

On a cross-country jaunt towards the Sanyati River, one thing which struck me was the change from the Cape Turtle-dove to only the Laughing Dove in that area. The former gradually "died out" as the latter became more plentiful, until only the Laughing Dove was seen, in large numbers, with an occasional solitary Emerald-spotted Wood-dove. Incidentally, the turtle-doves in that area appear to be very dark in colour. They may possibly even be a subspecies. (Quite likely the (Angola) African Mourning Dove, which looks extremely like the Cape Turtle-dove, but with a different call-note – Ed.)

I found a very late brood of Meyer's Parrot in August, by accident, while looking for something else. I have previously only found them nesting in April, at Inkomo near Salisbury.

Mr. M.P. Stuart Irwin is seeking some information on the African Black Duck. He points out that the typical subspecies *Anas sparsa sparsa* from South Africa has the bill dark lead blue, with a black saddle mark and a black nail. The Abyssinian Black Duck *A. s. leucostigma* has the lead-blue replaced by pink. Southern Rhodesian birds are supposed to belong to the southern subspecies, and nearly all have lead-blue bills, but he has examined a pair from Cyrene Dam with bright pink bills. If anybody has met with Black Ducks with pink bills, he would be glad to hear about it.

The first meeting of the newly formed Rhodesian branch of the International Committee for Bird Preservation was recently held in Bulawayo, in order to arrange for the forthcoming meeting in Bulawayo of the International Committee, which will be held just before the Pan-African Ornithological Congress in July 1957.

Recent distinguished visitors to the National Museum include Dr. D.L. Serventy of the Australian Commonwealth Industrial Research Organisation, Mr. C.W. Benson from Northern Rhodesia, and Dr. G. Rudebeck, of the Transvaal Museum. Dr. Rudebeck gave the Matabeleland branch a most interesting talk on the Transvaal Museum's recent expedition to southern Angola, in the course of which several new subspecies were discovered, and a francolin which appears to be completely new to science.

The Check List of Southern Rhodesian Birds is now in the hands of the printers.

The Editor of the *Bokmakierie* urgently needs "copy" for the next edition. What offers from Rhodesian members of articles on Rhodesian birds?

Matabeleland members! Would anyone care to accommodate Mr. C. Vernon for a few days between the 7th and 31st January, when he will be collecting nest records from Matabeleland? Any offers can be sent c/o Mr. H.M. Miles, P.O. Box 8016, Causeway.

The Editor wishes all members a very happy Christmas, and successful birding in 1957.