BOTSWANA SWALLOW PROJECT FOR 1994-1995

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The third and last expedition of the Botswana Swallow Project took place from 27 December 1994 to 27 January 1995, with the same team as the previous year, namely, Rob Bijlsma, Frank de Rooder, Kees Terpstraand and the author. We trapped at Shashe Dam, at the Boteti River which lies about 30 km from Maun, and once at Gaborone Dam.

The numbers of wintering European Swallows were very much lower than in previous years. The roosting site at Gaborone Dam contained a mere 2 000 birds (in December 1993 there had been 50–100 000 birds). The site at Shashe Dam had many thousands and the sites along the Boteti River contained from as few as 20 up to 1 300 birds (in 1993–4 there were two to three million birds!).

The conditions at the Boteti River, our most important trapping site, had changed dramatically. The river had almost completely dried out and most of the reedbeds had either been eaten by cattle or burnt down. We found some isolated stretches of water which were a couple of kilometres in length, so swallow trapping was concentrated at these sites, although the reedbeds had been reduced to small patches.

Only small numbers of swallows were present, due the droughts and the absence of insects. The temperatures were high and there had been hardly any rainfall during the last year. The swallows all had very low body mass. Their arrival on the roost site was about half an hour later than under normal conditions. Instead of making aerial manoeuvres over the roost site till darkness, the birds kept hawking for insects in the vicinity of the roost. Their wingbeats were shallower than usual, giving them a weakened appearance. As soon as darkness fell, the birds settled in the reedbeds immediately. Emaciated swallows were seen landing in trees, and were unable to fly away if approached. Some of these were captured by hand and turned out to weigh less than 14,5 g. Several birds had reached the critical weight of 13,0 g, the point of no return for European Swallows. These birds either died during the night or were unable to fly more than 50 m after being released the next morning. The body mass of juveniles was, on average, lower than that of adults and mortality was probably more severe among juveniles than among adults.

During the previous expeditions adults formed a minority among the captured birds (19–34%), but this time we noticed that 54% were adults.

After a rainstorm in the vicinity of Maun on 13 January 1995, larger numbers of swallows entered the Boteti area. Almost immediately after the rain had ceased, termites and ants started to swarm and other insects emerged, followed by some 1 200 swallows. These birds showed different behaviour, flying rapidly and making aerial manoeuvres over the roost. Their body mass was much heavier and they seemed in better physical condition.

The overall body mass increased to 'normal' weights until, by 20 January, a week had passed with no further rain. Then body mass started to drop again, showing how dependent swallows are upon precipitation causing an increase of insect life. Swallow numbers also dropped to pre-rainfall levels. The survival of the European Swallow seems to be very dependent on rainfall in the wintering quarters. It appears that the progress of moult was unaffected, or little influenced, by these adverse conditions.

Surprisingly, we retrapped four birds that we had ringed in the two previous years. This means that some birds are faithful to their wintering quarters even under unfavourable circumstances. This year, however, no birds were trapped with European rings.

The total of 2 594 swallows ringed was much lower than the totals for the two previous

expeditions. However, despite the unfavourable circumstances, we gathered valuable data.

Another one of the objectives of the Botswana Swallow Project was to count the number of waterbirds in the wetlands that were used by swallows as roosting sites. The waterbird counts that we conducted at every trapping site showed that the importance of the Boteti River for waterbirds had increased tremendously in 1995 because of the drought. They either concentrated in the few small sections of the riverbed that still contained water, or else had to leave the area. The drying up of the river will eventually result in their complete disappearance. The importance of permanent waterbodies increases during droughts and this was apparent at Shashe Dam. In January 1995, the highest number and diversity of waterbirds was found since the counts started here in January 1993. This would also apply to the Okavango Delta.

This third expedition marked the end of the Botswana Swallow Project. During these three years, we ringed a total 19 584 birds of which 18 424 were European Swallows. The final report will appear in 1996, followed by some articles in bird magazines.

We express our gratitude to everyone who helped us in achieving this Project, in particular Marc Herremans in Botswana and Terry Oatley in South Africa.

FORCED REMOVALS, ABUSE OF MINORS AND VIOLENT DEATH ON THE CAPE PENINSULA

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On 29 December 1992, a brood of well-grown Redwinged Starling *Onychognathus morio* chicks was rescued from a house being demolished in the Cape Town suburb of Wynberg. The birds then somehow found their way to the FitzPatrick Institute and almost got no further. The only suggestion as to what to do with them there was made by a venerable member of that institute who proposed that the unfortunate threesome should be "placed in the freezer until they succumb". You would have more sympathy for this unfeeling course of action had you heard the birds squeal. Possibly because of all the din, the birds' plight was heard of by Terry Oatley who, being more charitably disposed, rescued the refugees from a chilly, lingering death and brought them to us.

Redwinged Starling chicks are, like most young birds, vocal and rapacious. They were easy to feed (a cocktail of Pronutro, raw mince, chopped-up hard-boiled egg and various garden invertebrates, on demand), but the noise was all but intolerable and having a shoebox-full of them on the dining room table was putting something of a strain on domestic relations. Through the good offices of Gill Wheeler at Rondevlei Nature Reserve we acquired a large cage and, with considerable relief, installed the orphans on our stoep. Here their squealings were mercifully less audible to us but soon attracted the attention of not only the neighbour's cat (small missiles in its direction at regular intervals kept it at bay) but also a pair of Redwinged Starlings. These birds were already collecting food in our garden for their own brood about 200 metres away, but such was the clamour of the orphans that the adult birds also came to investigate. The result being that within an hour of the chicks being ensconced on the stoep, the adults were attempting to pass food to them through the wire mesh. To facilitate their efforts and, we must confess, reduce our workload somewhat, we cut a small opening in the mesh, big enough for a starling but too small for a Siamese, and within a few minutes the adoptive parents took food through the hole. This generosity was not greeted with any enthusiasm by the chicks who, being accustomed to the arrival of the great food-bearing forceps, cowered in silent terror at the arrival of an adult of their own breed. If