

RINGING HOLIDAY IN NAMIBIA, 1994

Monika Poferi

152A Stilfontein Road, Stilfontein 2550

Because we are not only keen birdwatchers but also enthusiastic bird ringers, Dries, his son André and I always plan our holidays with bird ringing in mind.

We decided to hire a camper and applied for the necessary permits to ring in Namibia. Then we contacted two different persons living on farms there. One was an Austrian missionary staying in Aroab and, as I am Austrian myself, I was looking forward to meeting him. The other one was Oom Jimmy, who lives on a farm near Okakarara in northern Namibia.

The first shock of our holiday was our first sight of the tiny little camper, an Explorer Cub from Toyota. It was big enough for two people, but definitely too small for three. We had to pack in all our ringing equipment including the box with our two white mice, the Bal-chatri and lots of blankets and sleeping bags for the freezing nights. So the little camper was filled way over capacity. But nothing could dampen our holiday spirit.

We drove as far as the Molopo Motel, close to the border, without any major incidents. The first excitement came the following day when, shortly before Rietfontein, we saw a Pale Chanting Goshawk sitting on a telephone pole. As we drove slowly past the bird I dropped the Bal-chatri (with the male mouse inside it) out of the rear door of the car, which is ideal for this purpose. We had not gone much further when the bird came down. We waited until we were sure that it was actually caught, then drove as fast as the car would go back towards it and I jumped out and grabbed the frightened bird. I was so excited that my hands were shaking. My first Pale Chanting Goshawk! Once both the bird and I had calmed down, the serious ringing and measuring began. Then, after I had taken a photo of it, we released the bird and passed the border without any complications.

About 30 km before Aroab we spotted another Pale Chanting Goshawk, so out came the Bal-chatri for another catch but, to our disappointment, it escaped and would not come down a second time. We could not understand what had gone wrong. We went on, sighted another one, put out the trap again and, although the bird seemed to be caught in the loops of the trap, it also escaped. It was very frustrating and we did not make another attempt even though we saw more of these birds perched on poles. Closer inspection of the trap revealed that all the loops were lying flat, making it impossible for a bird to get properly caught, so I had to make a plan.

We arrived at Aroab in the early afternoon and Father Königseder welcomed us to the mission station. Once we had explained our somewhat unusual hobby, he took us to a little dam on the farm where he thought we could catch some birds in this arid land. The wind was blowing, however, so we hoped for better weather the next day. Early the next morning we drove to the dam and erected our nets in a semi-circle around the pan. And then they came, huge flocks of Sandgrouse, but the wind was still blowing and we only caught a few Burchell's and Namaqua Sandgrouse. Father Königseder watched us with great interest and said we should actually eat these birds because they tasted delicious, but I knew he was only joking. To our great excitement, we also caught Stark's Lark and Slater's Lark, which were lifers for us, as well as ringing firsts. We stayed on this farm for five days and ringed 90 birds of 20 different species. Most of these also occur in the western Transvaal but there were some specials such as Karoo Robin, Dusky Sunbird, Whitethroated Canary, Sabota Lark and Marico Flycatcher. We also had our first flat tyre but luckily the problem was only the valve of the tube and we had a new one fitted.

We continued our trip via Koes, Gochas and Stampriet to Hardap Dam, always on the lookout for raptors on telephone poles or powerlines, once I had fixed the loops of the Bal-chatri and made them stand upright.

A few kilometres before Koes we had our first burst tire, so we bought a new one in Koes and went on. By this time, we considered Pale Chanting Goshawks to be "trash birds". Then we spotted another raptor on a pole right next to the road and saw that it was a Lanner Falcon. He was successfully caught and close inspection allowed appreciation of this beautiful and magnificent bird.

I discovered that raptor ringing is no easy task and cannot be done by one person alone. You have to watch out for long, sharp and very powerful claws, which can easily pierce your skin right to the bone. Once the bird gets hold of you it doesn't voluntarily let go – ask me about it!

There are special requirements for raptor measurements in Namibia. Dr Rob Simmons, of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, sent us specific forms for raptor ringing. They required all the following data: length, chord, depth, width, height of the bill, the length and width of the gape, the length of the wing, the secondary, the ulna and the tail inner and outer, the tarsus, the length of all toes and claws, the width of the shoulder and overall length, and then also the body condition and the fullness of crop and, finally, the weight of the bird.

From Hardap Dam we went on to our next destination, the farm of Oom Jimmy near Okakarara. The day we arrived nobody was at home and while we waited till late in the evening, I spent the time very usefully by repairing the Bal-chatri. I took all the loops off the trap, fitted new ones and applied silicon on the knots to make them stand upright permanently. Then we went to bed. The next morning Oom Jimmy told us that he had gone to town and completely forgot about us. He took us to a large pan on the farm and wished us luck.

Here we really did some serious ringing, catching close to 550 birds in five days. There were literally thousands of Violet-eared and Black-cheeked Waxbills. We also caught

Gabar Goshawks, both the normal and the melanistic forms, and other interesting species such as Barred Warbler, Yellowbellied Eremomela, Bleating Warbler, Pied Barbet, Crimson-breasted Shrike (which is my personal favourite), two Pearl-spotted Owls and a very noisy Pied Babbler. Dries was also the lucky, or should I say unlucky, person to remove the only Rosy-faced Lovebird that got caught in the net. It was, at that stage, the heaviest little biter we had come upon (since then we have caught some Thick-billed Weavers which are absolutely tops at inflicting very painful bites). One day we put the nets up in Jimmy's garden, where it was relatively quiet and the only bird of interest was a Yellow-billed Hornbill which tried to take a bird out of the net and got caught itself.

I got the next shock when I found that our mice had become the proud parents of ten ugly, pink, little babies. Actually I was very surprised that the mouse went through with her pregnancy with all that rattling and shaking while driving on the dirt roads.

After very exciting days on this farm, we went on to the Waterberg Plateau. I was glad to have a break from ringing because, in my opinion, a hobby must never become an obsession. The Waterberg Plateau Nature Reserve has a beautiful camp with hiking trails in an indigenous forest where we spotted Meyer's Parrot, another lifer for André and myself.

Then we drove via Tsumeb to the Etosha National Park. The roads were tarred all the way and rather busy, so there was no chance of catching raptors and trying the modified Bal-chatri. At Bloubokdraai, near Halali, we tried very hard to find the Black-faced Babbler, and actually succeeded by playing the call of the Arrow-marked Babbler. But the best thing happened at Okaukuejo. We went to the Ghost Forest and looked unsuccessfully for the Whitetailed Shrike all the way. Finally we drove back to the camp to get a permit for the Skeleton Coast Nature Reserve, only to be told that permits are issued at Springbokwater, at the gate to the reserve. There we spotted a

Whitetailed Shrike on the lawn in front of the office. There you have it – we had been driving around for hours looking for that bird and there it was, right in the camp – what a delight!

Another absolutely unique experience was the sight of roughly 300 Doublebanded Sandgrouse at the waterhole in the camp. They stormed the waterhole after dark, when the lights were switched on. In German this bird is called a “Nachtflyghuhn”, which means “hen which flies at night”. I have never seen such a phenomenon.

At Khorixas we filled our 50 litre tank with petrol which had to last us until Mile 108, approximately 400 km away. Then we visited the Petrified Forest, the Verbrannte Berg, the Organ Pipes and the Bushman engravings near Twyfelfontein. At the Petrified Forest, Dries experienced one of the greatest disappointments in life. He had taken a lot of beautiful pictures at Etosha and along the way, but when he tried to change film in the forest he discovered that he had no film in the camera. André and I couldn't help laughing and Dries wanted to kick himself. But as he said, it was one more good reason to come back to this beautiful country. The trip through the Skeleton Coast Reserve was highlighted by the sight of Herero and Tractrac Chats.

A few kilometres before Toscannini, we arrived on the scene of an accident. A young Swiss couple had overturned their VW Golf. They were on their way to Swakopmund when it happened. Luckily, besides a few bruises, they were unhurt and we offered them a lift. We packed all their luggage, including a 20 litre canister of petrol, into our already over-full camper and continued our trip, until our next exciting incident.

Just about 10 km before Mile 108, we ran out of petrol. There was, of course, much laughter and had it not been for the full canister of the friendly Swiss couple we would have been stranded. So they were lucky that we had appeared and we were lucky that they were with us. Do you believe in coincidence? I do.

We visited the seal colony at Cape Cross and arrived at Henties Bay late that Sunday afternoon. After dropping the couple off we were on our way to Swakopmund.

It was already dark when we parked our car at Mile 4 and we were exhausted from the long and eventful trip. Next morning, I could hardly wait to get into Swakopmund to do some real German shopping and bought Landjaeger (a type of German dry worst), German sweet mustard, genuine Springer chocolate and two pieces of delicious German tarts for each of us. Then we went on to Paaltjies in Walvis Bay to test our identification skills on waders. To our big surprise, we saw quite a few Grey Plovers which were not supposed to occur there in winter. Most of the waders had gone, however, and there was not much variety.

We left Walvis Bay and drove to S von Bach Dam. As we turned onto the dirt road leading to the dam, we spotted a Rock Kestrel sitting on a pole. Out came the mouse and into the “new” Bal-chatri it went. We had all had a long rest so we could do some ringing again. This was the first Rock Kestrel we had ringed and the trap worked perfectly.

At the dam we saw lots of White Pelicans and Reed Cormorants and we heard the first Fish Eagle of our trip.

The next day we went to Daan Viljoen Nature Reserve to spend the night there. Because it is not far from Van Bach Dam we arrived there early and went on the 6,5 km circular drive where we spotted an Osprey on a dead tree and with the help of my telescope we got a very good look at him. Then we did a walk through the camp, which stretches all along the dam, in search of the very rare Rockrunner, so rare that I doubted its existence. Because it was out of breeding season it would not respond to the tape calls. We were very disappointed but we will come back to look for it.

From there we were on our way back home to Maltahoeh, via Klein Aub as Dries had to see his old work place again after 15 years.

Before reaching this little village in the desert we had another flat tyre and had to buy a new one again. By then I had enough of dirt roads and we decided to stay on tarred roads till we reached home. We drove from Mariental via Keetmanshoop and Karasburg, where we successfully caught two more Pale Chanting Goshawks, some Greater Kestrels and Rock Kestrels, the trap now working fabulously, to Upington.

We had a marvellous time, ringed 640 birds including 16 raptors and travelled nearly 7 000 km. We had lots of fun and excitement and we will do it again.

Acknowledgments

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List of the species ringed

Gabar Goshawk	Yellowbilled Hornbill	Yellowbellied	Great Sparrow
Pale Chanting Goshawk	Pied Barbet	Eremomela	Cape Sparrow
Lanner Falcon	Sabota Lark	Blackchested Prinia	Greyheaded Sparrow
Rock Kestrel	Slater's Lark	Marico Flycatcher	Masked Weaver
Greater Kestrel	Stark's Lark	Pirit Batis	Redbilled Quelea
Namaqua Sandgrouse	Pied Babbler	Cape Wagtail	Melba Finch
Burchell's Sandgrouse	Redeyed Bulbul	Crimsonbreasted Shrike	Blue Waxbill
Cape Turtle Dove	Groundscraper Thrush	Dusky Sunbird	Violeteared Waxbill
Laughing Dove	Whitebrowed Robin	Buffalo Weaver	Blackcheeked Waxbill
Rosyfacd Lovebird	Karoo Robin	Whitebrowed	Shaftailed Whydah
Pearlspotted Owl	Titbabbler	Sparrowweaver	Yellow Canary
Whitebacked Mousebird	Barred Warbler	House Sparrow	Whitethroated Canary

