

Some seabird observations from the Orange River estuary,
South Africa/South West Africa

Introduction

The Orange River estuary (28 38S, 16 26E) falls on the border between South Africa and South West Africa. Numerous sand bars in the estuary and upriver provide ideal roosting and nesting sites for pelicans, cormorants, gulls and terns. Unfortunately, the estuary is sandwiched between two restricted diamond mining areas, and access to its shores is by permit only. The following observations were made during a brief visit to Oranjemund, South West Africa, during 22-28 April 1978, and these serve to indicate the importance of the estuary of the Orange River as a centre of seabird activity on the Atlantic coast of southern Africa.

Systematic List

White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

A total of 77 was counted in the estuary on 26 April, from 16h30 to 18h45. Only two subadults were noted, both with white body plumage and the wings extensively smudged with black. All adults examined were in immaculate plumage, with bright red irides and pink bare facial skin. On several occasions groups of pelicans were seen foraging in the estuary and flocks were seen flying upriver en route to some unknown destination. No evidence of breeding was seen. Forty-four birds were seen on the estuary on 11 December 1976 (Frost & Johnson 1976). It is not yet known whether the White Pelican breeds on the Orange River estuary, and, if not, where the pelicans come from.

Whitebreasted Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

On the evening of 26 April, I counted 180 - 200 roosting with Cape Cormorants on a sandbar directly offshore from the Oranjemund Golf Club. No evidence of current breeding was seen. Breeding was observed in December 1976 (Frost & Johnson 1977).

Cape Cormorant *Phalacrocorax capensis*

Seven active nests, all containing medium-sized nestlings, were situated on the large sandbar serving as a roost directly offshore from the Oranjemund Golf Club. The nests were situated on a slight mound of sand that had gathered within the shelter of partially buried driftwood. The nests themselves were sheltered slightly by protruding branches. A similar mound on the same sandbar held six intact but unoccupied nests. This sandbar is utilised as a roost by ca. 22 000 Cape Cormorants (estimate based on census conducted on 26 April 1978, between 16h30 and 18h30). Another sandbar located closer to the outlet of the bay, on the South African side, also served as a roost for Cape Cormorants, and although no census was conducted, I gathered the impression that an even greater number of this species was roosting there than at the Oranjemund site. Frost & Johnson (1976) record a total of 7 873 occupied nests of the Cape Cormorant on a sandbank on 11 December 1976. Breeding was also recorded on islands in the estuary in December 1977 (Siegfried & Johnson 1977).

Greyheaded Gull *Larus cirrocephalus*

Apart from those noted at the Hartlaub's Gull colony (see below), eight Greyheaded Gulls were counted at the Oranjemund refuse dump on 24 April at 08h00. Approximately 150 Kelp Gulls *L. dominicanus* and 150 Hartlaub's Gulls were also present; the Greyheaded Gulls preferred to mix with the latter species and both species remained apart from the larger Kelp Gulls.

Hartlaub's Gull *Larus hartlaubi*

A breeding colony was located in the extensive marsh adjoining the township of Alexander Bay on the south (South African) shore of the estuary. The colony was on a small island of sand situated in a narrow lagoon. Water level was so low when the colony was discovered that the island was only partially surrounded by shallow (ca. 400 mm deep) brackish water. The nests were situated on densely matted sclerophyllous scrub, about 200 - 500 mm above ground level, and were well-spaced, not densely packed. Of 62 nests examined, 30 contained eggs (clutch size distribution = 1, 2, 3 : 10, 17, 3), and about 150 Hartlaub's Gulls were standing on territories at the time. Amongst them stood three Greyheaded Gulls, although I did not remain in the area long enough to verify the existence of mixed pairs, as reported by Sinclair (1977) for South African colonies.

On the same island on which the Hartlaub's Gull colony was located, 230 - 250 Hartlaub's Gulls gathered in an overnight roost on the sandy fringe, shared with five Greyheaded Gulls, ca. 90 Sandwich Terns *Sterna sandvicensis*, and five Swift Terns *S. bergii*.

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References

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