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Earlé RA 2024. Bird species outside of their known distribution ranges in southern Namibia. Biodiversity Observations 14: 84–89.

14 August 2024

DOI: *10.15641/bo.1579*

ORNITHOLOGY

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Abstract

Out-of-range sightings of five bird species at the Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory in southern Namibia are reported on here: Quail Finch *Ortygospiza atricollis*, Chestnut Weaver *Ploceus rubiginosus*, Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus*, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove *Turtur chalcospilos* and African Cuckoo *Cuculus gularis*. These records emphasize the value of the Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory and highlight the importance of systematic field work in southern Namibia.

Introduction

Southern Namibia is biologically and ecologically under explored, including in terms of bird diversity. This is well illustrated in the data submitted to the Second Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) (Underhill 2016, Brooks et al. 2022, Lee et al. 2022); the SABAP2 data show that common species such as the Cape Sparrow *Passer melanurus* and Scaly-feathered Weaver *Sporopipes squamifrons* are commonly reported from areas in South Africa such as the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park but appear to occur rarely in southern Namibia, just across the border. The seemingly featureless semi-desert Nama Karoo and Succulent Karoo environments coupled with the well-known highly nomadic bird populations of southern Namibia contribute to the under exploration of this landscape. Although the Nama Karoo habitat is dominated by rocky grassland and low shrubs, there are drainage corridors and larger rivers throughout the area where large trees such as Camel thorn *Acacia erioloba* and Sweet thorn *Acacia karroo* often form thick stands. These tree-lined corridors are presumed to be the areas of suitable habitat for some of the bird species being reported on here. Furthermore, in this semi-arid environment the availability of free surface drinking water is a major factor in determining the distribution of some bird species especially seed-eaters.

The newly established Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory (the Observatory) (26.825°S, 17.352°E) is c. 90 km west of Keetmanshoop in southern Namibia. Bird observations have been made here over the seven-year period 2017 to 2024.

Increasingly severe drought conditions prevailed since 2013 with as little as 10% of the annual mean rainfall of 120 mm per annum being recorded in some years. In early 2020, good rains resulted in some improvement in the vegetation, especially that of the stony grassveld. Further adequate rainfall during the early summer of 2022 saw the grassveld improve further and thus also the availability of seeds. This resulted in an influx of mostly seed-eaters, such as Redbilled Quelea *Quelea quelea,* Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* and Lark-like Bunting *Emberiza impetuani*, to the area early in 2023.

Several bird species not previously recorded at the Observatory were observed during 2023 and 2024 and these are reported on here.

Observations

Five species were recorded at the Observatory, far beyond their known ranges in Namibia. The observations are presented in chronological order, with the first in April 2023 and the fifth in May 2024.

Quail Finch *Ortygospiza atricollis*

On 4 April 2023 attention was drawn to an unfamiliar call at a natural drinking pool. A pair of Quail Finches was sitting on the rock next to the water while several other bird species were drinking. The pair was watched for less than two minutes before they flew away together.

This species mostly inhabits open areas of short grassland (Nuttall 1997), but is regarded as nomadic when not breeding (Aspinwall 1980, Irwin 1981). Incidental records have shown that it is sparsely distributed in central northern Namibia and around Windhoek (Nuttall 1997, SABAP2) with the most southerly records in Namibia at Rehoboth, more than 400 km north of the Observatory.

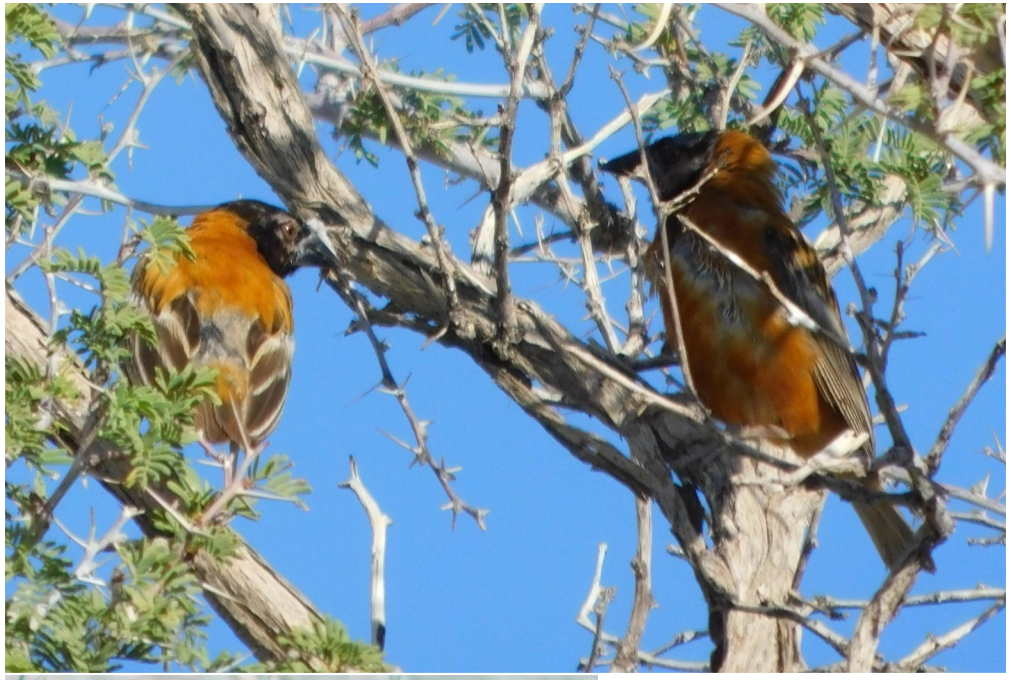
Chestnut Weaver *Ploceus rubiginosus*

Chestnut Weavers are known to be nomadic (Hockey et al. 2005) and are subject to erratic seasonal fluctuations in numbers and poorly understood dispersal during the nonbreeding season (Brain & Brain 1971, Komen & Buys 1990). The post-breeding dispersal of birds from central Namibia is known to be mostly northwards with birds ringed in Windhoek recovered in Damaraland (Dirk Heinrich pers. comm.) and it is regarded as a regular and locally abundant visitor to the Okavango basin (Herremans 1994).

Herremans (1997) provided no records of this species south of 24.55°S, more than 250 km north of the ringing record at the Observatory. An observational record in SABAP2 from near Duwisib (25.257°S, 16.541°E) is farther south, and brought the closest sighting of this species to the Observatory to c. 200 km.

On 6 February 2023 a single female Chestnut Weaver was netted at the Observatory and was the first individual of this species seen at this location. During March and early April 2023, single Chestnut Weavers were often observed in flocks of Red-billed Quelea and Cape Sparrows. A flock of at least 40 Chestnut Weavers was subsequently observed at a natural drinking pool on 22 April 2023. Some of the males were still in full breeding plumage although some body moult was evident (Figure 1) while others showed a mottled appearance and were thus well into their non-breeding plumage (Figure 2).

During March 2024 Chestnut Weavers were again seen at the Observatory when two females visited the drinking pool several times over



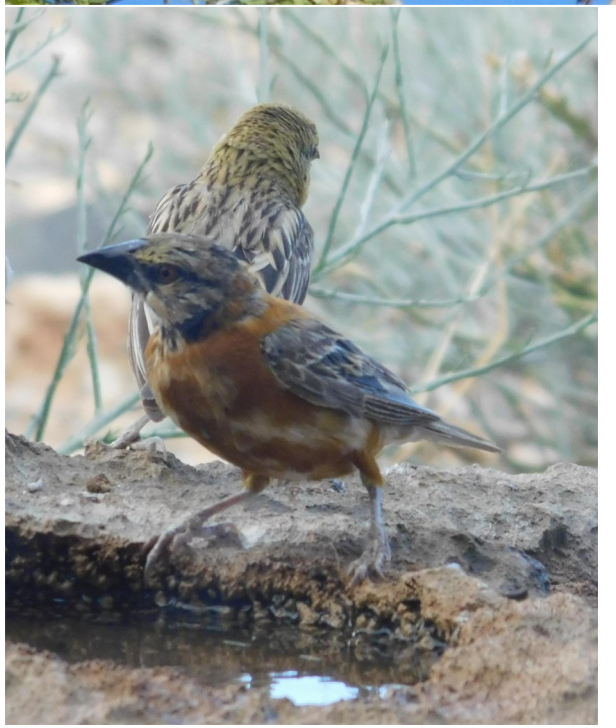


Figure 1: Male Chestnut Weavers in full breeding plumage at Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory in March 2023 (BirdPix record 267490).

Figure 2: A male Chestnut Weaver moulting into eclipse plumage at the Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory in March 2023 (BirdPix record 288112).

a five-day period. On 29 March 2024 a single male Chestnut Weaver in full breeding plumage was once again photographed at the drinking pool (BirdPix record 279056). Systematic observations from other areas in southern Namibia will probably reveal that the nomadic Chestnut Weaver is more widespread than current records indicate.

Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus*

While mist netting birds in the garden of the restaurant at the Alte Kalköfen Lodge on 3 April 2023, a Green Woodhoopoe was netted and ringed (Figure 3). Du Plessis (1997) described these birds as sedentary and group-territorial with no evidence of migration or nomadism. The accepted distribution records of this species restrict it to the northern half of Namibia but due to the fact that the Violet Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus damarensis* is similar, the observational records of these two species are probably intermixed to some extent (du Plessis 1997). Despite this possibility, neither of these species has a known distribution as far south in Namibia as the Observatory. Although these birds often attract attention in areas where they occur due to their raucous cackling, this was never heard before or after the bird was trapped and it was assumed that the bird was not part of a group. During 2022, good rains fell and the main river close to the Observatory came down in flood. Many other tributaries of the Fish River were also flowing, as were many of the large rivers north of the Observatory. These tree-lined rivers probably provided suitable habitat for this species at this time. The record is at least 250 km farther south than indicated by records in SABAP2 until mid-2024.

Emerald-spotted Wood Dove *Turtur chalcospilos*

While a bird count was being conducted at a natural drinking pool at 16h30 on 30 March 2024, a single Emerald-spotted Wood Dove landed and was photographed (Figure 4). The bird drank and spent three minutes at the water but did not eat with the other doves and seed eaters which were fed near the drinking pool.

This observation is far removed from the known distribution range of this species which is totally absent from most of the western part of southern Africa. The normal habitat of the Emerald-spotted Wood Dove is moist thornveld, particularly in thickets and along drainage lines (Colahan 1997). This type of thornveld is common in northern Namibia where this species is regularly recorded. The closest

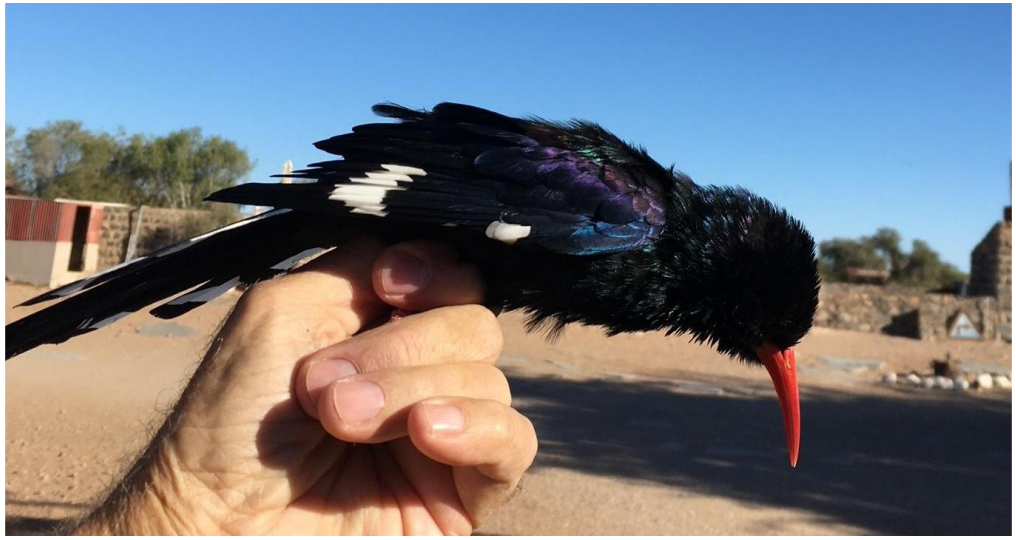


Figure 3: The single Green Woodhoopoe netted and ringed at the Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory in April 2023 (BirdPix record 288111).

Figure 4: The lone Emerald-spotted Wood Dove that came to the water bath at the Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory in March 2024 (BirdPix record 279073).

SABAP2 sight record is near Mariental, and c. 200 km north of the Observatory. Systematic fieldwork in Namibia would probably reveal a wider distribution of this species especially in northern Namibia (Colahan 1997).

Where it occurs, the Emerald-spotted Wood Dove is regarded as sedentary (Colahan 1997) but variation in seasonal abundance has been recorded in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and western Zimbabwe (Rowan 1983, Irwin 1981). Furthermore, it seems as if the birds respond to improving conditions and move into previously drought-stricken woodland after good rain (Colahan 1997). However, this bird appeared at the Observatory during a period of severe drought when conditions were extremely unfavourable and most granivores were moving out of the area. Despite intensive searches for the bird around the area where it was observed it was not spotted again. It seems likely that this bird had been forced to move due to drought, and was undertaking a nomadic movement in search of better conditions, but had not found them at the Observatory.

African Cuckoo *Cuculus gularis*

On 19 May 2024 a single immature African Cuckoo (Figure 5) was observed while it was feasting on the plentiful caterpillars of a *Colotis* sp. butterfly which infest the *Maerua schinzii* trees during autumn and early winter. For four days after the initial sighting of the bird several attempts at trapping the bird for ringing with both mist nets and baited spring traps were unsuccessful. However, on 25 May the bird flew into one of the staff houses and was caught by hand and ringed (Figure 6).

The African Cuckoo is a summer visitor in the northern half of Namibia with a few records as far south as Mariental which is c. 200 km to the north of the current sighting of this bird at the Observatory. Occasional vagrants have previously been reported from the Orange River (along the border between Namibia and South African) (Vernon 1997). This is at least 140 km south of the above observation but the SABAP2 data shows there have not been any recent records from this section of the Orange River. The presence of this bird during May so far south in Namibia probably indicates a case of reverse migration of the individual which should have been farther north in Africa at that time of the year.

Discussion

Figure 5: The immature African Cuckoo when first seen at the Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory in May 2024 (BirdPix record 282080).

Figure 6: The African Cuckoo in the hand after being ringed.

These five records emphasize the value of the Alte Kalköfen Bird Observatory to long-term monitoring of birds in southern Namibia. This region is characterized by large variability in the amount and timing of annual rainfall (Kwembeya & Shikangalah 2023); as a consequence of this variability, we anticipate that the abundance of birds and the species composition of the bird community will fluctuate widely. We also anticipate high levels of nomadism. Regular monitoring, through both drought periods and in the periods following flood events, will enable us to document the variability.

This paper also highlights the importance of regular and systematic field work in southern Namibia, with observations curated into one of the large-scale databases. For example, this can be achieved through participation in the bird atlas project (SABAP2) (Underhill 2016, Brooks et al. 2022) and the Virtual Museum (Underhill & Navarro 2023).

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Paper edited by Les Underhill
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