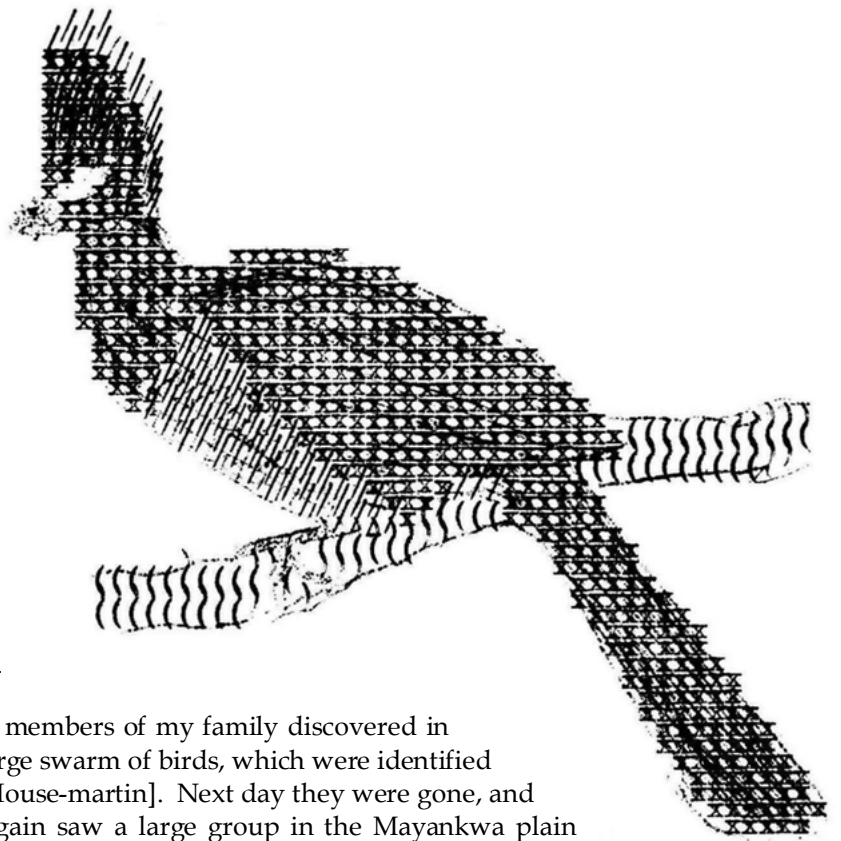


Rhodesian Ornithological Society Bulletin No. 26

October 1958

Editor: Dr. R.M. Harwin,
P.O. Box 647,
Gwelo.

BAROTSELAND NOTES



One day in July 1953, Mrs. Harwin and members of my family discovered in the floodplains at Balovale [Zambia] a large swarm of birds, which were identified as European House-martins [Common House-martin]. Next day they were gone, and a specimen could not be collected. I again saw a large group in the Mayankwa plain (Mankoya district) on the 7th June 1958, and they were observed on the central Buluzi plain on the 22nd June and on the 25th June near Senanga. On the central Buluzi plain a few European Sandmartins [Sand Martin] were also seen.

A crane or rail was observed on the Buluzi plain near Mongu on 11th May (about 20 were definitely seen during the day's trip) which corresponded to the description given in *Roberts* of the Spotted Crane — again a European migrant which should not have been there at all. The bird was different from anything seen here before, but never gave the watcher enough time to study it closely. When chased up by the boat, it would run over the reeds for a few yards and then dive or scuttle out of sight. The bill was brightly yellow, and there appeared to be a yellow shield at the base. The rest of the bird was just a mottled brown. I asked some people going out after duck to procure a specimen, but it apparently did not come into view and on a later trip through the area, not a single specimen was seen.

The Black Heron is supposed to be numerous on the Barotse plain, but even so, a congregation of over 80 of these birds which I watched on the 22nd June was a most impressive sight. About 20 of them were in the "shading" position so characteristic of the species.

On 11th July, a Bittern was watched from a close distance — about 20 yards — after it had flown from a mango tree into an open spot in the plain. The *Checklist of the Birds of Northern Rhodesia* records only "probable sound records" from Mongu.

A small brown eagle was observed near Sioma on the Zambezi on the 27th June, being mobbed by drongos [Fork-tailed Drongo] and bulbuls. It had a very short, stumpy tail, but there was otherwise nothing characteristic about it until it flew off. Then it showed a definite broad white bar on the upper tail coverts. Was it a Lesser Spotted Eagle?

A Hamerkop ("no records from Barotse Plain") was seen at Tapo at the edge of the plain on 31st March, and the Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark ("noticed once at Sesheke") on the 25th June at Senanga. Other birds not previously recorded from Barotse-land were flocks of Stumpy-tailed Spinetails [Bohm's Spinetail], and a pair of Peters' Twinspots [Red-throated Twinspot] at Dongwe on the 25th June. Admittedly they were only a few yards inside Barotse-land, the spinetails flitting over the Dongwe River, and the Twinspots in dense scrub on the river bank.

The Barotse Native Government affords protection to the following birds — all types of vultures, the Marabou Stork, the White-bellied Stork [Abdim's Stork] and all egrets. The protection of the egrets is

due to a Barotse legend that one of their great chiefs, Mwanambinyi, before disappearing underground at the end of his reign, transformed all his cattle into egrets, and these birds are still called Mwanambinyi's cattle.

W. Gilges.

Black-headed Oriole. Mr. F.O. McLean writes

In my garden in Gwelo, I have about 20 varieties of aloes, which attract a variety of sunbirds during the winter months. Two years ago I saw a male Black-headed Oriole feeding from the nectar of the aloe flowers, and occasionally giving a call somewhat like that of the European Bee-eater, and entirely different from the usual oriole call. His call was made several times even after the bird had left the aloes and settled on a nearby thorn-tree.

The same thing happened again this year, a male Black-headed Oriole being a daily visitor to my aloe garden for the past two months. At first he only visited the flowers of *Aloe aculeata*; when these were drying off he changed to *Aloe excelsa*. About a dozen other varieties were in flower at the same time, but were neglected in favour of these two. I think that this is because these two have thickish stems and fairly large flowers. Others have thinner and more slippery stems and smaller flowers. I also saw a male Black-headed Oriole feeding on *Aloe excelsa* flowers in the Que Que Reserve.

The bird visiting the aloes this year invariably announced its arrival with the usual oriole call, and on only one day did I hear it give the bee-eater-like call. When feeding on *Aloe excelsa*, it was observed that the birds' bills became a bright orange-red colour from the pollen.

I imagine that nectar is not a usual food for orioles and that this may have some bearing on the altered call-note; but why should the call of an insect-eating bird like the bee-eater be chosen. The only similar instance I can call to mind is that of the Red-winged Starling, normally a fruit-eater. I have known them change their call when feeding on ticks on sheep. On two occasions in very cold weather in the Drakensberg foothills, I have seen flocks of starlings settle in a herd of sheep and pick ticks off them, climbing all over the sheep and walking on the ground like Pied Starlings. Their calls then were a very poor imitation of the pied starling, a bird with which the sheep were quite familiar."

Yellow-billed Kite. Mr. B.E. Dean, of Malindela, Bulawayo, says

It may be of interest that on my way to work on the morning of the 21st August I noticed a single kite, which I assume was *Milvus migrans parasitus*, which with effortless ease, glided through the trees surrounding Coghlan Junior School in Bulawayo.

Last year, the first kite I noticed was on the morning of the 21st September, exactly one month later, floating at no great height above the houses in Malindela. Nearly every morning for some days, the bird was seen flying low over this suburb, and it is more than likely it was the same one. On the 28th September, 1957, when watching the friendly cricket match between Rhodesia and Transvaal at Raylton, a kite was seen circling over the ground. As the distance between Malindela and Raylton is about 2 miles, it was quite possibly the same bird. Small numbers of this species are known to remain through the year, so it is possible the birds I saw were residents.

I assume this bird, like its Indian cousin, *Milvus migrans govinda*, the Indian Pariah Kite, has a great fondness for chicken runs. I have seen the latter suddenly swoop down and take food off a tray carried by a servant. On yet another occasion, I witnessed the turban of an Indian, who used to climb trees for me, neatly taken off by one of the parent birds when he was a few feet from its nest."

African Fish-eagle. Major Trollope remarks

I see that notes about the fish-eagle's call are still coming in. I must of course be convinced by the mass of evidence that they do call in flight, although I have still to observe this personally. But I was interested in Mr. Parnell's note regarding a fish-eagle at St. Lucia "skittering" along the surface of the water with a fish too heavy to lift clear. I recently observed a fish eagle with an even larger (probably) fish. It settled on the water like a duck and obviously had the fish clasped in its talons

below the surface. Believe it or not, it then began to swim towards dry land! Propulsion?! It rotated its wings slowly for all the world like an old side-wheeled paddle steamer. It was apparently an exhausting experience, for the bird rested frequently. When it reached the bank, it pulled out a fine tiger fish, which it proceeded to devour.

A friend of mine in conversation recently claimed to have seen a fish-eagle submerge completely at the completion of its stoop, like an osprey. I have never observed such behaviour, and have a feeling of dubiety. Are there any other records of similar behaviour?"

White-fronted Bee-eater Mrs. E.M. Watson records that she has had regular visits from a pair, at Mzingwane School, Essexvale, since March. They have appeared every two or three weeks, perching on branches of a large fig-tree, or on telephone wires, and catching flying insects. She remarks "it is such a Beautiful bird that when one sees it, one is thrilled and spends time watching it."

Scaly-feathered Finch Mr. B.E. Dean remarks on the habits of the Scaly Weaver of as many as four to six birds entering the one nest of an evening to roost, sometimes when the nest is still under construction. He goes on "These habits make me wonder whether more than one pair take part in building operations, or whether the male, like an Eastern Sheik, has more than one wife. I did, however, examine one nest, which contained 4 eggs, and this seems to indicate that only one pair was responsible.

I remember last year, just before the breaking of one of our tropical storms, the sky became really black. There was great excitement among the weavers in the Acacia tree just outside our kitchen door. In this tree was one of their nests, which had already been a home for a family, and it was quite a large one. After much chattering, one after the other, our feathered friends disappeared into the nest, and about 20 minutes later a really violent storm broke. We counted six altogether enter the nest.

These little birds appear to like habitation, and like the House Sparrow, have little fear of man. They do, however, get quite excited if the nest is approached when there are eggs or young.

African Green-pigeon The seeds which Mr. Kirkwood reported in *Bulletin* No. 25 as being eaten by Green pigeons in the Fort Rixon district, have been identified by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture as those of *Loudetia simplex* (Common Russet Grass).

From the Nest Record Cards

Since the beginning of a new season for breeding records in July, the best start has been made by two Plumtree schoolboys. On the 6.9.58, Bobbie Thomson found seven nests of Hamerkops with eggs, at the Mana Pools not far from the Zambezi, surely a record for one day's work! One nest had 7 fresh eggs, another 9, heavily set, which is a record for this country and might be the combined clutches of two birds. All the nests were found in an area of about 2 square miles, and a lot of water birds' nests could have been reached by Bobbie and his brother if they had had a boat and had ignored the crocodiles. Another interesting record from the same locality was of a spinetail laying in a bee-eater's nest. However, the specific identity of the spinetail is in doubt, though Thomson thinks it was *C. boehmi* [Bohm's Spinetail].

The other Plumtree schoolboy is Andrew Williams, who sent in several years' back-records of nests found in the Chipinga—Mt. Selinda area. The latter's forests are, of course, unique in Southern Rhodesia; the original, home of Swynnerton's Robin. Thanks to Andrew Williams, we now have a modern breeding record for our robin.

The organiser of the Nest Record Scheme, Mr. H. Miles, P.O. Box 8156, Causeway, looks forward to receiving data from new contributors. Every nest found with eggs or young should be recorded, together with the date. Cards are obtainable from Mr. Miles. Up to the end of September, exactly 1000 cards had been received for 1958, and Mr. Miles hopes for another 500 before the end of the year.