

Notes on the birds and other animals recorded at the Cunene River mouth from 6-8 January 2001

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Introduction

The Cunene River is the third largest Namibian river, emerging in the Atlantic Ocean approximately 1000 km from its source (Simmons *et al.* 1993). The banks of the river do not have extensive riparian vegetation and the lagoon and vegetated islands at the mouth are probably the most biologically productive areas on the lower Cunene River. The mouth and lagoon have been described in detail by Simmons *et al.* (1993) and Simmons *et al.* (1998).

The Cunene River mouth never supports large numbers of waterbirds, but it is nevertheless an important staging and feeding area for waders, probably as a result of its isolated location along the Atlantic coast (the nearest permanent wetland is Walvis Bay; some 700 km away) (Simmons *et al.* 1993; Simmons *et al.* 1998). The low number of waterbirds can partly be attributed to the relatively small area of the mouth and suitable waterbird habitats. For example, the area of exposed sand and mudflats when the river flow is low is only 125 ha and there are only thin strips of riparian vegetation along the banks and on several small islands (Simmons *et al.* 1998).

Despite the low numerical abundance of waterbirds, the Cunene River mouth regularly supports the second largest wetland species total in Namibia and 72 species have been recorded (Simmons *et al.* 1998). This wetland is recognized as an Important Bird Area because of significant populations of Damara Tern, Great White Pelican, Chestnut-banded Plover and a few other species (Simmons *et al.* 1998).

Although several waterbird surveys have been conducted at the Cunene River mouth during the period 1982-2000 (Ryan *et al.* 1984; Braine 1990; Simmons *et al.* 1993), it is less frequently counted than other important Namibian wetlands. The aim of this study was to count the waterbirds and terrestrial birds at the Cunene River mouth during January 2001.

Methods

The waterbird survey was conducted from 08h15-13h00 on 7 January 2001. We divided into three groups (each comprising three people; two observers and a scribe) and simultaneously counted three separate areas. These areas were (1) the northern and southern beach areas adjacent to the mouth opening, (2) the 1.9 km section of the river from our campsite (17°15'316"/11°45'544") to the river mouth (17°14'434"/11°45'133") which included the islands, sandbars, and large lagoon on the southern bank and (3) the river section from the campsite upstream to opposite the Foz do Cunene (17°16'065"/11°47'020"), a length of 2.3 km. The total straight-line distance of the river that was surveyed was approximately 4.2 km. Simmons *et al.* (1998) considered the section of the Cunene River 4 km from the coast to constitute the river mouth).

The waterbird survey was conducted with the aid of binoculars and spotting scopes. Although we did not have a boat and thus were not able to access the islands and the Angolan bank, an attempt was made to survey these areas from the southern bank. Nevertheless, it is likely that many birds present on the northern bank, islands and reedbeds were not counted and the results of the survey therefore represent a minimum species and population estimate.

All terrestrial birds were also counted during the waterbird survey and additional species recorded during the duration of our three-day stay were also noted. For some waterbirds (such as Great White Pelican) we conducted additional counts in order to obtain maximum numbers for these species. Notes were also kept of all mammals and reptiles observed.

One of us (Dirk Heinrich) set up seven mistnets on the mudflats, reedbeds and a small accessible reedbed island throughout the three-day period. On some occasions strong southwesterly winds prevented continuous netting operations and the nets were then closed. All captured birds were weighed, measured, ringed and released.

Results & Discussion

During the survey a total of 2452 birds of 61 species were recorded (Table 1). Waterbirds significantly outnumbered terrestrial birds, with only 155 individuals of 20 different terrestrial bird species being recorded, an indication of the extremely arid nature of the surrounding terrestrial habitats (Table 1).

Seven waterbird species were observed which have not been recorded during four previous comprehensive surveys (Ryan *et al.* 1984; Braine 1990; Simmons *et al.* 1993), namely Intermediate Egret, Dwarf Bittern, Cape Shoveller, African Crake, Wood Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper and Yellow Wagtail. Some species, such as Intermediate Egret and African Crake,

have been recorded at other localities in the Skeleton Coast Park (Braine 1988). Forty-three species of waterbirds recorded during the above previous surveys were not observed during our January 2001 visit.

Unusual birds recording during the survey included Baird's Sandpiper, Royal Tern, White-browed Coucal, Dwarf Bittern and African Crake. During the waterbird survey two Baird's Sandpipers were observed along the camp-Foz do Cunene river section and, later that day, one of these individuals was located again and studied in detail which enabled confirmation of the identity of the species. We observed one (possibly two) Royal Terns on two occasions (6 and 7 January) roosting on sandbars in the mouth area. Although no Swift Terns were present, the presence of many Caspian Terns allowed for a comparison between these two similar species. Royal Terns have previously been recorded at the Cunene River mouth (e.g. Ryan *et al.* 1984; Komen & Paterson 1999). A coucal, possibly White-browed, first recorded at the mouth during November 2000 by R.E. Simmons (in litt.), was heard calling on two occasions during this survey. Forty-nine individuals of 13 species were caught in the mistnets (Table 2), also providing two species (Dwarf Bittern and African Crake) that were not recorded during the waterbird survey.

The number of waterbirds recorded is lower than several previous counts (Simmons *et al.* 1993) and may be due to the time of the survey, especially if the Cunene River mouth is more important as a staging area (for Palearctic migrants moving north or south along the south-west African coastline) during early and late summer. The number of water and terrestrial birds was nevertheless significantly more than the 1412 individuals of 33 species recorded by Simmons (in litt.) on 10/11 November 2000. A comparison with the numbers of waterbirds reported by Ryan *et al.* (1984), Braine (1990) Simmons *et al.* (1993) reveals higher numbers during our survey for several species: Great Cormorant, Caspian Tern, Great White Pelican, Egyptian Goose and Red-billed Teal.

Although no effort was made to systematically search for mammals and reptiles (and count their numbers), Tables 3-4 provides a list of these animals that were incidentally observed during the duration of our stay.

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Table 1. The number of waterbirds (shaded) and terrestrial birds recorded at the Cunene River mouth on 7 January 2001.

Common name	Scientific Name	Number			
Great White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>	149*	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	74
Cape Gannet	<i>Morus capensis</i>	1**	Royal Tern	<i>Sterna maxima</i>	1
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax lucidus</i>	240	Damara Tern	<i>Sterna balaenarum</i>	13
Cape Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax capensis</i>	220*	White-browed Coucal	<i>Centropus superciliosus</i>	1#
Reed Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax africanus</i>	1	Eurasian Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	4+
African Darter	<i>Anhinga rufa</i>	1	Bradfield's Swift	<i>Apus bradfieldi</i>	2+
Goliath Heron	<i>Ardea goliath</i>	4	African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>	1+
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	9	Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>	6
Intermediate Egret	<i>Mesophoyx intermedia</i>	1	Madagascar Bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>	14+
Dwarf Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus sturmii</i>	1	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	39+
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	42	Rock Martin	<i>Hirundo fuligula</i>	1+
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>	77	Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	42
Red-billed Teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>	5	Tractrac Chat	<i>Cercomela tractrac</i>	5+
Cape Shoveller	<i>Anas smithii</i>	7	African Reed-Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus baeticatus</i>	4++
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1	Lesser Swamp-Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus gracilirostris</i>	1++
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus parasitus</i>	1	Fan-tailed Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	14++
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	Black-chested Prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>	2
African Crake	<i>Crex egregia</i>	1	Cape Wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>	14
Black Crake	<i>Amaurornis flavirostris</i>	1	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	1
Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	1	African Pipit	<i>Anthus cinnamomeus</i>	1
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	70	Common Fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>	2
White-fronted Plover	<i>Charadrius marginatus</i>	48	Southern Masked-Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>	3+
Chestnut-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius pallidus</i>	9	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	18+
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>	4	Unidentified waders		5
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	1	Total – waterbirds		2297
Common Sandpiper	<i>Tringa hypoleucos</i>	6	Total – all birds		2452
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	2			
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	8	*Indicates highest count during period 6-8 January 2001		
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	20	**Recorded passing offshore		
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	889	+Number of birds present was more than that counted		
Baird's Sandpiper	<i>Calidris bairdii</i>	2♦	++Number of birds present was significantly more than that counted		
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	244	# Heard calling; species identity not certain		
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	114*	♦Record not yet submitted to any rarities committee		

Table 2. The number of birds caught and ringed at the Cunene River mouth from 6-9 January 2001.

Common name	Scientific Name	Number
Dwarf Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus sturmii</i>	1
African Crane	<i>Crex egregia</i>	1
White-fronted Plover	<i>Charadrius marginatus</i>	2
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	6
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>	1
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1
African Reed-Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus baeticatus</i>	2
Lesser Swamp-Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus gracilirostris</i>	1
Fan-tailed Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	7
Cape Wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>	1
Common Fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>	2
Southern Masked-Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>	3
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	21
Total		49

Table 3. Mammals recorded at the Cunene River mouth and along the beach between Möwe Bay and the mouth.

Common name	Scientific Name	Number and comments
Gemsbok	<i>Oryx gazella</i>	Seven individuals observed on the Angolan side on the mouth
Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>	Eighteen individuals observed on the Angolan side of the mouth; some crossed the river to Namibia
Black-backed Jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>	Tracks observed at the mouth; few individuals seen between Mowe Bay and mouth
Brown Hyaena	<i>Hyena brunnea</i>	Tracks observed at the mouth; one individual observed between Möwe Bay and mouth
Cape Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus pusillus</i>	Many singletons along beach between Möwe Bay and mouth; large colony at Rocky Point
Heaviside's Dolphin	<i>Cephalorhynchus heavisidii</i>	One dead individual on beach; south of mouth
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	One dead individual on beach; south of mouth
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melaena</i>	One dead individual on beach; south of mouth

Table 4. Reptiles observed in the vicinity of the Cunene River mouth and between Möwe Bay and the Cunene River mouth.

Common name	Scientific Name	Comments
Nile Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus niloticus</i>	Eight individuals were observed at mouth
Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	Five individuals observed swimming in estuary
Nile Soft-shelled Terrapin	<i>Trionyx triunguis</i>	Several seen swimming in estuary
Horned Adder	<i>Bitis caudalis</i>	One individual near mouth
Western Rock Skink	<i>Mabuya sulcata</i>	Several near mouth
Reticulated Desert Lizard	<i>Merops reticulatus</i>	Several near mouth
Desert Plated Lizard	<i>Angolosaurus skoogi</i>	Several near Mowe Bay
Web-footed Gecko	<i>Palmatogecko rangei</i>	One individual near Rocky point
Kaokoveld Namib Day Gecko	<i>Rhoptropus biporosus</i>	Several near mouth