

Namibia Coastal/Marine Bird News 2

Newsletter of the Namibia Coastal/Marine Bird Working Group

June 2008



The Orange River Mouth (photo Holger Kolberg)



The Orange River near Hohenfels, about 20 km upstream of the mouth, August 2004 (photo Ann Scott)

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The Orange River Mouth – an important and little known Ramsar habitat for birds

Holger Kolberg, MET; email holgerk@mweb.com.na

The Orange River is one of few perennial rivers in southern Africa. The river forms a linear oasis through the semi-arid and arid Karoo and southern Namib and thus forms an important habitat for all flora and fauna in that area. The Orange River Mouth and its associated estuary/lagoon is an integral part of that system. The importance of the site becomes even more apparent when one considers the fact that the next nearest large wetland is the Olifants River mouth, some 400km to the south, and Sandwich Harbour, 500km to the north.

Counts of wetland birds have shown the Orange River Mouth to be the sixth most important wetland in southern Africa. The site regularly supports more than 1% of the global population of Damara Terns (*Sterna balaenarum*) and Hartlaub's Gull (*Larus hartlaubii*) and more than 1% of the southern African population of an additional six species, as well as fourteen species of birds listed in either or both of the Red Data books for Namibia and South Africa. The site also supports 33 species of mammal, amongst which are such unusual species as the straw-coloured fruit bat (*Eidolon helvum*) and Cape clawless otter (*Aonyx*

capensis), 41 reptile species, including water leguaan (*Varanus niloticus*) and the coastal legless skink (*Acontias littoralis*), and 16 amphibian species, one of the highest diversities in Namibia. The Namaqua barb (*Barbus hospes*) is a fish that is endemic to the lower Orange River and is one of three Red Data fish species found in the river.

The site conforms to Ramsar criteria 1, 2, 3 and 6 (www.ramsar.org) and is Namibia's smallest listed Ramsar wetland at 500ha. The site falls within the restricted diamond area known as the *Sperrgebiet* and thus enjoys relatively good protection.

The Orange River Mouth supports a large number of waterbirds, with a maximum of 20 653–26 653 individuals of 57 species recorded in December 1985.

Because of its importance for waterbirds, the Orange River Mouth is recognised as a Ramsar site and an Important Bird Area. Since being designated a Ramsar site in 1991, however, the number of waterbirds has decreased (by c. 74% since the first two surveys in 1980 and 1985). During 13 surveys conducted from December 1995 to August 2001 an average of 6 873 ($\pm 1 719$ SD; $n = 6$) and 5 547 ($\pm 2 039$ SD; $n = 7$) individuals were recorded during summer and winter, respectively. This decrease, in conjunction with the degradation of the c. 300ha saltmarsh resulted in the Orange River Mouth being placed on the Ramsar Convention's Montreux Record in 1995. The decrease in the number of waterbirds at the Orange River Mouth is mainly attributable to the absence of large numbers of Cape Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) and non-breeding Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*), with no breeding of the former being recorded on islands in the mouth area after 1993.

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The decrease in numbers of these two species may be attributed to both on- and off-site factors. During a re-evaluation of the revised Ramsar criteria, we found that the site still meets three of the four Ramsar criteria under which it was originally designated in 1991 and five of the eight new criteria.

Newsflashes

New IUCN Red Data listings (for details, see <http://cms.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/species/index>)

According to the new 2008 IUCN Red List Category (as evaluated by BirdLife International - the official Red List Authority for birds for IUCN):

1. **Wandering Albatross** is now classified as **Globally Vulnerable**.
2. **Eurasian Curlew** is now **Globally Near Threatened**.

Project Shine hits the coast!

Contact person: Berdine Potgieter, Swakopmund Municipality (tel. 064 410 4240, email bpotgieter@swkmun.com.na)

The second phase of Project Shine, which focuses on cleaning up our environment and promoting recycling and conservation awareness, was launched on World Environment Day (5 June 2008) at Swakopmund. This time the area to be cleaned over the next six months will be the entire coast from Paaltjies at Walvis Bay to Henties Bay. Generous sponsorship, prizes and support in kind are being provided by various partners (still being finalized) including the three relevant coastal municipalities. Local schools and other organized groups are invited to participate (please contact Mrs Potgieter, see above).

The Namibia Coastal/Marine Bird Working Group has pledged bird guide books to the value of N\$2 500 as prizes for the following competitions:

1. The school that collects the greatest amount of blue plastic water bottles for recycling (in kg) over the six-month period.
2. The school group that creates the most striking large sculpture of a coastal or marine bird (Namibian species!) out of recycled waste materials collected from the coast during Project Shine.

Colour-ringed Swift Terns

Mark Boorman, email felix@mweb.com.na

Just a reminder to please keep a look out for Swift Tern carrying colour-rings. Yesterday (4 June 2008) I saw a juvenile bird with orange left, metal right (see photo, top of next column). This is one of a large group ringed as chicks by Pete Bartlett and Seabee Ndjengua on Possession Island in April this year. Of interest is that this juv. was still soliciting for, and receiving food from an adult (presumably one of the parents). Apart from these orange marked birds there have been good numbers of this species ringed in South Africa with colour-rings and also engraved "Canada" rings in South Africa. These birds turn up (pun intended!) from time to time on our coast.



Ringed juvenile Swift Tern (right; see report by Mark Boorman) soliciting food from adult (left; *photo Meidad Goren*)

Jessica Kemper (email jkemper@mfmr.gov.na)

Here's some additional information about the Swift Terns. There were 2 455 Swift Tern nests at Possession, 680 at Ichaboe and 180 at Halifax this season. There may have been more breeding at Penguin and / or Seal Islands, but those unfortunately didn't get counted. I was on Penguin Island during May and didn't see any chicks or fledglings, and only few adults, so I doubt whether they had bred there in any great numbers, if at all. Pete Bartlett and Seabee Ndjengua ringed 346 chicks, just before they became flighted. Of those, they ringed 93 on 22 April, 185 on 23 April and 68 on 29 April. All of them got metal right and orange left. On 16 May Tony Delport on Ichaboe Island reported seeing two of the ringed fledglings, one begging from presumably its parent.

Strings of cormorants at Sandwich Harbour

Linda & Jeff Millington, email millington.linda@gmail.com



Sandwich Harbour (top), and endless lines of cormorants, with other birds, 2 May 2008 (*photos: Linda Millington*)

Sabine's Gull sighting

John Paterson, email john@paterson.alt.na

I saw a bunch of Sabine's Gulls in full breeding plumage off Pelican Point (Walvis Bay) on 1/6/08; they are summer visitors. Also a penguin in the bay.

Habitat changes at the Swakop River Mouth

High seas during the weekend of 17-18 May 2008 resulted in tidal washing over the sand berm into the Swakop River Mouth, bringing about dramatic habitat changes. Large amounts of sand were washed into the lagoon area, and the water level was raised and pushed back towards the road bridge. The flushing effect also changed habitat conditions, attracting 14 Crowned Cormorants to the area, a fairly unusual record for this area according to local experts. On 16 June 2008, a total of 40 Crowned Cormorants was counted at this site.



Top: High seas wash into the Swakop River Mouth;
Centre: the water level rises (20/5/08); and
Bottom: previous water level (16/4/08; photos Ann Scott)



Great White Pelican, Walvis Bay Harbour
(photo Susann Kinghorn)

NAMIBIA'S RED DATA COASTAL/ MARINE BIRD SPECIES

Great White Pelican

Pelecanus onocratalus Vulnerable

Adapted from Simmons R.E. & Brown C.J. 2006. *Birds to watch in Namibia: Red, Rare and Endemic Species*. National Biodiversity Programme, Windhoek.

Range: Botswana, Namibia, South Africa

Area of occupancy: 90 380 km²

Population estimate: 4 000 adults, only 3 known breeding sites

Population trend: Declining

Habitat: Coastal waters especially bays, large inland dams, sewage works

Threats: Single mass breeding sites vulnerable to pollution or fluctuating water levels

Distribution and abundance

This species is found throughout the African continent and in southern parts of Eurasia, as far east as Vietnam (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The global population is estimated at 94 000 prs of which 75 000 prs are estimated to occur in Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982, del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Of these the southern African population is variously estimated at 6 000 prs (Urban 1984) or 20 000 adults (Wetlands International 2002). Pelicans are distributed mainly at Lake St Lucia, and the southwestern Cape coast in South Africa, the Okavango Delta in Botswana and the Chobe River floodplain, Etosha Pan, the Cunene and Orange River mouths, and inland dams and the central coast in Namibia (Williams & Borello 1997).

In Namibia the population appears to have declined from the 3 000 prs (~6 000 birds) estimated to be breeding at Etosha Pan and Lake Oponono in 1971 (Berry *et al.* 1973) to about 4 000 adults in 2003. This figure was derived from annual wetland counts (Table 1) that have found concentrations at Hardap Dam (1 400 birds), at Sandwich Harbour (900 birds, April 2004, R Braby unpubl data), Walvis Bay (932), Orange River Mouth (470), Naute Dam (90), Walvis Bay Bird Platform (360), Lake Oponono (500) and one very large count from the Ekuma River (2 953 in June 1995). The largest instantaneous count from the decade 1991-2000 was in 1992

when 2 294 birds were present in Namibia (data in Jarvis *et al.* 2001); the mean number of birds for this period was 2 718 birds (Table 1). However, recent work at Hardap has shown an increase from 800 birds in 1999 to 4 024 birds in early 2003 (Theron *et al.* 2003), a figure that must include most of Namibia's current population or immigrants. Recent (2004) data from South Africa suggests some decline in population. This totals a maximum of 3 000 SA pairs, not 3 500 as previously estimated (du Toit *et al.* 2003).

Ecology

Prefers coastal islands (and platforms) to breed on but more birds are found inland in Namibia than at the coast (Table 1). These breeding colonies occur (regularly) on Namibia's largest dam at Hardap where about 150 to 202 nests occur (Williams & Randall 1995, Jarvis *et al.* 2001) on one or two small islands when water levels are appropriate. In May 2004, an estimate of 250 juveniles were present on the larger island of which 62 were subsequently ringed (D. Oschadleus, M Brooks pers obs). Small breeding numbers are also present at the Walvis Bay bird platform where 100 - 200 prs breed regularly (Whitelaw *et al.* 1978, Williams & Borello 1997). More recently (2000-2004), pelicans have begun breeding in small numbers on the jackal-free islands at Sandwich Harbour in numbers not exceeding 20 nests (R Braby unpubl data). While not proven, breeding may also take place at Naute Dam where juvenile birds barely able to fly have been recorded occasionally by MET staff in the period 1998-2002 (C Sikopo, pers obs).

Feeds on large fish by surface swimming - often in groups - funneling fish until they can be caught by the enclosing circle of pelicans (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992) and also doing so on moonlight nights (RE Simmons pers obs). Often feed on discarded fish parts in Walvis Bay and Swakopmund (R Braby pers obs). Also known to round up cormorant chicks and eat them where they occur (Berry 1976a).

Breeds in medium-sized colonies in virtually every month in Namibia with a marginal peak towards the winter and spring: January (1 breeding record), March (2 records), May (2) June (1), July (5), August (2), September (4), December (1) (data in Jarvis *et al.* 2001). The only mass breeding event recorded for Namibia was from Lake Oponono where 1 500 prs abandoned their attempt to join another 1 500 prs on the flooded Etosha Pan (Berry *et al.* 1973). Birds commuted from Etosha where there are no fish to Lake Oponono the closest source of fish, about 130 km to the northwest (Berry *et al.* 1973). Clutch size varies from 1-3 with the commonest being 2 eggs (Berry *et al.* 1973, Jarvis *et al.* 2001). Young are fledged from Hardap Dam virtually every year and the 250 young estimated in 2004 (D Oschadleus M Brooke pers obs) is higher than the maximum 202 nests reported as active in previous years (Jarvis *et al.* 2001). Recent reports from Angola show that up to 370 adult pelicans breed on the Ilha dos Tigres (producing 40 juveniles in Feb 2002) about 70 km

north of the Cunene River mouth (Simmons *et al.* unpubl data).

Threats

Has suffered from natural drying of ephemeral pans and lakes in northern Namibia which curtailed breeding success. The Lake Oponono colony was reported to be raided by local inhabitants and their dogs once breeding commenced (Berry *et al.* 1973). Oil pollution may become a threat for birds breeding at the coast at Walvis Bay where fish oils are sometimes released into the harbour and disperse northwards (Berry 1976b, K Wearne pers comm.). The increase in shipping traffic will also increase the chances of oil spills and ship-borne pollution affecting birds. Pelicans are discouraged from breeding on bird platforms elsewhere on the Namibian coast by owners fearful of pelicans disrupting breeding of guano-producing cormorants. The numbers involved however are small (R Braby pers obs). Elsewhere potential threats ranked as high were collision with power lines, recreation and tourism disturbing colonies (Saldanha Bay), and El Nino events (marine) or commercial exploitation of (fresh water) fish diminishing the prey base. Bioaccumulation of pesticides and habitat loss to agriculture were ranked as low (du Toit *et al.* 2003).

Conservation status

This subspecies is classified as *Vulnerable* because of its small population of less than 3 000 (but greater than the 2 500 individuals required for the *Endangered* category) which is 50% less than the estimated 6 000 birds present in 1971 (30 yrs previously). Thus there is some evidence of long-term decline, although this may be due to the nomadic nature of pelicans travelling long distances to suitable breeding localities (Berry *et al.* 1973, del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). While the bird has adapted well to inland dams and sewage works, as evidenced by the greater mean population numbers inland (1 762) than at the coast (956: Table 1) its population is also fragmented across southern Africa. More importantly it has only 3 regular breeding sites in Namibia (Hardap Dam, Walvis Bay Bird Platform and currently Sandwich Harbour), amounting to about 250 + 120 + 20 nests. Thus Namibia's breeding population of 390 prs is very small. This species is not globally classified as threatened (Stattersfield & Capper 2000), but in South Africa it is classified as *Near Threatened* (Barnes 2000) based on its the two breeding localities there (Dassen Island and Lake St Lucia) and its population of about 3 500 breeding prs (du Toit *et al.* 2003) or 3 000 prs (M de Ponte Machado pers comm.).



Pelican sentinels at Mile 10 (photo Susann Kinghorn)



Pelican line-up at Sandwich Harbour (photo Linda Millington)

Actions

- Genetic and ringing research is needed to understand if interchange occurs between the widely dispersed breeding colonies, in Angola, Namibia and South Africa. Recent ringing indeed suggests long distance movements between coastal and inland sites (D Heinrich, M de Ponte Machado pers comm).
- Research and annual monitoring on the largest breeding population at Hardap Dam is also required to determine the annual success and where these birds disperse to.
- All breeding localities, particularly the emerging ones at Sandwich Harbour and Ilha dos Tigres (Angola) should be monitored regularly to check on the probable rise and fall of these populations and the success and dispersal of the young.
- Coordinated counts across the entire southern African range are required to determine the population status, and genetic information is required to determine the taxonomic status of southern African White Pelicans from those elsewhere in Africa (du Toit *et al.* 2003).
- Breeding birds in Namibia are generally protected within parks (Etosha, Sandwich Harbour, Hardap Dam), or occur on inaccessible areas (bird platforms and islands), thus habitat protection and management is probably unnecessary at present.

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Table 1. Summary of White Pelican populations in Namibia from 1990 to 2003

Compiled from wetland counts coordinated by R.E. Simmons

| Locality | Mean ± 1 SD | Max. (n=counts) | Observers |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Mahango Reserve | 17 ± 19 | 30 (2) | Paxton |
| Nyae Nyae (Bushmanland) | 26 ± 25 | 67 (5) | von Plato/ Simmons |
| Fischer's Pan (Etosha) | 18 ± 3 | 20 (2) | Versfeld |
| Ekuma River (Etosha) | 628 ± 1300 | 2953 (5) | Versfeld |
| Lake Oponono (Etosha) | 95 ± 181 | 500 (7) | Versfeld |
| Cunene River Mouth | 58 ± 52 | 149 (5) | Simmons/Braby/ Braine |
| Cape Cross Saltworks | 2 ± 1 | 3 (5) | Braby |
| Mile 4 Saltworks (Swakp) | 14 ± 10 | 34 (12) | Braby/ Davis |
| Swakop River Mouth | 5 ± 5 | 13 (12) | Friede |
| Walvis Bay wetlands | 325 ± 238 | 932 (25) | Weame <i>et al.</i> |
| Walvis Bay sewage wks | 65 ± 74 | 223 (8) | Weames |
| 30 km beach Swakop-WB | 181 ± 251 | 608 (5) | Braby |
| Caution Reef | 28 ± 18 | 40 (2) | Braby |
| Sandwich Harbour | 170 ± 136 | 612 (28) | Simmons/Braby |
| Conception Bay | 35 ± 19 | 46 (3) | Simmons/ Braby |
| Orange River Mouth | 138 ± 146 | 473 (15) | Kolberg/ Anderson |
| Hardap Dam (s. Namibia) | 500 ± 407 | 4000 (11) | MET staff/ Theron <i>et al.</i> |
| Friedenau Dam (c. Nam) | 8 ± 2 | 10 (4) | D. Ward |
| Omatako Dam (c.w. Nam) | 141 ± 185 | 600 (10) | Braby/ Roberts |
| Otjivero Dam (c.e. Nam) | 9 ± 13 | 30 (7) | Bird Club/ Mallet- Veale |
| Olushandja Dam (n Nam) | 4 ± 1 | 4 (4) | Robson |
| Naute Dam (s. Nam) | 54 ± 35 | 90 (4) | MET staff |
| von Bach Dam (c. Nam) | 54 ± 33 | 106 (9) | MET staff |
| Oanob Dam (c. Nam) | 9 ± 10 | 23 (5) | Bird Club |
| Swakoppoort Dam (c.w.) | 158 ± 117 | 372 (12) | Roberts |
| Avis Dam (c. Nam) | 16 ± 19 | 29 (2) | Mallet-Veale |
| Windhoek Sewage Works | 22 ± 36 | 95 (8) | Bird Club |
| Swakop Sewage Works | 3 ± 3 | 10 (16) | Dantu/Boorman |
| Coastal wetlands (10) | Means: 956 | Max: 2 910 (counts=112) | |
| Inland wetlands (18) | Means: 1 762 | Max: 6 325 (counts=113) | |

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