



IN THIS ISSUE

Editorial
About avian influenza
Bi-annual waterbird counts
Bird ringing at Lake Ngami
Exciting find in Maun
Thanks to contributors
Slaty Egret project draws to close



EDITORIAL

The importance of organisations such as the BirdLife Partnership, RSPB and other ornithological institutions was once again brought to the fore during 2005, this time with the outbreak of Avian Flu in South-east Asia. In the face of widespread media hype, these organisations, which have access to up-to-date information on the disease and its transmission, were able to bring some common sense to the groundless panic that has spread needlessly throughout the world.

The reason for the anxiety was the prevalent presumption that migrating birds would carry and spread the high-pathogenicity H5N1 virus as they poured out of their northern breeding grounds and flew to their wintering sites across Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

However, the year ended with the non-arrival of this predicted natural catastrophe. "The most obvious explanation is that migrating wild birds are not spreading the disease," said Dr Michael Rands, BirdLife's Director & Chief Executive. The virus is highly lethal and infected birds would probably not be capable of migration. There are several ways through which H5N1 might be transmitted, and it is important that attention is focused on these real problem areas so that the disease may be contained. These include movements of poultry, the trade in wild-caught birds, and the movement of soil/mud on wheels and feet. The relative importance of each of these factors in the transmission of H5N1 is unknown, but to date, all outbreaks that have been investigated have been traced back to poultry movements.

It is the duty of all responsible people to keep themselves well-informed on this issue.

BirdLife Botswana is the  partner in Botswana.
Together for birds and people



ABOUT AVIAN INFLUENZA

Avian flu is of huge economic, social, public health and wildlife conservation concern. The outbreaks in south-east Asia have already led to major economic losses and social disruption, and to some human infections, with over 50% mortality. Fears are constantly expressed that this virus could develop into the next human pandemic. Some scientists, international agencies and governments maintain that wild birds are implicated in the spread of the virus. So, what are the facts?

The H5N1 virus currently circulating is a High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI). This strain of the virus first appeared in Hong Kong in 1997. It evolved in poultry from Low Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (LPAI) viruses that were probably acquired from wild birds. Conditions in poultry flocks (such as crowding, especially in mixed species groups, and prolonged contact with faeces, saliva and other bodily secretions) keep the viruses circulating as they evolve. Wild birds can also be infected with, and killed by, HPAI viruses. They appear to acquire the virus through contact with infected poultry or with facilities used by them.

There is no concrete evidence that migratory birds have helped transmit the disease between countries or regions, but the possibility cannot be ruled out. The spread of H5N1 within and beyond South-east Asia appears attributable to movements of infected poultry. The patterns of spread are not consistent with the timing and direction of movements of wild birds.

A great deal of the interest in Avian flu arises through the fear that it may be transmitted by wild birds to humans, and develop into a pandemic. However, there is no evidence that H5N1 infection in humans has been acquired from wild birds. Human infections have occurred in people who have been closely associated with poultry. Given the number and distribution of outbreaks in domestic poultry and waterfowl, the number of human cases is very small, indicating that the transmission of the virus from poultry to man remains inefficient.

What can be done to prevent the spread of H5N1? The key steps are to improve bio-security. This means keeping wild birds apart from poultry, enhanced monitoring and control of poultry movements and markets, and swift culling of infected flocks. Countries currently free of the disease should consider a ban on imports of domestic poultry and wild birds for the pet trade from affected regions. Preventive measures should be focused especially on places where poultry, wild birds, and humans gather.

This information is derived from the BirdLife International website www.birdlife.org. Visit it to learn more about Avian flu.



BI-ANNUAL WATERBIRD COUNTS

Every year, during January and July, BirdLife Botswana co-ordinates counts of waterbirds throughout the country. This information, apart from being of value for local monitoring of waterbirds, is also sent to Wetlands International as a contribution to the ongoing African Waterbird Count (AfWC) conducted in wetlands throughout Africa. This information becomes even more valuable when collated at this continental level, and many of our global estimates of waterbird population sizes are derived in this way. It is a truly impressive collaborative effort that transcends all political boundaries.

It is important to count the same sites regularly, as the data become more valuable if this continuity is maintained. However, new counters are welcome, and so is coverage of new areas. If you would like to participate in the January counts, and need AfWC forms, or would like to know the areas counted, please contact Kabelo Senyatso (for the southern part of the country) and Pete Hancock (for the north) – see contact details at the end of the newsletter.

Volunteer counters are needed for the January African Waterbird Count

BIRD RINGING AT LAKE NGAMI

During the first two weeks of December 2005, a group of around ten qualified ringers ('banders' in USA terminology) from Southern Africa and beyond came together at Lake Ngami to carry out a study of the avifauna of the Lake. Six trainees also attended. The team was led by a Motswana ringer, although the majority who attended were from South Africa. However we also attracted ringers from Zimbabwe, Germany and the UK – the latter having been sponsored to join the group as a specialist in duck trapping (by the Avian Demography Unit of Cape Town University). For a good portion of the study, two members of the Wildlife Department attended also, one of whom was Zee Mpofu, currently the Botswana Wildlife Department Ornithologist. Another local ringer from Francistown attended for a few days. Members of the communities surrounding Lake Ngami were consulted and informed about what was taking place on the ground before and during the study and their support is gratefully acknowledged.

Ringling involves the harmless capture of birds and the subsequent attachment of a small lightweight ring on their ankle before release. The ring carries an 'O Mang' for each bird – meaning that each ring has stamped on it a unique series of letters and numbers which can be used to identify it if it is found dead or alive in future.





Processing birds back at the work-station

Although birds are all around us, a lot has yet to be learnt about how long each species lives, when (and where) they breed, if they are resident, nomadic or migratory and many other things. Ringing is a way of adding to our knowledge of the life histories of bird species.

During the two week study period nearly a thousand birds of more than 60 species were ringed. Some of the rarer species captured and ringed were Green Sandpiper and Black-tailed Godwit. A Long-legged Buzzard was seen but not trapped – there are not many confirmed sightings of this bird in Southern Africa! The work may be considered to be pretty antisocial, involving getting up before dawn, setting up nets and spending hours taking birds out of the nets and taking measurements and observations on each bird (biometrics) such as mass, moult patterns, breeding status *etc.*. The same process is repeated in the evening at dusk. For some species of bird, ringing at night is preferable – depending upon the brightness/presence/absence of the moon. However the joy of holding such a delicate organism in ones hands, working with others who share the same sentiments, as well as the knowledge that what one is doing may be an important addition to information about birds within Southern Africa makes giving up ones time and money worthwhile(!). All the information collected (from each and every bird ringed all over Southern Africa) is sent to Cape Town University so that anyone from anywhere in the world can access the data collected about the birds and use it to benefit man's knowledge in any way they think fit.

It is hoped that this research might be repeated at fairly regular intervals in future. This will depend upon the goodwill, trust and understanding of our Wildlife Department. If regular ringing at this site is maintained over the years – especially



when there is water in the lake - a picture may begin to emerge as to where the birds come from and go to when there is no water. Sometimes five, ten or fifteen years may elapse before water returns to the lake. (The last big filling of the lake was in the early to mid-sixties. Since then there has been water there in the late eighties and then in the last couple of years.)

Currently there is only one Motswana who is active in Botswana doing research using the technique of ringing. Ringing is done worldwide largely by amateurs, although there are a few professionals - such as two of the four members of the Avian Demography Unit who joined the study from Cape Town University and the guest from the UK who works with their Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. Amateur ringers spend their own money buying ringing equipment and rings, and participate in research projects as 'volunteers'. In the future it would be good if such research in Botswana could be done without the need for qualified ringers from other countries. The most realistic way forward for us in Botswana is to get lodge owners and other such people involved with 'selling the environment' to tourists to sponsor one or two of their professional guides to become proficient in ringing. This would involve sending them on four or five intensive training weeks over a period of a couple of years to train with one or more qualified ringers. This would then allow them to qualify with the SAFRING organisation at the University of Cape Town to become ringers in their own right. (SAFRING is the responsible organisation for issuing rings and ringing equipment to anyone in Southern Africa who is qualified.)

Peter D'Arcy

EXCITING FIND IN MAUN

During December, two Corn Crakes were recorded in Maun, and one just outside Gaborone! These bring the total number of Corn Crakes recorded in Botswana up to eight. This is a globally threatened species, and we do not know much about its numbers and movements in Southern Africa. The reasonable good rains may have been responsible for greater numbers migrating through Botswana, but since it is a secretive bird, perhaps these are just lucky sightings. Please report any other sightings, with photographs if possible, to the contact addresses at the end of the newsletter.

THANKS TO CONTRIBUTORS

A recent request for old bird fieldguides - to use for local bird guide training - was picked up by our colleague Karen Marx at BirdLife South Africa, who managed to persuade some of the BLSA members to part with their copies. A couple of pairs of binoculars, also to be used for guide training, were an added bonus for us too. Many thanks to our sister organisation for this support.



Locally, Brian and Doline Bridges organised several copies of Roberts 6 for us as well. This is the last edition in the fieldguide format, and just what we need for the trainee bird guides. Our next course will be conducted soon.

SLATY EGRET PROJECT DRAWS TO CLOSE

The first phase of the Slaty Egret project (baseline survey) finishes at the end of the year. **We would especially like to thank all those safari operators, professional guides and others who assisted with the project** – this short acknowledgement really does not do justice to your contribution. For your information, some of the main findings are as follows:

The Slaty Egret is a bird of shallow seasonal floodplains that have short, emergent vegetation (especially *Cynodon dactylon*); as such it is quite widespread throughout the Okavango Delta Ramsar site where this habitat occurs. The availability of this habitat is increased by fire and high grazing pressure (particularly from Lechwe), both of which reduce grass height. Since the distribution of the preferred habitat varies cyclically throughout the year as the Delta floods and dries out, Slaty Egrets move to areas of suitable habitat. The Jao Flats support the highest density between April and July; during August to October, when the floodwaters have spread to the lower reaches of the Delta, Slaty Egrets may be found along the Boro, Gomoti and similar floodplains. When these dry out during the summer months, birds move to the Okavango Panhandle.

The Slaty Egret spends most of its time during the day on these floodplains actively foraging for small fish, frogs and aquatic invertebrates which it locates by sight in the clear, shallow water. Although the availability of prey items (particularly corixids – Water Boatmen) is high, the Slaty Egret has a low feeding success, and intra- and inter-specific competition for food is high.

Slaty Egret breeding habitat is quite different from the habitat used for feeding – they prefer *Phragmites* reedbeds, but smaller numbers will also use *Phoenix reclinata* and *Ficus verruculosa* islands. They exhibit a high nest site fidelity, but the major historical breeding sites have been destroyed by hydrological changes and human-induced fire. No new replacement site(s) could be found during 2005.

The disappearance of important breeding sites in reedbeds is one of the major threats facing the Slaty Egret, coupled with disturbance at other existing sites. Any factor which impacts negatively on the availability of shallow floodplains used for feeding, is also likely to negatively affect the population of this species. Human activities that contribute to these changes in Slaty Egret habitat, and direct



disturbance from humans, are both undesirable.

Priority should be given to protecting the Slaty Egret breeding sites as they are of vital importance to their survival. Since the sites are few in number and relatively small in size, this should be quite feasible.

In a preliminary baseline study of this nature, it is inevitable that more questions should be raised than answered, and this is indeed the case. The most important question to be answered is "Where are the other Slaty Egret breeding sites?" Fieldwork should continue with the aim of locating these sites. Ongoing monitoring in the form of counts along fixed transects should be continued to determine population trends. Organisations involved in future research and monitoring should be equipped to undertake this task.

Pete Hancock

BirdLife Botswana has produced an official Botswana Bird List with all the new names according to Roberts VI I. Visit our website if you would like to download a copy – it is an Excel spreadsheet that cuts and folds into a pocket-sized checklist that can be used in the field (design courtesy one of our members, Pat Hagan). This replaces the old single sheet checklist previously issued as there are now too many birds to include on the two sides of a single sheet of paper!

STOP PRESS

The Botswana part of Worldbirds - a web-based bird monitoring system – is just about ready to use. It will certainly be operational before the next newsletter comes out, so check www.worldbirds.org to see when it is officially launched. It is quite user-friendly, but more information on its capabilities will be published in the next newsletter. The information required by participants will be day lists of birds from any locality within Botswana, and in return, users will be able to access all the information in the system. This will include being able to obtain a bird list for a specific locality, or a map showing sightings of a particular species. And that's not all – do have a look at the system!

Special thanks to Rachel Roberts and the Worldbirds team for assisting us to get this established.



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BIRDLIFE BOTSWANA MISSION

BirdLife Botswana aims to conserve birds and important bird habitats, by creating awareness, carrying out research and promoting beneficial relationships between birds and people.

This newsletter appears quarterly. If you would like to contribute an article on your field observations or bird conservation project, please send it to birdlifemaun@ngami.co.za



Membership Details

Membership is due in *January of each year*, as the subscription runs from January to December.

Rates

- Resident - entitles you to both Babbler issues and the quarterly Familiar Chat (per family): P120.00
- Corporate - (4 families): P2000
- Professional - Rangers, guides and students (Babbler and Familiar chat): P60.00
- Life - P2000
- Schools/Clubs - nil
- SADC Region - P150
- Overseas (and outside SADC) – P200

The following details are required:

I/We/Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms: _____

wish to become members of BirdLife Botswana

Address: _____

Home/Cell Phone: _____

Work phone: _____

Email (PRINT please): _____

I acknowledge that my family dependents, invitees and I take part in the BirdLife Botswana organised events entirely at our own risk. I, in my personal capacity and as representative of my spouse, children, dependents, and invitees hereby keep BirdLife Botswana, its committee, members and agents indemnified and hold them harmless against all loss, injury, or damage to person or property from any cause (including negligence) arising as a result of our participation in events organised by BirdLife Botswana.

Signed _____

Date: _____

Please make your cheque payable to 'BirdLife Botswana'

Please return this form with your subscription to one of the addresses given below:

The Secretary (membership)
BirdLife Botswana
P/Bag 003
Suite 348
Mogoditshane
Gaborone, Botswana

Pete Hancock
PO Box 20463
Maun

or phone Pete to
collect 6862481

Guy Brina
Private Bag F12
Francistown

or phone Guy to
collect 2412913

OFFICIAL USE

Card _____ Data base _____



Reporting Birds of Concern

BirdLife Botswana is very interested in collecting information on Birds of Concern – they are species that are either globally or nationally threatened. Please use the format below when submitting sightings to make computerisation of the data easier.

Note that the co-ordinates of each sighting are essential – it is convenient to get these from a GPS but of course they can be read off any good map. If you have a GPS, please set the datum to WGS 84 and the position format to decimal degrees. If you use any other datum/format, please just let us know what it is. Information in bold in the table below is the most important, if you cannot collect it all.

Species (see list below)	GPS co-ords		Quarter degree square e.g. 1923C4	Area e.g. NG 19	Locality e.g. 2 km west of Machaba	Date	Time	# of birds	Ad. M	Ad. F	Ad. ?	# of Imm.	Observer (your name)	Comments

The species that we are interested in are the following:

Slaty Egret	White-backed Night-Heron	Wattled Crane	Grey-crowned Crane	Lesser Flamingo
Cape Vulture	White-headed Vulture	Lappet-faced Vulture	Hooded Vulture	Pallid Harrier
Bateleur	Martial Eagle	Long-crested Eagle	Lesser Kestrel	Pel's Fishing Owl
Kori Bustard	Southern Ground Hornbill	African Skimmer	Rosy-throated Longclaw	
Black-winged Pratincole				

Breeding records for these species would also be invaluable.

Please send this information to:

BirdLife Botswana, PO Box 20463, Maun, BOTSWANA. Alternatively please e-mail to birdlifemaun@ngami.co.za

