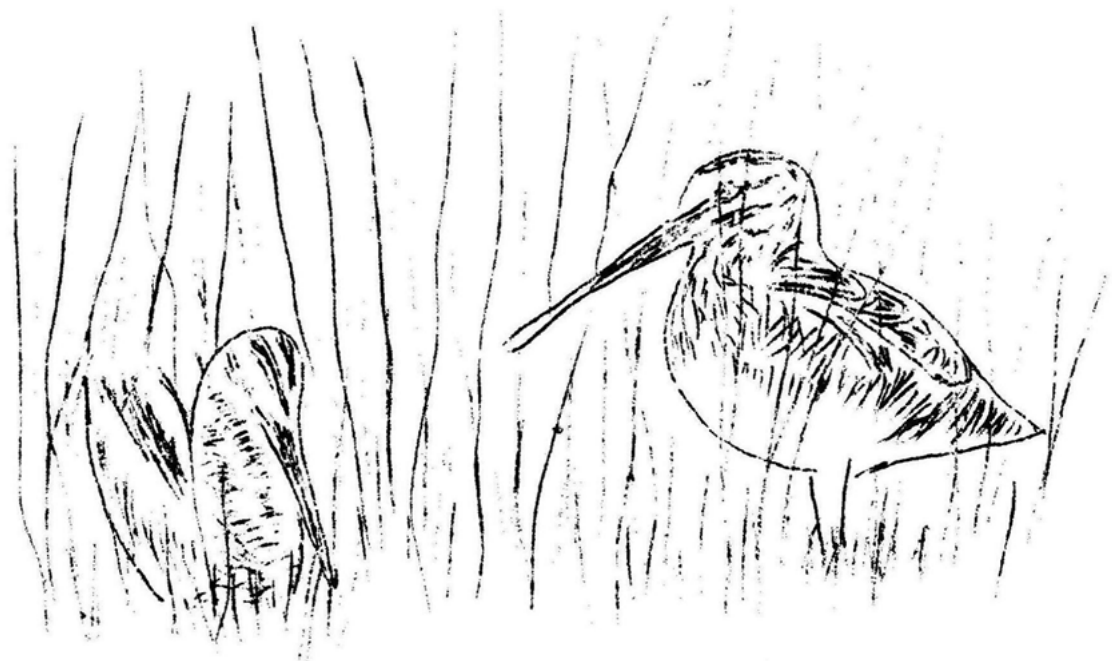


Rhodesian Ornithological Society

Bulletin No. 29



November 1959

Editor: Dr. R.M. Harwin,
8, 27th Avenue, Famona, Bulawayo.

Ethiopian Snipe breeding in Southern Rhodesia

There has previously been only one record of *Gallinago nigripennis* breeding in Southern Rhodesia. This was by A. Vincent, who found a chick at Umvuma, and there appears to be no record at all of anyone actually seeing a nest. I believe the Ethiopian Snipe [African Snipe], along with a fair number of other species, breeds not uncommonly in suitable habitat, e.g. wet, marshy "vleis" or "dambos", but on account of its preference for boggy areas, its (at times) unobtrusive habits, and the concealment of its nest, it is very easily passed over, and possibly only those with "an eye for a nest" or an eye for birds paired in suitable country (and I say this with the greatest respect to all ornithologists) realise what is going on.

The area to which these notes refer is some boggy country 10 miles west of Salisbury. In September 1958, while plodding through it, looking at other things, my attention was attracted by a snipe on the ground 15 yards from me, behaving in an agitated manner. The bird clucked almost like a domestic hen, with its neck extended vertically, and ran to and fro in the grass; it made no attempt to fly until I made deliberately for it, when it flew a little distance and ran back towards me, clucking. I was unable to find a chick or chicks in the grass, but felt little doubt in my mind that they were there.

This year, 1959, I visited the area on 18th July at 4 p.m. and heard the "Khah, khah" grunting call of snipe in the marsh; there was no drumming. On 8th August, late afternoon, this noise was again in evidence, and to reassure myself that it was made by snipe, I stalked a bird and watched it doing it. This call, which I have heard elsewhere in Northern and Southern Rhodesia before, and which surprisingly is not mentioned in *Roberts* or *Mackworth-Praed* and *Grant*, is very similar in accent and tone to a regular single "syllable" of *Jardine's Babbler* *Turdoides jardinei*. It is often very difficult to place and echoes round a marsh, giving the impression, of several birds, although there may be only one. Of course there may be several, and then you get the regular timing upset, e.g. "Khah....khah....khah – ko....khah – ko....khah....khah...." etc. Anyone not familiar with the note might

take it as some kind of frog in the marsh — or at the worst a single misplaced monosyllabic babbler! When making the call the bird stands quite still, with bill (apparently) closed, and the body vibrates slightly at each “Khah”. It is very nasal — as I say, like a babbler.

When I put this bird up it immediately flew round and drummed several times before landing. I put it up again, and once more it drummed. It appeared to drum only if disturbed, and I caused it to do so a number of times. Those who are familiar with snipe in Britain would appreciate the different tone of the drumming from the European *G. gallinago*: it lacks the “bleating” quality. The drumming dives are shallower, too.

I again visited the area on 15th August, this time early afternoon to give time to search for the nest(s) of whose existence I felt certain. When I arrived, there was no sign or sound of birds, but after I had started moving about, “grunting” started, and, as before, birds drummed only when put up. After I had been tramping about for two hours, drumming was going on pretty frequently, by several birds, but I had the strong impression that only my disturbance had caused it. I noticed that a bird which “grunted” also drummed. Several birds also gave the well-known “scaaap—scaaap” call in flight, but this only took place when two or more were in flight together.

The search resulted in my finding a nest with two eggs (a full clutch) and another bird brooding a chick about 3 days old in wet grass. The brooding bird on the nest and eggs sat extremely tightly and it was possible to stamp past within a foot of the nest without flushing it. It was beautifully concealed in grass, much shorter than most in the marsh, but which completely hid the sitting bird and nest from all overhead view. Only a close look from the entrance at the side revealed what was there. The ground was very wet.

The chick was, I think, being brooded by the parent, for the latter appeared to fly up off it. It was about 150 yards from the pair with eggs. It was almost black with blotchy gold markings; the bill was 3 inches, the legs grey and eye dark; a very pretty little thing.

I was unable to find proof of breeding by more than these two pairs, and never saw more than three birds in the air at once; but I received the impression from the number of times I flushed birds that about four pairs might be present.

J.M.E. Took.

ON BIRD BOOKS

Having a morbid streak, I sometimes wonder what I would do if all my bird books were destroyed, and in particular, what volumes I would endeavour to replace at once. This is a practical problem in a world of accidents and worse, even though, as yet my books only occupy some 32 feet of shelving! At the very first opportunity I should go to the nearest bookseller and buy:

- 1). *Roberts' Birds of South Africa*, revised by McLachlan and Liversidge (Identification made easy by means of coloured pictures, maps and accurate up-to-date information on field characters, habitat and behaviour).
- 2a). *A Check List of the Birds of Southern Rhodesia* by R.H.N. Smithers, M.P.S. Irwin and M.L. Paterson. (The authoritative list of what species occur in the Colony, in what districts, and in what habitats. Is this bird rare or unexpected? Look it up in the Check List).
- 2b). *A Check List of the Birds of Northern Rhodesia* by C.W. Benson and C.M.N. White. (This does for Northern Rhodesia what the previous book does for Southern Rhodesia).

These volumes are unquestionably essential. If there is but one of my readers who has not got them, let him or her go forth at once and buy. But what books should form the nucleus of a library thereafter is a trickier problem and one where differences of opinion and interest can enter. I myself would next try to get:

- 3). *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*, by R.T. Peterson, G. Mountfort and P.A.D. Hollom. (So easy to identify all manner of migrants).
- 4). *African Handbook of Birds, Series One (Two Volumes)*, by C.W. Mackworth-Praed and C.H.B. Grant. This gives classified information on the birds to the north of us, just as the revised *Roberts* does for those to the south.

- 5). *Days with Birds*, by V.G.L. Van Someren. This deals with the life histories and breeding biology of some 160 species in Kenya, mostly in the Nairobi area. About 110 of these also occur in the Colony.
- 6). *The Birds of the Belgian Congo*, by J.P. Chapin (4 Volumes). This is said to be the best book ever written on African Birds and is full of information of all kinds. But it is not a book for the beginner, as the nomenclature is Latin, with the English sometimes given in the text; sometimes not.

In order to have the most informative books on the birds of Southern Africa, I would then seek:

- 7). *The Birds of Southern Rhodesia*, by C.D. Priest. This contains useful information, but is somewhat dated. It should be read in conjunction with the Check List (Item No. 2a).
- 8). *Eagles*, by L.H. Brown. This deals with Kenya, but we have all our eagles in common.
- 9). J.M. Winterbottom's *Common Birds* series in Longman's Field Handbooks. They are, in order of publication:—
- | | | |
|-----------|------------|----------|
| Cape | More Bush | |
| Bush | South-East | |
| Waterways | Highveld | Migrants |

These contain most useful summaries of what is known of the species with which he deals.

- 10). The back-numbers of the *Ostrich*.

It may be that in mentioning what I would buy if I had to, I have drawn attention to the gaps in members' own shelves that they would like to fill. Items 1, 2, 4, and 9 can be obtained in any bookshop; item 10 from the Editor of the *Ostrich* or the Secretary of the SAOS, both in Cape Town. The prices are stated inside the front cover of the latest *Ostrich*. Items 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 can most easily be obtained overseas from a dealer in the literature of Natural history. Items 3 and 8 will be less than £1 each. Item 5 is 65/-, and items 6 and 7, containing 4 Volumes each will each cost in the region of £15. In all I would find myself wanting to spend just over £50 to provide myself with the literary tools for intelligent bird-watching.

R.K. Brooke.

TEMPORARY PRESERVATION OF BIRD SKINS

Birds for skinning are often forwarded through the post to the National Museum only to arrive some days later in a state of putrefaction that renders them fit only for the rubbish bin. Many specimens are lost in this way, and we have no doubt that in other instances birds are cast aside by their finders through insufficient knowledge of how to deal with them. Interesting specimens are often picked up dead, either having collided with overhead wires or dashed into lights at night. Rare rails and crakes are often found in this way and should be preserved for study wherever possible.

To assist interested persons in forwarding material to the National Museum, we give the following method, whereby specimens of up to the size of a pigeon may be temporarily preserved before skinning. This largely follows the instructions given in *The Ornithologists' Guide*, published in 1956 by the British Ornithologists Union, with such additions and alterations as we, through personal experience, consider necessary.

1. Open the bird's bill and pack in as much salt as possible, pushing it well down into the throat with a stick.
2. Remove the eyeballs with a sharp instrument, making sure that the resulting socket is free from matter, and fill with salt.
3. Make an incision down the centre of the abdomen and remove the entrails, making sure that the liver or lungs does not remain behind, and push well up into the body cavity, to remove the heart.
4. Ascertain the sex of the specimen. The reproductive organs of a bird lie close to the backbone, about midway in the abdominal cavity. Male gonads are paired; female are a single mass of granular substance. Both are quite obvious when well developed, but when regressed in the non-breeding season, some difficulty may be experienced. Never, however, guess the sex if you are. Simply put "indeterminate".

5. Swab out any excess moisture from the body cavity and cram with salt, forcing it well up into the cavity; then leave the body for at least 24 hours to let the salt penetrate and any excess moisture dry out. Wrap the body well in newspaper or other absorbent paper, pack in box and despatch. Specimens treated in this manner will keep for several months, though the sooner they are skinned, the better.

6. Finally label the specimen, recording locality, date, sex, colour of soft parts and collector's name. This should be attached to one leg, and when more than one specimen is prepared, it is advisable to add a reference number and duplicate the data on the covering letter that should always accompany specimens.

Try and keep the specimen as clean as possible at all times, but do not become discouraged if the resulting salted bird presents an unpleasing sight. On receipt at the Museum, it has to be soaked in water for 12 hours before it can be skinned.

Mary L. Paterson & Michael P. Stuart Irwin.

House Sparrow in Southern Rhodesia I should be glad for records, recent and otherwise, of this species. Its spread through the Union has been reasonably well documented, but as far as I know, no records of its occurrence in Southern Rhodesia have as yet been published, although it is known to have been established in Salisbury for some time. I recorded it in Gwelo during June 1959, so it has already begun to spread from its bridgehead.

Common Ringed Plover D.M. Winterbottom records a small party, about six, at Ingesi dam near Ingesi station on the Lourenco Marques railway line. There were no mud or sand banks for them to feed from, and they were feeding for the most part on the wall, over which the water was just flowing. The date was the unusual one of early August.

Glossy Ibis Brian Ade records seeing a Glossy Ibis at Lake McIlwaine twice between the 24th and 30th August. He writes "At first appearance the bird looked black and very curlew-like, but under further study the gloss became apparent as the bird moved. It could quite easily be distinguished from the Hadeda Ibis by its much lighter build and more slender beak. It was feeding, poking its long beak into the mud at the water's edge, in the company of a number of African Jacanas. It was not easily disturbed when I approached and only flew off after most of the other birds had gone. The flight was easy, light, and quite slow. I was wondering if its presence was due to the low water level, the lake having been drained for stump-clearing."

Red-fronted Tinker Barbet Brian Ade has also sent a sight record of the Red-fronted Tinkerbird from the Hunyani Valley. The Red-fronted species is usually accepted as being coastal in distribution, but there have been many sight records of its occurrence inland, and it is not easy to dismiss them all as misidentified Yellow-fronted Tinkerbirds. One day, no doubt, the matter will be settled by the collection of a specimen. Brian Ade's notes follow.

"Yesterday, 1st September, I saw a Red-fronted Tinker Barbet in the Hunyani River Valley, not more than three miles from Sinoia. I came across the bird suddenly, while walking through the bushes not far from the river. It was feeding in a small tree, and I was able to observe it from close range without binoculars. I remember it calling as it fed, and then as it flew off with rapid wing beats; but cannot be sure of the noise. I immediately recognised it as a Tinker Barbet, and the red colour of its forehead was quite unmistakable."

White-fronted Bee-eater Mrs. E.M. Watson records that these birds have been spending the winter at Essexvale for the second winter in succession. She notes them skimming around hawking insects from a perch on a fig-tree.

Miscellaneous Records Among a list of records submitted by A.J. Tree, I single out one of a Bat Hawk at Victoria Falls Bridge on 17 May and an adult Little Bittern at Lake McIlwaine on 30 August. He also mentions an aggregation of about 16,000 Falconidae on the Salisbury – Mazoe Road on 4 February. These included 400 Eastern [Amur Falcon] and one Western Red-footed Falcons, and one Lesser Kestrel, identified for certain. From all accounts, 1958-58 was a particularly good season for these species.

The Executive Committee feels that a more dynamic approach to migration studies is necessary. As a first stage, Mr. Richard Brooke has been asked to collect migration data, and the co-operation of every single member is being sought.

Please let him have lots of records of arrivals and departures, so as to make it possible to build up a picture of migration for the information of members and for the advancement of science. Data should include species, place, date and number of individuals. Records of past years are invaluable, and remember that not only species from Europe and Asia are covered, but also those from other parts of Africa; in fact any bird which is not a permanent resident. Mr. Brooke's address is P.O. Box 8155, Causeway.

NEST RECORD CARDS

During 1958, 1612 cards were sent in, which represents a drop of nearly 200 compared with 1957. Once again C.K. and P. Cooke headed the list with 297 cards, which included both [Melodious Lark] *Mirafra cheniana* and [Monotonous Lark] *M. javanica*, neither of which has been recorded by any other member to date.

The organiser, Mr. Miles, wishes to thank Mr. R.K. Brooke for taking over while he was absent in the United Kingdom, Mr. James Took of Salisbury, and Mr. H.F. Meyer for submitting some outstanding records, including incubation and fledging periods, from the Que Que area.

Chief contributors were:

C.K. and P. Cooke – 297	C.R. Owen – 49	J. Douglas – 19
G.R. Thomson – 192	J.M.E. Took – 38	Capt. R.A. Bourlay – 13
Plumtree School – 122	F.O. McLean – 37	A.D. Gosling – 13
A. Williams – 119	R.K. Brooke – 35	E.A. Edwards – 12
Dr. A.W. Wragg – 103	N.R. Hyslop – 23	R. Theisen – 11
H.F. Meyer – 70	Springvale School	I. Cannell – 11
B.V. Neuby-Varty – 58	per J.M. Paterson – 19	

Useful cards were also received from Mrs. G.D. Attwell (1), D.A. Byrom (5), J.K.A. Davey (7), G.K. Dona1d (6), A.A.F.G. Farmar (3), A.B. Fletcher (8), Mrs. V. Gargett (2), R.M. Harwin (8), N.E. Holmes (1), Mrs. B. Ingles (1), A.J.M. Lind (5), A.N.B. Masterson (1), The National Museum (2), Miss M.L. Paterson (2), R.W. Rankine (1), Miss I. Rorke (1), R.B. Saunders (2), M.C. Saunders (2), Mrs. D. Searson (6), Mrs. M.L. Snell (7), A.J. Tree (2), C.J. Vernon (5), Mrs. L.C. Webster (1), and O. West (3).

We heartily congratulate our former Hon. Secretary, Miss Mary Paterson, on her recent marriage to Mr. L.B. Ball. Mrs. Ball has asked me to remind members that she is no longer at the National Museum, and that if they have any ornithological queries for the Museum, they should address them to the Director and not to her personally. And if any members are still unaware of the fact, the present Hon. Secretary is Mr. R.C. Knight, P.O. Box 1108 Salisbury.

The Editor of the Ostrich has indicated that he will be very pleased to receive manuscripts for future issues of the journal. Such manuscripts may be either in the form of notes and enquiries, or of long papers, and should be typewritten with double spacing, and on one side of the paper only. All contributions should be addressed to the Editor, Dept., of Zoology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, Cape Province, South Africa.

The Executive Committee of the ROS endorses this appeal wholeheartedly, feeling that the *Ostrich* serves a very valuable purpose in ornithology in Southern Africa, and hopes that as many members as possible will provide contributions.

Members who have not yet paid their subscriptions for 1959 are advised that the Council of the SAOS resolved at a recent meeting that publications would no longer be sent to such members until the subscriptions are paid.

At present 28 subscriptions are outstanding from ROS members, made up as follows: Matabeleland Branch 9, Selukwe Branch 2, Mashonaland Branch 8, and Northern Rhodesia 7. It is also pointed out that members who find themselves unable or unwishful to continue their membership would save the Executive Staff both unnecessary work and expenditure on postage by advising the Hon. Treasurer (Private Bag 2 Gatooma) of their wish to resign.