

BIRDS OF SEA AND SHORE : A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE CAPE TOWN SYMPOSIUM

by W.J.A. Dick

In mid November last year Peter Ferns and I assembled at Heathrow Airport for a migratory flight energetically far less efficient than that of the Siberian Knot *Calidris canutus*, which requires only about 160g of fat for the journey to Cape Town. Laden with WSG Bulletins and Expedition Reports (we can confirm that ten copies of the Greenland Expedition Report as Cabin Baggage apparently constitutes "a reasonable quantity of reading material for the flight"), we were on our way to the five day Symposium on Birds of the Sea and Shore, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the University of Cape Town, and the 50th anniversary of the Southern African Ornithological Society.

The symposium consisted of three days of papers and two days of excursions. The organisers wisely decided to extend the scope of the symposium to include both shorebirds and seabirds, thereby "netting" delegates from overseas working in each field. As both fields form important parts of the work of the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute of African Ornithology, and of local clubs and societies, a wide cross-fertilisation of ideas and experience was possible.

The papers on waders consisted of six from South Africa and four from overseas. Contributions from South Africa related to feeding ("Food, foraging and social behaviour of Lesser Sheathbills at Marion Island" by Alan Burger, "Role of shorebirds in the ecology of Eastern Cape sandy beaches" by A. McLachlan & T. Woolridge, "Comparative feeding behaviour of the White-fronted Sandplover and Sanderling in South-Western Cape" by Anna Crowe, and "Observations of prey specific feeding technique in the Black Oystercatcher and their bearing on the evolution of prey specificity in the Haemopodidae by Peter Hockey) and distribution ("Annual summer and winter fluctuations of resident and Palearctic waders on Langebaan Lagoon, 1973-1979" by H.G. Robertson, and "Distribution and biometrics of the Terek Sandpiper in Southern Africa" by M. Walther & J.C. Sinclair.) Overseas contributions were "Moult strategies in waders" by Tony Prater, "Breeding and wintering waders on the Isle of Vlieland in the Dutch Waddensee" by G. de Roos, "Seasonal and annual changes in the distribution of shorebirds on the Severn Estuary" by Peter Ferns and "The spring migration of Siberian Knot" by William Dick. It was, of course, very pleasing that it was possible to present the results of the WSG co-operative project at this symposium, considering the African wintering areas and the substantial contribution of the Cape Wader Group to our understanding of the Siberian Knot's migration. It was also appropriate that the results of the project involving participants in many countries could be presented at an international gathering.

The seabird talks, which were numerous (as were the number of delegates working on seabirds), concentrated mainly on the problems of distribution at sea, ecological separation, breeding ecology and the effects of commercial fishing on seabird populations. The latter talk, by Bob Furness, was notable for the way in which the complex food web had been unravelled to show how man had affected in unexpected ways the food available to seabirds: are food webs for waders as stable as they might appear, and what are the effects of pollution on our estuaries?

Most valuable of all was probably the opportunity to meet ornithologists from different countries and continents and discuss areas of common interest. It also allowed us, as visitors, to see how pre-conceived ideas of African wader habitats measured up to reality! Having travelled to South Africa expecting to recruit numerous new members for the Wader Study Group, it was suddenly brought home to us that not only are most wader workers in South Africa already members of WSG but that many of the advances in knowledge of waders in Southern Africa have been achieved by a small and dedicated group of enthusiasts in the Cape Wader Group. In Europe, and particularly in Britain, we have become used to a high density of wader ringers and groups, and reasonable availability of manpower for wader studies. In the whole of Africa other than in the south, there is very little wader research being carried out, and the state of knowledge of basic information such as distribution is poor or non-existent. For example, practically no systematic count of waders has ever been made between Senegal and South Africa, a mere 7000 km of coastline! Some more accurate assessment of the wintering population of coastal Africa must surely be a prerequisite to detailed conservation planning of European estuaries used as staging areas for these populations? Similarly the distribution and numbers of waders wintering inland in Africa, and the seasonal availability of wader habitats, has not been documented in any detail. Inland vleis (seasonal pools), river valleys and even small ponds support waders, aggregate numbers of which must be considerable. Bearing in mind the size of the African continent, and that the situation in Southern Africa is relatively well known, the size of the gap in knowledge becomes apparent.

The excursions included visits to the remarkable island breeding colonies of cormorants, gannets and Jackass Penguins *Spheniscus demersus*. We can also report that the normally land-lubbing wader delegates matched up well to the seasoned seabird specialists by retaining their stomachs intact during heavy swell on an albatross-watching cruise in a 40ft converted motor torpedo launch off the Cape of Good Hope! We also visited the Langebaan Lagoon, the most important coastal site for waders in South Africa. Peter Ferns and I were taken to see some of the extensive beaches which form most of the coastline, and one night put up a few single panel nets. We soon had a good sample of Sanderling *Calidris alba* and Curlew Sandpipers *C. ferruginea*, although we were assured that catching waders is not normally so simple!

The symposium organisers, capably headed by John Cooper, are to be congratulated for promoting such a stimulating and enjoyable meeting, which was hopefully as rewarding for the hosts as it was to the visitors.

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(Proceedings of the Symposium will be published in late 1980. Orders and enquiries should be sent to: J. Cooper, Southern African Seabird Group, Fitzpatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7700, South Africa.)