



PETER RYAN (3)



ON THE flip side

One of the conventional wisdoms of bird lore is that hummingbirds are the only birds that can fly upside down. Hummingbird wings are designed to be able to create lift on both the up- and the down-stroke, which gives them the freedom to fly in any direction, including backwards. Other birds can only briefly glide upside down. Waterbirds such as geese, shorebirds and ibis often flip upside down in flight to shed air speed when coming in to land. Termed 'whiffling', this manoeuvre is thought to reduce their vulnerability to predators during landing. Some raptors also flip over in their display flights or 'present talons' to deter other birds from mobbing them. And Common Ravens occasionally glide upside down when displaying or perhaps simply for the joy of it (it's hard to find any other reason for their propensity to repeatedly slide down snow slopes on their backs, often while holding a stick in their feet!).

But in all the images that I've seen of birds flying upside down, it is immediately obvious that this is the case. I was impressed by how 'normal' the Alpine Swift in the central image looks

despite being upside down. I was photographing a large flock of Alpine and Black swifts on Muizenberg Mountain on 25 July 2020 when I caught this bird coming towards me. It took a second glance to confirm it is belly up (you can just make out the white belly patch). Its head is rotated almost 180 degrees to keep the horizon level – a trick we see clearly in albatrosses and petrels. Dynamic soaring at sea requires birds to repeatedly change their wing angle, often going past the vertical in smaller species, yet their heads remain perfectly aligned with the horizon. Whiffling geese also typically keep their heads level. This suggests that birds are unlikely to perform a barrel roll in flight, because it would require them to turn their head back through a full rotation to once again find the horizon. That said, birds do sometimes take their eyes off the horizon in flight, when preening or shaking their heads.

When I looked at the centre image in isolation, I assumed the swift was turning sharply in a high-speed glide, but the shot is one of a series of three, taken fractions of a second apart. The preceding image shows the bird ridge soaring

Three successive photographs taken one-tenth of a second apart of an Alpine Swift ridge soaring, then flipping over into a powered dive. The bird accelerated so fast that it was more than half out of the frame by the third photograph.

on the updraft coming up the mountain before suddenly flipping over into a dive. By rolling, it adds 'negative lift' to the force of gravity, thus accelerating faster than if it remained right-side-up. Judging by the blur of its wing tips, it also flapped to accelerate even faster (the shutter speed was 1/1600th of a second), suggesting that swifts also propel themselves while upside down. It dropped so fast that the third image only caught half the bird, now completely upside down but with its head still level with the horizon. There's no marked change in wing angle or profile, confirming that the bird is using negative lift to assist its dive.

Although perhaps not quite as agile as hummingbirds in the air, swifts are almost as impressive in terms of their flying ability. No surprise that they are each other's closest relatives.

PETER RYAN

royal flush?

While not all Wandering Albatrosses exhibit pink staining on the sides of their neck, it has long been considered a unique feature of the Wandering Albatross complex. Neither of the other great albatrosses, the Northern and Southern royals, are known to exhibit these marks. As such, it was with some surprise that on 3 August 2019 I observed a juvenile Southern Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora* in the trawling grounds off Cape Point that clearly showed some staining on the hind neck. While not as bold as it can appear in some Wandering Albatrosses, the feature was quite obvious and visible in several photographs taken of the bird.



CLIFF DORSE

What actually causes the staining is not known. In their *Oceanic Birds of the World* (2019), Steve Howell and Kirk Zufelt speculate that the staining may be caused by 'food solution' having been blown back from the nostrils

and that it does not occur in royal albatrosses because their nostrils are angled differently and they have narrower heads. Clearly this particular individual had not read their book!

CLIFF DORSE

finders eaters

Red Phalarope kleptoparasitism of Portuguese man o' war

On a pelagic birding trip off Cape Town on 21 March 2020 we observed two Red Phalaropes *Phalaropus fulicarius* out in the trawling grounds. As we approached, I took a few record shots while the birds were still far away. We could see that the birds were near several Portuguese man o' war *Physalia physalis*, a species of siphonophore, a group of animals that are closely related to jellyfish.

It was only later when processing the photographs that I noticed that one bird was clearly interacting with the man o' war. At first I thought it was feeding on it, but later in the series of photos I could

see the phalarope retrieving a small fish from underneath the man o' war.

Red Phalaropes are opportunistic feeders that obtain most of their food by surface pecking. Although they eat mainly zooplankton, they occasionally consume small fish and other marine organisms. They have even been observed feeding on parasitic amphipods from the backs of killer whales. As such, it is not really surprising to see a pelagic bird exploiting an opportunity like this. However, this appears to be the first time a Red Phalarope has been observed to kleptoparasitise prey from a Portuguese man o' war.

CLIFF DORSE



CLIFF DORSE (2)



ADAPTING TO THE new normal

PETER RYAN (3)

In an article in the July/August 2020 issue of *African Birdlife*, I tried to piece together the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on birds from anecdotal reports across the country. One of the more effective ways to confirm that behavioural changes were linked to the lockdown was to monitor what happened as it eased. In the case of Muizenberg beach, outside Cape Town, the signal was clear.



I am fortunate to live overlooking the beach at Muizenberg, so for the first three weeks of the lockdown I spent a fair amount of time scanning it for birds for my lockdown list. Then on 20 April I was given a permit to conduct beach litter surveys in the absence of beachgoers. As a result, I was able to see first-hand how birds adapted to the empty beaches through the end of April and in May, and how they reacted when people returned to the beach in June.

Kelp Gulls are the most abundant birds on Muizenberg beach, feeding mainly on clams at low tide. The absence of people saw many more gulls roosting on the beach throughout the day. One unexpected result of this was a massive increase in the number of gull pellets,

above *White-fronted Plover chicks are particularly susceptible to dogs that are allowed off-leash on beaches.*

left *A White-fronted Plover shuffles sand onto its eggs as it prepares to abandon its nest for the umpteenth time due to the passing parade of surfers and dog walkers after Muizenberg beach reopened following the Covid-19 lockdown.*

many of which contained plastic bags and cling wrap from scavenging on the nearby Coastal Park dump site. By closing the beach, we exchanged human litter for gull litter!

With the effective opening of the beach on 1 June, the Kelp Gulls swiftly returned to their old habits. Numbers on the beach decreased and roosting was confined to the more remote areas of the beach towards Strandfontein. A small number of Caspian Terns regularly forage over the surf at Muizenberg, mainly targeting mullet. During lockdown, up to 11 Caspians roosted with the gulls on the beach. And like the gulls, they stopped doing so overnight when people returned to the beach.

Sacred Ibises took to feeding along the strand line during lockdown. This is a common behaviour at many other Cape beaches, but I had never seen it at Muizenberg. Their numbers gradually increased and by mid-May as many as 60 occurred along the beach at once, mainly east of the mouth of Sandvlei. When people returned, they mostly disappeared, although the odd bird still tried its luck along the quieter stretches east of Sunrise Beach.

The ibises were joined in late May by a pair of Blacksmith Lapwings, which left as soon as the beaches reopened. African Oystercatchers, Little Egrets and the occasional Grey Heron also started to feed along the beach during lockdown, only to be displaced when people returned. However, a few Little Egrets continued to feed sporadically in the mouth of Sandvlei, which acts as a barrier to most beachgoers.

Perhaps the most interesting lockdown reaction was seen among White-fronted Plovers. Like its close relatives from the northern hemisphere, Kentish and Snowy plovers, this species is known to be susceptible to human disturbance, not least because it breeds on beaches too. Frequent disturbance by beachgoers can prevent parents from incubating the eggs or keeping them cool on hot days and predation by dogs is a major cause of mortality for the precocial chicks.



The White-fronted Plover population in the Western Cape declined by more than one third from 1980 to 2010 and their numbers around Cape Town fell by almost 60 per cent over this period (see Ryan 2013, *Austral Ecology* 38: 251–259). Along the northern False Bay coast, they are confined to only a few of the more remote beaches, including the two-kilometre stretch between Sunrise Beach and the Strandfontein outfall. During lockdown I saw little evidence of a range change until early May, when a few birds were seen west of Sunrise Beach. By mid-May plovers also ventured west of Sandvlei mouth and I was finally able to see one for my 'garden' list.

Given their cautious response to the lockdown, I expected the plovers to react quickly to the beaches reopening, but this was not the case. Throughout June they persisted in their newly acquired areas, seemingly becoming increasingly tolerant of people and dogs. The reason why became apparent when, on 25 June, I found a waterlogged chick next to the mouth of Sandvlei. I can only surmise that it was caught by a wave as it crouched to evade detection by a passing person or

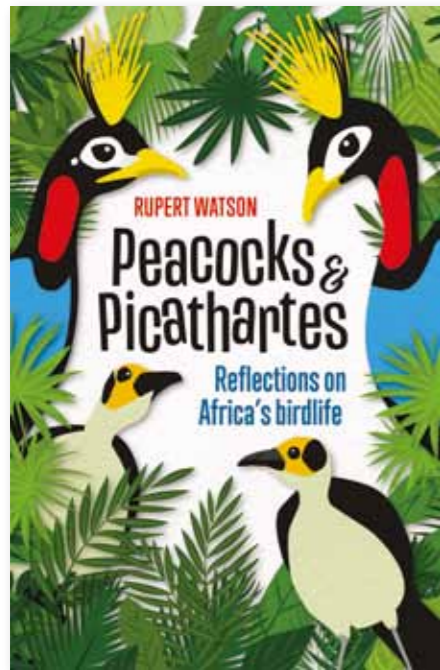
A Hartlaub's Gull targets a kelp fly on Muizenberg beach. Unlike Kelp Gulls, the numbers of Hartlaub's and Grey-headed gulls did not change dramatically during lockdown.

dog. Despite attempts to resuscitate it, it died that night.

Then, on 30 June, I found a pair west of Sandvlei incubating two eggs on a raised mound of sand and kelp. Predictably, this breeding attempt was doomed to fail; the eggs had disappeared on 2 July. I hoped that by failing early, the parents had not invested too heavily in this breeding attempt. However, they returned a few days later and were again incubating on 23 July. A pair east of Sandvlei mouth was seen with a large chick in early July – presumably the sibling of the chick that drowned. Hopefully at least one plover fledged from this seemingly unsustainable range expansion.

Breeding in inappropriate places was flagged as a concern for birds during lockdown in the northern hemisphere, but I had not expected it to be an issue for birds in South Africa because few birds breed in autumn. This serves as a timely reminder to not take anything for granted.

PETER RYAN



PEACOCKS AND PICATHARTES

Reflections on Africa's birdlife

Rupert Watson

Struik Nature
Softcover; 216 pages. R220
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www.penguinrandomhouse.co.za/book/peacocks-picathartes-reflections-africas-birdlife/9781775845614.
R220. ISBN 978-1-77584-561-4

As an enthusiastic amateur birder – someone who's getting on top of his larks and pipits but has not advanced to feather moult in migratory terns – I recently took the step of adding a new column to my colour-coded Excel spreadsheet of bird sightings. Families. The first step to a taxonomy addiction, symptoms of which include regular perusal of IOC lists (transition to IOC 10.2 currently under way) and disputes on chat groups over current versus 'old' names.

In many respects, Rupert Watson's book is perfect for someone like me; a largely entertaining journey through

on the shelf

sub-Saharan Africa's endemic and near-endemic bird families, from ostriches (Struthionidae) to whydahs (Viduidae). Some sections are accompanied by delicate pencil illustrations by Peter Blackwell.

The book does, however, have a schizophrenic quality. The cover and title suggest a memoir or sorts, but the opening chapter presents a rather formal scientific examination of bird evaluation and families. The structure of each family description is a rattlebag of choice facts, curiosities plucked from arcane research and personal anecdote. After mentioning that hylionas are 'a lot more interesting than they look' they are dismissed in less than a page, while the oxpeckers receive five pages.

More interesting are the taxonomic peculiarities: does the White-tailed Shrike belong in the Platysteiridae along with the arboreal batises? And what exactly is a Picathartes? Is it a 'bald-headed magpie vulture' as its Latin binomial proposes?

On the upside, this is not a book about how one lucky bloke went somewhere fantastic and ticked off such-and-such a species (though White-necked Picathartes would be near the top of many birders' wish lists). Watson has certainly travelled widely, especially in central and East Africa, so for the reader who has not ventured to the Lomako-Yokolala reserve in the DRC or the Udzungwa Mountains in Tanzania, there is much to enjoy in his descriptions of Africa's less well-known reserves.

The perusal of African bird families concludes with Watson's accounts of 'special' species, where he somewhat mischievously bookends the Picathartes, Peafowl and Udzungwa Forest Partridge with the Egyptian Goose and Hadeda (technically Hadada). Surprisingly, given Watson's interest in nomenclature, he opts for the more

nostalgic Peacock rather than Peafowl in the book's title.

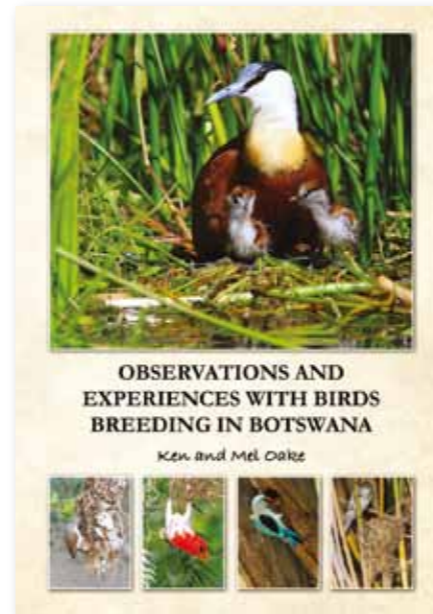
Watson is as interested in the overwhelming influence of European collectors – not always scientifically inclined – on the naming of birds in Africa, noting drolly that Austrian zoologist Rudolf Grauer, 'seemingly not one to shun immortality ... also has a swamp warbler, broadbill, cuckoo-shrike and subspecies of ground thrush to his name, as well as a subspecies of gorilla.' Throughout, the book is



as much a discourse on taxonomy and its practitioners as an account of Africa's ornithological diversity.

Watson's book is aimed at the armchair enthusiast and it certainly makes one want to travel more through the continent to experience its extraordinary avian richness.

IAN-MALCOLM RIJSDIJK



OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES WITH BIRDS BREEDING IN BOTSWANA

Ken and Mel Oake

Softcover; 496 pages
ISBN 978-99968-0-804-3
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Botswana is a jewel in southern Africa's crown, attracting significant ecotourism to boost that country's economy. The Okavango Delta, Chobe National Park, Makgadikgadi Pan and Lake Ngami are among its favoured natural wonders. Although Botswana does not have any endemic birds, it does boast a substantial bird checklist of between 550 and 600 species and it hosts 13 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas.

In this impressive coffee-table book, Ken and Mel Oake cover 167 bird species that they have encountered on their birding adventures. While this may not be a 'complete' list of the breeding birds of Botswana, it does include some species whose nests are notoriously difficult to find, such as the five species of cisticolas, yet surprisingly the abundant Helmeted Guineafowl is

conspicuous by its absence. During my own long birding life, I have met only a handful of birders who have the knack of finding bird nests and it is obvious that Ken Oake ranks among them.

A splendid collection of some 1100 photographs, many of them highlighting nests and eggs and mostly taken by Ken and Mel Oake, is arguably the main feature of the book. At first glance I thought the type font chosen presented somewhat of an artistic flair, but I found it very legible and, combined with the relaxed writing style, the book is refreshingly easy to read. The bird sequence follows that of standard field guides, but the falcons and kestrels are, strangely, well separated from the kites, hawks and eagles. Most of the text is presented as captions to the photographs and in Ken's anecdotes about his birding experiences and the observed nuances of bird breeding behaviour.

While I did not find a wealth of information new to science, I did pick up on some interesting aspects of bird breeding behaviour of which I was previously unaware. These included a theory of geophagy (ingestion of soil) by Burchell's Sandgrouse chicks, the daily gender incubation duties of Red-eyed Doves, and the fascinating idea that Black-collared Barbets are cooperative breeders with helpers that defend the nest against

Lesser Honeyguide brood parasitism. Furthermore, if the honeyguide managed to evade the barbets' defences and they reared its chick, the barbets would then abandon that cavity in future breeding attempts. Another interesting account is that of three Jacobin Cuckoo chicks in a Dark-capped Bulbul nest, two of which eventually fledged.

I encourage birders and avitourists to add this impressive book to their library and enjoy the fascinating information that emanates from Ken's meticulous notes on the breeding activities of birds in Botswana.

ROB LITTLE

