

BirdLife Botswana
Bird Conservation Newsletter

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EDITORIAL - SAVING SPECIES

A major part of this newsletter focuses on saving individual species, as this is an important component of BirdLife's work – in Botswana and elsewhere. I particularly like the Species Programme of BirdLife, as its rationale is so simple and to the point:

'We aim to prevent the extinction of species, to improve the conservation status of Globally Threatened Birds and to make sure common birds remain that way'.

It is clearly an impossible task to conserve all birds; the immediate priority is to focus firstly on those faced with extinction, and secondly, those that are globally threatened. This is why BirdLife International has invested so much time and resources in producing 'Threatened Birds of the World' and why BirdLife Botswana recently held a workshop to compile a Red Data book for Botswana's birds. We need to know which of our birds are threatened so that we can take appropriate conservation measures. At the same time, it doesn't make sense to ignore entirely those birds that are common – one needs to keep a finger on the pulse to ensure that they always remain that way. Let's work together to get the globally threatened birds off the List, while ensuring that no other species are added.

Pete Hancock



TOP PRIORITY FOR 2004

The Slaty Egret is a near endemic, with most of its global population being restricted to the Okavango Delta in Botswana. It is classified as 'Globally Threatened' according to the BirdLife International publication "Threatened Birds of the World" and is long overdue for study by BirdLife Botswana. Relatively little is known about any aspects of the birds' ecology and population dynamics, so a Slaty Egret Working Group is being established along the lines of the now successful BirdLife Botswana Crane Working Group. If you are interested in actively participating in the conservation of this species, and wish to join the group, you should contact Pete Hancock (see below for details).

The Okavango Delta Management Plan Project has been approached to allocate funds for a preliminary study of the species; it is hoped that this will show that the species is doing well, and if not, will highlight any actual or potential conservation issues.

In the meantime, a database on the species has been established, based on the Geographical Information System (GIS) programme ArcView, for mapping distribution and breeding records. Please send all observations (date, number of birds, GPS co-ordinates in UTM/Cape datum) to Pete Hancock (telephone 6862481 or e-mail pete@info.bw).

Pete Hancock

VULTURES POISONED

While conducting a game drive in the Jao Concession (NG 25), I found a bare patch of earth covered in dead vulture remains. The bird's bones and feathers were scattered over an area of approximately 40 square metres. On the edge of this area, I also found some bones belonging to what I suspect was a Spotted Hyena. These bones were burnt, although those of the vultures were not.

I believe that the remains that were found are the result of a poisoning incident. The fact that the hyena bones have been burnt only serves to further confirm this, as it is obvious that the perpetrator did not want the remains to be intact. None of the remains are very recent, and I would have to guess that the incident occurred during late 2003.

Grant Atkinson (Specialist Guide - Jao Concession)

BirdLife Botswana regards this as a very serious incident, as poisoning is a major threat to vultures throughout their range. To date, poisoning has not been a problem



in Botswana as far as we are aware. However, it may be more widespread and common than we think, because information has not been sent to a centralised database where it can be collated. In fact, Wendy Borello is the repository for all information on vultures in the country. It is important that all information on poisoning of vultures (even past incidents) be sent to her so that we can assess how serious this problem is, and take action to prevent it. Her contact details are: e-mail borello@sharps.co.bw, telephone 3161683, fax 3951618.

VULTURE STUDY GROUP MEETING

There will be a short report on the Vulture Study Group meeting that took place recently in Kimberly, South Africa, in the next issue of this newsletter.

UPDATE ON POPA FALLS HYDROPOWER SCHEME

BirdLife Botswana, along with many other organisations and individuals, has long been concerned about the potential impacts the planned Popa Falls Hydropower scheme may have on the Okavango Delta. The Scheme will generate a mere 20 megawatts of power, but could have potentially far-reaching consequences for the whole Okavango Delta. The project has passed the pre-feasibility stage, and now a full feasibility study will be conducted. The article below comes from The Namibian (newspaper) of 12 May, and was submitted by Ryan Hoover of the International Rivers Network.

Nampower has been given the go-ahead by the Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) to start with full feasibility studies to gauge the viability of a hydropower scheme at Popa Falls near Divundu. A preliminary Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and technical studies were completed and handed to OKACOM late last year and, at their last meeting at the end of last month, the three countries sharing the basin – Angola, Botswana and Namibia – pledged their continued involvement to the next phase of the project. Nampower said on Friday that they had not yet been formally informed of the decision and could not immediately shed light on how it would proceed. Should the power utility decide to pursue a fully-fledged study, it could take at least another two to three years before yielding acceptable results. The pre-feasibility study indicates that 20 megawatts of power could be generated at any site. Preliminary environmental studies, which were presented to OKACOM, noted that plants, birds, animals and fish upstream in the immediate vicinity of the project and downstream of the scheme, could be affected by the development.



This aspect has been a major sticking point raised particularly by Botswana: that failure to supply sediment downstream would have consequences for wetland species downstream in the swamps. Each of the five sites proposed for the building of a weir also presented their own complications – both environmentally and socio-economically – in terms of existing settlements and people's livelihoods. The original site on the lip of the Falls, proposed as the best site for the power station according to the 1969 Water Affairs Study, was not considered as an option because of the obvious environmental, tourism and visual impact it would have. So far, Nampower has spent about N\$4,5 million on pre-feasibility studies – a third of which has gone to environmental investigations.

The scheme would go a long way towards providing a more secure and reliable electricity supply to the north-eastern regions of the country. But even if Nampower was to forge ahead with the scheme, the power utility has said it would still need to find a bigger source of power for the country. Currently more than 50% of the country's supply is imported from South Africa which, at this point is also hard-pressed to provide for its own domestic needs. As a result, the company is also vigorously pursuing the viability of exploiting the gas fields off the Oranjemund coast as its first option. It is envisaged that the Kudu Gas Project could unleash about 800 megawatts of power and last for at least 20 years – more than double Namibia's current requirement for about 380 megawatts. This would also put the country in a position to export the surplus.

NEST RECORDS

BirdLife Botswana has a wealth of information on breeding birds in Botswana, gathered over many years. The nest record project is still continuing, and field birders are encouraged to continue submitting their observations to BLB. A nest record sheet can be downloaded from our website and posted or e-mailed to BLB after completion. Interestingly, there is a paucity of breeding information for some common species such as Emerald-spotted Wood-dove, so don't be lulled into complacency if you think the nest you have found is not worth reporting! Similarly, if you have reported your initial observation of a nest, don't think that there is nothing useful that remains to be done - *repeat observations of the same nest site are most valuable*. By reporting on the progress of the clutch of eggs or nestlings, it will be possible to get a measure of the breeding success of that particular bird species. So keep watching!

Finally, an important point – when Peter Steyn was compiling his now well-known book 'Nesting Birds' he found many nesting records had inaccurate information and could not be used. Record only what you see and are sure of.



WATTLED CRANE ACTION PLAN

It is a standard practice for the Species Working Groups of BirdLife to develop participatory Species Action Plans (SAPs) to guide the groups in their conservation efforts. The BirdLife Botswana Crane Working Group convened such a workshop in August last year. It was attended by delegates from most of the Wattled Crane range states such as Botswana, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe and representatives from the International Crane Foundation (USA) and the Endangered Wildlife Trust (South Africa). The major local stakeholders were safari operators, local professional guides, media representatives, and personnel from the Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks and the Harry Oppenheimer Okavango Research Centre (University of Botswana). The Botswana Wattled Crane Species Action Plan has thus been developed with input from stakeholders who are affected and who benefit from wetland and crane conservation.

The main objective of the workshop was to develop a comprehensive action plan for the conservation of Wattled Cranes and their habitat in Botswana. The action plan for Wattled Cranes was considered necessary because the species is globally endangered and the population is declining in other parts of the range. The action plan that was developed in 1993 during the African Crane and Wetland Training workshop has been overtaken by events and as such needed revision. The major achievement of the workshop was the input provided by interested stakeholders both local and international, during the proceedings of the workshop. This led to the production of a species action plan which is comprehensive and inclusive. It is the intention of BirdLife Botswana through the Crane Working Group to implement the plan to ensure the conservation of the globally endangered Wattled Cranes. The implementation of the Botswana Wattled Crane SAP will commence on 1st January 2004 and will run until 2009. The SAP outlines a comprehensive effort to conserve Botswana's Wattled Crane population for the benefit of people and biodiversity.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE ACTION PLAN

AIM

To maintain the size of Botswana's Wattled Crane population within natural cycles, between January 2004, and January 2009.



ACTIONS REQUIRED

The aim will be achieved through the following:

- Obtain knowledge of factors affecting the biology and ecological requirements of Wattled Cranes
- Ensure better implementation and enforcement of laws, regulations and plans by the responsible agencies
- Improve awareness and knowledge of wetland dynamics, and the role of the Wattled Crane, amongst planners, developers, communities, the tourism sector and policy makers so that Wattled Crane habitat requirements are maintained in the long term.
- Secure funds and human resources to implement the Wattled Crane Species Action Plan

A pdf version of the complete Species Action Plan can be downloaded from the BirdLife Botswana website www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw

Sekgowa Motsumi

BIRDLIFE BOTSWANA OPENS OFFICE IN GABORONE

BirdLife Botswana has now opened an office in Gaborone at the Molapo Crossing Mall; located just before the Grand Palm Hotel along the Gaborone – Molepolole road.

The Botswana Bird Club started as a branch of the Botswana Society in 1980, and shared their office. In 2000, it successfully 'fledged' from the Botswana Society and became the official BirdLife International representative for Botswana and moved into the offices of the local branch of IUCN (the World Conservation Union). The change of name from the Botswana Bird Club to BirdLife Botswana also heralded a change in focus from a broadly social club with interests in bird conservation, to a more formal science and research-based organisation. In addition to this Newsletter, the organisation has since 1980 published biannually the journal, '*Babbler*' and a quarterly newsletter, the '*Familiar Chat*' has been published since 1990.

BirdLife Botswana is party to and subscribes to the objectives of BirdLife International, which are to use birds as stepping-stones to achieve the conservation



of species, sites and habitats, at the same time ensuring that people residing near these resources are mobilised and empowered to sustain care for the birds and the wider natural environment. The strong focus on birds has been due to the fact that birds serve as useful environmental indicators, helping us locate important biodiversity areas and alerting us to environmental change. However, they also have cultural, aesthetic and economic values.

If you have any enquiries or comments, please contact BirdLife Botswana's Conservation Officer, Kabelo Senyatso (see contact details at end of this newsletter).

Kabelo Senyatso

AFRICAN SKIMMERS IN THE OKAVANGO

Mark Paxton, a birding colleague in Namibia, has ringed a large number of African Skimmer chicks during the 2003 breeding season, using both metal and colour rings. They were ringed on the Okavango River where it passes through Mahango Game Park in Namibia. It is highly likely that these birds will be seen along the panhandle and elsewhere in Botswana, so do keep a look-out for them. Any sightings should be reported to Mark at shamvura@iway.na, but please copy the information to pete@info.bw as we'd also like to know about the resightings.

Pete Hancock

INFORMATION NEEDED ON RED-BILLED QUELEA COLONIES

Information on the locations (with co-ordinates if possible), dates and stage of development (nest-building, egg-laying, incubating, age of young in nest, fledglings present, *etc.*) of any breeding colonies of the Red-billed Quelea *Quelea quelea lathamii* anywhere in southern Africa now and in the past are being sought to validate a forecasting model. The model, developed by scientists based in the UK (Jon Venn, Bob Cheke and Peter Jones), uses satellite-derived rainfall data and knowledge of the birds' life-cycle to predict areas where the conditions have become suitable for the birds to breed. So, information on confirmed dates and locations of colonies are needed to check the model's accuracy. During the breeding season in southern Africa (October – May), those with internet access can view the weekly forecasts for the SADC region on either:

<http://www.sadc-fanr.org.zw/rrsu/quel/latest.htm> or at

<http://www-web.gre.ac.uk/directory/NRI/quel/Index.htm> or

via the Information Core for Southern African Migrant Pests (I COSAMP) website at <http://icosamp.ecoport.org>



Any data would be very gratefully received by Bob Cheke at the Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, Central Avenue, Chatham Maritime, Kent, ME4 4TB, UK or via email (r.a.cheke@greenwich.ac.uk).

2003 ROOST COUNTS

The Okavango Delta qualifies as an Important Bird Area (IBA) according to the criteria specified by BirdLife International, and is one of 12 such sites in Botswana as described in "The Important Bird Areas in Southern Africa". Recognising sites as IBAs is however only the first step in a process aimed at securing these areas as key components of a strategy to conserve birds in Botswana. And in many respects, it is the easiest stage!

Now that the Okavango Delta has been designated as an IBA, it needs to be monitored in terms of the important birds occurring there. This is easier said than done, since it is a vast area with a wide range of birds, not all of which are easy to count.

A novel approach to monitoring the numbers of waterbirds is to conduct roost counts when the birds congregate at specific focal points during the late afternoon/early evening. Many species of waterbirds fly in to these roosts from feeding areas as far afield as 30 kilometres, providing a practical and cost-effective way of censusing them. This method had however not been used in the Okavango until early 2003 when Stephanie Tyler co-ordinated a pilot project to assess the usefulness of this method.

More than 20 roosts were identified and counts were made at all of these. Highlights of the project were the following:

- The reedbed at Xaxaba was the best in terms of overall numbers and species diversity (1717 birds of 18 species)
- Other significant roosts are those at Xakanaxa, Gcobega, Gadikwe, Xigera, Sitatunga Camp and Samedupe
- The roost at Sitatunga Camp regularly had over 1,500 Cattle Egrets
- The roost counts provide minimum estimates of some 'difficult to census' species - for example, a total of 278 Slaty Egrets was seen at all roosts.

These roost counts will be repeated early in 2005. Information is still needed on the whereabouts of any other significant roosts that may have been missed. Volunteers are also needed to assist with these counts. Please contact Stephanie Tyler at steph_tyler2000@hotmail.com.



BIRDLIFE BOTSWANA REPRESENTED AT THE BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS



Together for birds and people

From 7 – 13 March 2004, Harold Hester (BirdLife Botswana Chairman) and Kabelo Senyatso (Conservation Officer) were among the more than 350 delegates from over 100 countries who attended the BirdLife International World Conservation Conference and Global Partnership Meeting in Durban, South Africa. These global meetings for all BirdLife partners are held every four years, and the aims of the Durban conference were:

- to share and celebrate success, experiences, skills and knowledge in biodiversity and conservation with a special focus on birds as indicators and a means of empowering people to achieve conservation;
- to strengthen local, national and global capacity to deliver conservation action; and
- to agree and adopt strategies, programmes and policies for the conservation of birds, wider biodiversity and to achieve sustainability in the use of natural resources.

Through plenary panel discussions, symposia and workshops, several issues pertinent to the conservation of birds and the wider environment were discussed.

These included:

1. Plenary discussions on:
 - What should be done to build the conservation capacity of BirdLife partners
 - The value of birds to people, and
 - How collaboration between BirdLife partners could be improved.
2. Symposia on:
 - Understanding linkages between conservation and sustainable development
 - What is being done to save threatened bird species
 - Key biodiversity areas, including Important Bird Areas
 - Bird tourism, and
 - Birds and education.
3. Workshops on:
 - Working on international conventions at national level
 - Identifying, securing, managing and monitoring Important Bird Areas (IBAs), and



- Working in partnership with development agencies, business, and other stakeholders.

While the primary objective of the presentations were to share experiences, the workshops were also used to develop ideas and recommendations for the BirdLife partners. A CD with all presentations will be available shortly, and will be lodged at the BirdLife office in Gaborone.

The meeting was also used to launch several BirdLife publications, the most important being *State of the World's Birds 2004*, *Threatened Birds of the World 2004* and *Working Together for Birds and People*. In addition, a new BirdLife Strategy and regional programmes (six in total for Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, Middle East and Pacific) for the years 2004 – 2015 were also reviewed and adopted.

Being a relatively new conservation organisation, BirdLife Botswana did not have much to share, although Harold Hester presented on *How BirdLife Botswana was involving Botswana businesses in bird conservation* and *BirdLife Botswana's Education Programme*. Nonetheless, attendance afforded an opportunity to network with donors as well as regional and global partners, and most importantly to learn from the experiences of others.

For more information or to obtain copies of any of the documents mentioned in the text, please contact Kabelo Senyatso at the address at the end of the newsletter.

Kabelo Senyatso

The BirdLife Secretariat covered all of Kabelo's expenses, and their support is gratefully acknowledged.

HERONRIES, EGRETTERIES AND CORMORANTERIES!

I am currently putting together a list of all known, past or present, mixed 'heronries' in Botswana. A heronry might include as well as, or instead of, herons and egrets, cormorants and darters, spoonbills, ibises or even storks and pelicans.

The best-known mixed heronries are at lagoons at Xakanaxa, Gadikwe and Gcobega in Moremi Game Reserve but there are important breeding colonies in some years at many other sites. It is important to note that the heronries are sites where the birds breed, as opposed to roosting sites where the birds simply overnight.



If you see any 'heronry', mixed species or single species, even with very small numbers (even one nest) of nesting herons, egrets, pelicans, cormorants and darters, storks or spoonbills, please make a note of the location (preferably with GPS co-ordinates in UTM/Cape datum) and approximate number of occupied nests and let me know.

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Visit our website <http://www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw/>

This newsletter will initially appear twice annually. If you would like to contribute an article on your field observations or bird conservation project, please send it to pete@info.bw

