

# Rhodesian Ornithological Society Bulletin

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### Notes on the Dusky Lark (*Mirafra nigricans*)

The Check List records the Dusky Lark as occurring uncommonly in woodland in Mashonaland. It may, however, well be a regular passage migrant through Salisbury.

A party of four turned up in my garden at Highlands during May – they were first noticed on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and last seen on 28<sup>th</sup> – and a single bird appeared in the Drill Hall grounds on the occasion of the queen's Birthday Parade on the 11<sup>th</sup> June. I can recall seeing a few birds about the same time last year.

The bird is well illustrated in *Roberts*, though, if anything, the bill and tail appear longer, giving a slenderer appearance. One's first impression is of a small-size Groundscraper Thrush (*Turdus litsitsirupa*), though, of course, the build is wrong.

On the ground the bird's stance and behaviour were for the most part, pipit-like; in other words, more horizontal than upright, actively running about, with bobbing head. The birds had a curious habit, which they only seemed to indulge in when the day had warmed up, of stopping for a moment and flexing their wings above their backs. At other times they stayed motionless for long periods together, either in the shade of some small trees, or in the open.

Despite what *Roberts* has to say about their shyness, they permitted a close approach. When disturbed, they usually flew around and alighted again not far from the spot where they took off. Occasionally, however, they were seen to perch in some of the neighbouring trees, often flying over the tree and alighting on the other side.

As far as could be seen the food taken was insects, though one bird was seen pecking the surface of the tennis court (possibly for grit); there was no evidence of insect life at the spot. No note was heard.

H G.W. Bass.

N.B. The author of the above writes "I have only been in S. Rhodesia for a year, so the attached note on the Dusky Lark may not contain anything of particular interest." The Dusky Lark seems to be rather irregular in its appearance, and also frequently overlooked when it does occur. The above description is an accurate one, and in particular, I have found the mannerism of "flexing their wings above their backs" to be a valuable field character – Editor.

*The following two notes are from a regular contributor, Mr. F.O. McLean*

**Blue Stork:** Sometime about April – May last year, I saw a rather unusual stork in the Drill Hall grounds at Gwelo. This stork was one of a pair seen on several occasions, the other being a normal White Stork. This particular bird was ashy blue where it should have been white. The ashy blue was almost identical with the colour of a Stanley Crane.

When in flight, white feathers showed under the wings and tail; when I first saw it, I thought this bird had had a dust bath in an ash heap; but the colour persisted for a period of at least five weeks while I had the bird under observation. The only solution I can think of is that this bird had been dyed for identification.

(This bird was also seen by myself, although on one occasion only, and I can confirm most of what Mr. McLean states – Editor)

**Redwing Shrike feigning death:** In January this year, I was cutting paddock lines through the bush in Lower Gwelo Reserve, when a bird flew off a nest in a shrub, a yard or two from a tree which was being cut down. On inspection, the nest was found to be that of a Three-streaked Redwing Shrike [Brown-crowned Tchagra], with two eggs in it.

Clearing the line had rather exposed the nest, and on returning to the spot half an hour afterwards, I saw what appeared to be a dead Three-streaked Redwing Shrike on the nest. The head was hanging over the edge, with neck bent at an angle and eyes closed. One wing was also hanging over the edge, partly stretched out, and bent, and the tail splayed.

I remained motionless a yard away from the nest for several minutes, and there was no sign of life in the bird; but as soon as I started moving away, its eyes opened and it had resumed the natural position when I stopped about 40 yards away and observed it through binoculars.

*Commenting on Mr. McLean's account of a cobra in a kingfisher's nest-hole, in Bulletin No. 31, Mr. Bryan Donnelly writes*

I can report that a similar experience happened to me on the Limpopo River last month (May 1960). On looking into a Brown-hooded Kingfisher's burrow with the aid of a torch, a Black-necked Cobra *Naja nigricollis*, was discovered. It was hastily despatched, and measured about four and a half feet in length.

One wonders whether the snakes are actually the kingfishers' enemy, or whether they were merely using the holes for hibernation purposes. Although I keep snakes, I have never yet seen one blink its eyes as mentioned by Mr. McLean.

*Another note by Mr. McLean, this time concerning cuckoos*

The last week in March, I came across an immature Black Cuckoo in the Que Que Reserve. I tried to catch it, but had no luck as it could fly well enough to keep ahead of me. It was accompanied by a Scimitar-billed Wood-hoopoe, [Common Scimitarbill] which kept on flying ahead, and drawing the cuckoo away from me, so it seems as if the cuckoo was hatched and reared by the Wood-hoopoe. At times I managed to get within 3 or 4 feet of it.

**Mr. C.T.H. Fisher has reported a roosting concentration of Black-breasted Snake-eagles** [Black-chested Snake-eagle] in the Selukwe Reserve. This is the second such concentration he has seen in the Reserve in nine years, the previous one being reported in the *Bokmakierie* Vol. 5 page 48 (August 1953). At its peak, nearly 200 birds were present. The 1960 roost was not in the same place as the 1953 ones but like it was in quite open country, in not very tall trees. The number of eagles was such that they must have come from a very much larger area than the Selukwe Reserve, and it is likely that it occurs annually, but in different parts of their range.

I myself saw the tail-end of this concentration at the end of June, but by then the majority of the birds had paired off and dispersed.

***And here are some extracts from an amusing diary of observations at an African Jacana's nest by G.J. Guy***

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27.3.60 7.30 a.m. 3 nestlings and 1 egg. The babies were approximately 2¼ ins. long, with whitish throat and breast, brown back with darker stripes running the length of the back, dark eye-streaks, and the beak shorter and sharper than the adult's. When I approached the nest, one of the parent birds (the other was hiding in the reeds) came very near, making a loud "chirring" noise, wings outspread, and sinking in the water as if injured. From the bank I watched as the parent, making a soft "koop-koop" noise, approached the nest, and the three chicks followed on the lily leaves, sometimes half submerged. As the chicks got wetter and wetter, they found it more difficult to keep going, and sometimes disappeared completely under water. When this happened, the adult either grabbed hold of the chick in its beak, and hauled it out and placed it on a leaf, or caught hold of another leaf, and pulled it and the chick higher out of the water. On one occasion, the parent had a youngster in its beak, when the leaf it stood on overturned; it dropped the youngster, and by the time it had regained its balance, the baby must have been under water 7 or 8 seconds. This was all very amusing to watch, and eventually all 3 were lying exhausted on the leaves, unable to move. But they all reached a clump of reeds in the end.

3.4.60 5 p.m. On this visit I was able to get within a couple of yards of the young birds, which were now quite at home in the lilies. When the adult saw me, it rushed to its chicks with its wings spread a little, and bent its legs slightly. The 3 young ones crept under its wings, and it closed them, stood up and walked away with the chicks' legs hanging out from under its wings.

***May I remind members*** that this is the time of year for the first breeding records, and also for the arrival of migrants. Breeding records should be sent to Mr. H.M. Miles and migration records to Mr. R.K. Brooke; both at P.O. Box 8156, Causeway.

Mr. Miles would be very pleased to receive records from new contributors, as the Nest Record Scheme is still carried largely by the efforts of a faithful few. As for migration records, the Society has only got down seriously to keeping these, and each and every one is valuable.

***Finally our congratulations go to Mr. C.W. Benson*** for being awarded the British Ornithologists' Union Medal, for his contributions to African Ornithology, and particularly his leadership of the recent BOU Centenary expedition to the Comoro Islands.