

IN MEMORIAM

TRIBUTE TO CHARLES CLINNING

It would be unfitting to sound a mournful note when writing about the passing of Charles Clinning, for he was definitely not a man given to melancholy. This tribute, therefore, is one which remembers with fondness his total immersion in his work, his dedication to his family and his irrepressible dry humour.

Charles began his work in South West Africa in 1969 when he, Tessa and two daughters took up abode in the old farmhouse at Daan Viljoen Game Park, just outside of Windhoek. Here he, as a Nature Conservator, patrolled the hills of the Khomas Hochland and fell in love with its diversity of birdlife. I used to visit the Clinnings there, preferably sitting with them in the huge kitchen of the farmhouse. Charles's face was deeply tanned, his expression radiant and his arms and legs usually severely scratched as testament to his latest encounter with a thorn tree whilst looking into nests. He later teamed up with Dr Rolf Jensen, Ornithologist in the Division of Nature Conservation and Tourism, to produce an illustrated book *Birds of Daan Viljoen Game Park*, which is published in English, German and Afrikaans.

I was, at the time, employed as Ornithologist on the coast and whenever the opportunity arose, Charles and family travelled to Walvis Bay to join me in 'birding'. One of his favourite places was Sandwich Harbour, which was a harbour at the turn of the century and is now a protected wilderness. It is a birder's paradise, located 40 kilometres south of Walvis Bay. Charles, Tessa, Conny (my wife) and I decided jointly that 'Sandwich' must be one of the most beautiful places on earth. It is bounded on

the inland by towering Namib dunes, sloping steeply to the edge of the lagoon, their pale yellow colour offset by the bluest of desert skies, the greenest of the lagoon's vegetation and the cold grey of the Atlantic. Here, during the day, Charles and I would paddle a tiny dinghy among the lush beds of reeds and bullrushes, opportunistically ringing Grey Heron and Redknobbed Coot nestlings. Our wives were sworn to secrecy not to divulge the spectacle presented by our frequent immersion in the most evil-smelling, glutinous mud when our antics to get at the nest capsized the dinghy. At dusk, with fog blowing in across the mudflats, we would erect mistnets to catch waders feeding along the tidal ebb and flow. These were magic times: our torches reflected trails of phosphorescence as we plodded through the shallows, with jackals scurrying furtively ahead. Occasionally I was able to drag Charles away from birding long enough to catch a couple of delicious cob in the surf adjacent to the lagoon.

Soon after these halcyon days, Charles decided to qualify himself for a post in the Research Section. He and Tessa took the children to South Africa where, with Tessa as wage earner to supplement the bursary he had obtained, Charles obtained a B.Sc. Honours degree in Zoology. He replaced me as Ornithologist on the coast in 1975 after I moved to Etosha. Again, his insatiable appetite for birds sent him all the way to Etosha where we once more linked up, this time to cannon-net vultures at carcasses of zebra which had died of anthrax. The wildlife veterinarian of Etosha, Dr 'Ian' Hofmeyr who has also passed on, was appalled at the unhygienic approach Charles, Rolf Jensen and I adopted towards vultures we removed from the nets. Admittedly they must have been covered in anthrax bacteria



Charles – in characteristic position – up a tree, pursuing his favourite occupation.

(which is deadly to most people, except ornithologists). Soon afterwards, Rolf Jensen again teamed up with Charles, this time to produce an illustrated book *Birds of the Etosha National Park*, which recorded 312 species. It too was published in the three 'official' languages of South West Africa.

Perhaps this is a fitting place to mention the prolific pen of Charles Clinning – his publications included work he did on Damara Terns, Caspian Terns, Turnstones, Lappetfaced Vultures, Egyptian Vultures, Cape Eagle Owls and Damara Rock-jumpers. He produced a book, published by the Southern African Ornithological Society, on the derivation of scientific names of South African birds. Clinning and Jensen

also added new records to Winterbottom's (1966) checklist of birds of Kaokoland and the Skeleton Coast. At this point I owe it to Charles to mention his irreverent attitude to bureaucracy and The Establishment. At an Annual Professional Officer's meeting in the dignified setting of the Executive Committee Room at the "Tintenpalast" (Palace of Ink) in Windhoek, Charles had some senior staff members (all "big and hairy" protagonists of large mammals) aghast. He introduced his progress reports by stating dryly that a recent epidemic of anthrax in Etosha (which had killed hundreds of zebra, wildebeest and springbok) was the best achievement of Etosha's staff for the year, because it ensured a substantial food source for his beloved vultures!

Our birding took us to other places inland – we ringed a variety of species at the Hardap Dam, the country's largest manmade lake. This is where the accompanying photo of Charles was taken, fitting rings on Whitebreasted Cormorant chicks, as he perched atop a dead tree standing in the water. I've purposely included this picture because it is linked to the last time I saw Charles, when he made a special effort to attend the 30th Anniversary of the Namibia Bird Club in January 1993, as guest of honour. I included this photo in my presentation of a history of birding in Namibia, and Charles was delighted to be reminded of those early times.

The venue of the Anniversary was Walvis Bay, selected because of the lagoon where he spent many hours counting and ringing waders. Charles, accompanied by his eldest daughter Jane, rose to the occasion and regaled his audience with anecdotes and his delightful brand of wit. He concluded by saying he was in the process of collating a bibliography of the birds of Namibia. (I do not know if this marathon task was

completed by Charles before his death, but if not I appeal to his associates in South Africa to ensure that it is published. It will be a fitting tribute to a man who contributed significantly to ornithology in the then South West Africa.)

Immediately after this meeting I invited him to visit the Namib Research Institute at Gobabeb where I'm now based. His good friend Pieter Mostert accompanied him and we three reminisced of the days when Pieter was employed in Nature Conservation, also working at Gobabeb. Later that day I said goodbye to Charles in the most appropriate of settings – in the Namib-Naukluft Park, on the road to the Gamsberg mountain pass – an area he had worked in for several years during his research on Lappetfaced Vultures. Those of you who have experienced the Namib, its vastness, and its unbelievable colours, will appreciate the scenery we were in. We both may have thought the same thing – but we never said it – this was a good place for us to say goodbye.

Hu. Berry