

mix & match

Hybrid spurfowl

Although the Natal Spurfowl *Pternistis natalensis* is most closely related to Hildebrandt's Spurfowl *P. hildebrandti* of East Africa, it is also closely affiliated to the Red-billed Spurfowl *P. adspersus*. All three species are part of the vermiculated group of spurfowls.

Following the observation by Hans Grobler of a Natal Spurfowl and Red-necked Spurfowl *P. afer* hybrid of the bare-throated spurfowl group in the Mawela Private Game Reserve between Mooi River and Estcourt in KwaZulu-Natal (see *African Birdlife* 3(4): 6), a Natal Spurfowl and Red-billed Spurfowl hybrid has recently been reported from Botswana.

Being aware of occasional reports of Natal Spurfowl from the eastern end of the Chobe National Park in Botswana, Marjorie and Gavin Blair pay close attention to spurfowl they encounter in the area, but they had never been fortunate enough to see that species in the region. However, on 28 February 2016, while atlas along the Chobe River near the Ngoma Bridge at the western end of the park, they saw a spurfowl that attracted

their attention. They stopped to take a closer look and were intrigued to see that it wasn't a normal Red-billed or Swainson's Spurfowl *P. swainsonii* (both species are common in the area).

They considered that it might be a hybrid, but of which species? Fortunately the bird was fairly confiding so Gavin managed to photograph it. Moments later the bird's partner appeared from behind vegetation and the Blairs were rewarded with their first Botswana sighting of a Natal Spurfowl. The hybrid was the male, which had retained from the Red-billed Spurfowl the eye-ring which extended behind the eye (but was more orange than yellow in colour). The back, wing coverts and tail feathers also reflected the Red-billed Spurfowl heritage, while the neck, breast and belly feathers were indicative of the Natal Spurfowl.

Although Natal and Red-billed spurfowl are known or suspected to occasionally hybridise in the wild in Botswana and Zambia, the interesting aspect of this record is that it may be confirmation of a pairing between a pure Natal Spurfowl female and a hybrid male. Procreation



GAVIN BLAIR (2)

The male Natal x Red-billed Spurfowl hybrid (top) and the female Natal Spurfowl (above) seen in Botswana.

between such a pair is thought to produce viable offspring since the hybrid species are of the same genus, and indeed reproduction in hybrid zones can lead to hybrid populations, thus fast-tracking evolution and even creating new discernible species.

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CONGRATULATIONS! The winners of the Struik Nature Club Kruger Quiz (March/April 2016 issue) of a hamper of selected natural history books worth R1500 each are Nicholas Rice, Northcliff, Johannesburg and Hugo le Roux, Krugersdorp, Gauteng.