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The Pan-African Ornithological Congress and the International Committee for Bird Preservation

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In any account of these two conferences, it would be impossible for someone like myself, whose ornithology had previously been confined to Southern Africa, to refer to even a small proportion of the wealth of knowledge and experience gained, even though all papers were on African subjects (or at least were of special interest to the student of African ornithology); but everyone agreed as to the value of the contacts made with ornithologists from other continents. In this respect, the ICBP conference, which was held in Bulawayo, prior to the PAOC, was of great value, because, apart from the more international character of the discussions, the smaller number of the delegates provided the opportunity for more intimate social contacts.

Discussions at this conference covered such divergent aspects of Bird Preservation as the status of White Storks and Black Storks in Europe and Africa; the effects of oil pollution of the sea on bird life; protection of birds on the Tristan da Cunha group of islands; effects of pesticides on bird life; the establishment of reserves in the more thickly populated continents for the larger migrants; and the prevention of the illegal export of protected species. We even discussed birds that are pests, and it seemed strange and out of place at a meeting on Bird Preservation, to listen to descriptions of methods employed for the mass destruction of Red-billed Queleas.

Of the White Stork, it was sad to learn that the numbers are declining, and that fewer seem to be nesting year by year. Dr. E. Schultz of Stuttgart, who has given much time and study to this bird, particularly in Europe, gave interesting details of his observations.

The effects of oil pollution of the sea will not become a local problem of the Rhodesian Committee, but there is a definite field of study in the effect of pesticides, particularly in those areas where mass spraying is carried out for anti-malarial measures, or tsetse fly control. Of similar concern is the loss of bird life, which occurs in certain agricultural areas in other countries where poisoned grain is used to destroy rodents. It was most interesting to learn that research has shown that colouring of the grain with certain dyes acts as a repellent to birds, who are definitely colour-sensitive, whereas rodents are colour-blind.

The need for bird protection on such sparsely inhabited islands as the Tristan da Cunha group may not be immediately obvious, but man is not the only, or the most important predator. Cats which accompany him, as well as rats which arrive as "stowaways" in kit and stores, can and do play havoc amongst ground-nesting petrels and shearwaters, and indeed, have already considerably reduced the bird population on some islands.

But it was not only the birds that were preserved and protected at Bulawayo, for the local members had taken considerable trouble and care to provide a social round for the ornithologists that would ensure that there was no risk of extinction through lack of nourishment or local migration to better feeding grounds! Besides the sundowner party in the Museum and the cocktail party in the City Hall, there were outings to Khami and to the Matopos, both well conducted and organised, so that our overseas visitors could get an introduction to the Rhodesian veld and its avifauna.

The close of the ICBP conference came all too soon, yet such was the anticipation of everyone for the PAOC to follow at Livingstone that there were no regrets. Accordingly, early on the Friday morning, we loaded our luggage and boarded our transport en route for the Wankie Game Reserve [Hwange]. The passengers in the bus in which I travelled were a representative cross-section of the delegates to the Congress, and I could not fail to notice the number of different languages spoken as we got under way. Many of our commoner birds were new to our overseas delegates, and no-one was more surprised than I to find myself identifying different species to such eminent ornithologists. Our visitors were particularly interested in the raptors, and of these the Wankie Game Reserve provided a good variety.

The game provided an additional attraction, but, varied and exciting as it was, and I think everybody saw a very good selection of wild life, the avifauna was of primary interest. There was, for instance, the occasion when one of the cars drew up in sight of a large herd of elephant, and the driver, one of our members, expecting his passenger to be duly impressed, found that she was looking out of the other side of the vehicle and asking for some small and insignificant bird to be identified!

Overnight stops were made at the Main and Robins Camps, and eventually we arrived at the Victoria Falls and Livingstone, where everyone was deposited at their various hotels.

The Pan-African Ornithological Congress opened the next day, the official opening being performed by Mrs. Mackie Niven, the President of the South African Ornithological Society, and the Rhodesian Society was honoured by its president being asked to take the chair for this function, which was attended by over 200 delegates.

Immediately after the tea which followed the Congress got down to business and the first paper was read. The author was Professor K.H. Voous, and the subject the relation of the European and African avifauna. Thereafter, papers were delivered both mornings and afternoons, with for the most part, two sessions taking place simultaneously in adjacent halls. It was perhaps a pity to crowd such a wealth of information into such a few days, and one was often faced with the dilemma of having to choose one of the papers, both of which one was most anxious to hear! As these papers are to be published in due course, there is no need to make further comment, but reference should be made to the very excellent films and slides which were shown every evening, which were much enjoyed. Mr. D.C.H. Plowes contributed to these by showing some magnificent slides, and another interesting evening featured a selection of slides and films on humming birds, shown by Dr. Dean Amadon.

Eventually came the day and the time for the closing session. Professor Berlioz gave a summing-up of the congress, and the usual speeches of thanks were made, and the time for farewells had come. There was, however, another function, which was arranged in an impromptu manner, and which was exceedingly well attended. This was a dinner at the Bon Accord Hotel, and it was a fitting ending to the Congress. A feature was that the leading delegate from each country gave a short speech in his mother tongue.

To some fifty delegates, however, this was not the end, for they were taking part in the final excursion, the Northern Rhodesian excursion to the Kafue National Park and to Lochinvar Ranch. Having been warned of the rough and crude condition of our camps, it was a great surprise to find ourselves stationed at Ngoma, where there is a first class camp with brick chalets, baths and waterborne sewerage. Some of these buildings were unfinished, necessitating camping conditions, but there was very little hardship. Three days were spent at this camp, and parties, each under the guidance of a Northern Rhodesia Game Warden, left each morning for a conducted tour on a

specified route. Grateful thanks are due to Mr. C.W. Benson and his assistants for the trouble, care and patience they took in arranging these trips.

From Ngoma we proceeded to Lochinvar Ranch — a cross-country run over shocking roads — which is situated adjacent to the Kafue Flats, on the edge of which a camp had been erected. Here, at our last camp of the excursion, was the greatest ornithological treat of all. It is difficult adequately to describe the wealth of bird life on the edge of these shallow waters, but mention must be made of a flock of some 150 Grey Crowned Cranes dancing in the sunlight; of pratincoles whirling around in hundreds; of African Openbill Storks and Wattled Cranes, pelicans, Spur-winged Goose and Egyptian Goose; Ibis and herons, and everywhere ducks flying in thousands, and above it all the mewing cry of the African Fish-eagle. In the immediate background, Red Lechwe stretched away into the distance, whilst on nearly every anthill perched vultures and Marabou Storks, awaiting the death of the sick and aged of the herds.

I shall not easily forget the memory I have of the sun setting in a blaze of colour across the water, and the black silhouettes of the flying birds coming in to roost — and eventually the black stillness of the African night, broken only by the murmuring of the birds as they settled. It is, I think, a suitable thought with which to end these impressions.

The Grey-headed Bush-shrike

This handsome shrike is a well-known bird in Rhodesian gardens, and would seem to be the local counterpart of South Africa's Bokmakierie, but it is far more aggressive and predatory in its nature, as would be expected from a bird with such an enormous and cruel bill. There is even an account of one attacking an eaglet, and some of the ICBP delegates on their visit to Khami Dam saw one boldly descend a tree and kill a mouse on the ground. Mr. R. Henderson has sent an account of a further escapade of this bloodthirsty bird, He writes:

“During a visit to the Victoria Falls in September 1956, I stayed at the Zambezi Rest Camp, a quiet spot some 2 miles up the river from the Falls, on the South Bank. The camp is right on the water's edge, and it is a pleasant occupation to sit under the trees near the river, and look across the mile of placid water to the opposite bank.

One morning, when thus lounging under the trees, my attention was aroused by a considerable stir of birds overhead. For a short time past, a crescendo of squeaks and calls had been contending with an indolent desire to gaze across the water, and ignore any consideration other than that of meditation.

On looking up into the tree whence the disturbance was coming, I found that the noise was being made by a pair of Puff-backed Shrikes [Black-backed Puffback], which were in evident agitation, darting back and forth through the heavily-foliaged upper branches. After watching them for some moments, I saw that they were mobbing a Grey-headed Bush-shrike, which in turn was vigorously warding off their attacks. While I watched, the bush-shrike flew to an outer branch of the tree and started to pull to pieces a nest, which, but for this action, would have remained hidden from my view. The nest apparently belonged to the puffbacks which now redoubled their assaults; but they were helpless against the bush-shrike which easily parried their attacks with its exceptionally heavy bill. Furthermore, the latter did not content itself with a purely defensive role, but twice abandoned the nest to pursue the Puffbacks through the tree.

During the time I followed the contest, the bush-shrike did no more than pull out beaks-full of material from the nest, but it looked as though he had already damaged it and it was by now in a ruined state. There was nothing to show whether it had consumed eggs or young before the time my attention was drawn to the episode, but as I had not seen the start of the fracas, it looked to me as though the bush-shrike had already done this work, and that I was observing a bit of subsequent devilment on its part. The bush-shrike behaved with extreme aggressiveness towards the smaller birds, and seemed to be violently urged by a desire to inflict as much damage as it could on their nest. After completing its pillage, the bush-shrike disappeared into the foliage of the trees followed by the Puffbacks. The furore died down and quiet returned once more. As a result of this little scene, I had to revise my attitude towards the Grey-headed Bush-shrike, which until then, had been influenced by the bird's beautiful colouring more than by its habits. Its powerful, cruel bill however, should provide a warning of its rapacious propensities.”

The Angola Pitta

A specimen of this bird [African Pitta] was picked up injured but alive, in the precincts of the Anglican Cathedral, Salisbury, on Saturday 18th November 1957. Its beak was encrusted with some "gummy" material so that its mandibles could not be opened. This was subsequently cleaned off and the bird given some grasshoppers and water. Mrs. Hiller, who took care of it, states that it had recovered by the evening and she took it out of Salisbury and released it when it flew away strongly. It was interesting to be able to examine a living specimen of this beautiful bird at close quarters, and to observe its upright thrush-like stance, and also to notice the almost complete absence of a tail. Unfortunately no rings were available, but as it appears to live in dense evergreen bush the chances of a recovery are not good unless it should be foolish enough to fly into another building.

Previously, but only occasionally, specimens have been picked up dead in Salisbury, having flown into buildings during their migratory flight, which apparently takes place at night. It would be interesting to know more of these movements, and also if any sight records have been made in our area. The records quoted in the *Southern Rhodesian Check List* all seem to be of birds in transit.

Mr. G.W. Parnell has some further news of the Secretarybirds about which he wrote in *Bulletin* No. 20, who hatched their eggs in February, and their young flew in July. Writing on the 22nd February 1957, he says:

I have been surprised to find this pair or another building again this week. It would appear that if they are going to lay, then the eggs will be laid in mid-March. In 1956, no nest was found, either at this time, or in August or September.

Perhaps that first nest was not such a freak after all. Perhaps they do rear two broods a year at times. Perhaps they are able to breed more or less all the year round.

Incidentally I have heard of another case of both young surviving, also in this district. They were removed from the nest when they could stand, and soon became very tame, and hung around for some while, consuming vast quantities of boys' meat and hens' eggs, which they swallowed whole. I gather that their captor was quite glad when they decided to emigrate."

An Eagle-owl [Spotted Eagle-owl] was recently brought into the National Museum from Nyamandhlovu. On opening it up it was found to have the remains of a hedgehog in its stomach. Surely an awkward and unpleasant morsel even for a voracious bird like an eagle-owl.

Back numbers of the Bulletin

Following requests for back-numbers, it has been decided to establish a stock, and an appeal is made to members if they have any back-numbers of this bulletin and don't want them, to send them to me. Copies of all issues are needed, but particularly Numbers 1 to 12 and some of the more recent numbers from No. 18 onwards. So don't throw all those back-numbers out. Send them to me instead!

Check List of the birds of Southern Rhodesia

The demand for the first printing of the Check List was so encouraging that a second edition was ordered in July, and is expected early in December. If you were unable to obtain a copy of the first edition, you should be luckier now.