

inbox

We'd like to hear from you, and you are welcome to send us your birding questions, observations or sightings for inclusion in these pages. Accompanying images should be sent as high-res jpgs and be between 1 and 3MB in size. Send your contributions to editor@birdlife.org.za. Letters may be edited for clarity or length. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the policies of BirdLife South Africa.



MONOVISION

I nanda Country Base in Kyalami, Gauteng, is a haven for many birds and even porcupines, genets, water mongooses, scrub hares and black-backed jackals. Most mornings and evenings I walk my dogs in this interesting area, which forms part of the Greater Kyalami Conservancy, and the more we walk the more I manage to see.

A pair of Spotted Eagle-Owls has been around for a number of years; the male has only one sound eye, although the other eye does seem to react to light and dark, being closed for much of the



BRIGHT & BEAUTIFUL

We toured Namibia in July this year and one of our must-see destinations was the Epupa Falls, where we stayed at Omarunga Lodge. While we were there, I decided to sit and watch the birds building their nests and a Golden Weaver, busy trying to impress his mate, caught my attention. He never remained still for more than a few seconds and I began to despair of getting a decent photograph of him. Suddenly, for a moment, he gave me the opportunity to capture that special, curious look in his eyes.

ELSA MEINTJES

day and open at night. I noticed the damage to its eye three years ago but I am not sure how long it has been blue. Interestingly, he has managed to provision two broods: one owlet in 2015 and three in 2014. He and his mate are being seen together at present (July 2016), so hopefully another breeding season is imminent.

SUE GOODMAN

HYBRID SPURFOWL UNRAVELLED

In News & Views, July/August 2016, 4(5): 16, I presented the case for a Red-billed x Natal Spurfowl hybrid seen by Gavin and Marjorie Blair in the eastern Chobe National Park, Botswana. Subsequently, however, Brian Marshall, editor of *Honeyguide*, the journal of BirdLife Zimbabwe, suggested that this might be a case of mistaken identity.

If one considers that the bird has a red lower mandible and an upper mandible

that is red on the sides but black above and at the tip, a red cere patch around the nasal cavities, blackish legs that have a tinge of red and flank feathers with a distinct black central streak, it becomes clear that these are all features characteristic of Swainson's Spurfowl.

It is often difficult to be certain of the parentage of hybrids in the field and even more so on morphology alone, so genetic confirmation is obviously first prize. Even more misleading is that >



GAVIN BLAIR



Quite suddenly they stopped fighting and appeared to be resting side by side, facing one another. On closer inspection he saw that they were locked in a stalemate: neither was able to attack the other as each bird's left foot was clamping shut the other's beak. He watched for a few minutes as the starlings lay quietly facing one another in this position and making very soft sounds. They seemed oblivious to his presence and he managed to approach closely enough to photograph them. After about 10 minutes a loud noise startled them and they disengaged and flew away, seemingly none the worse for wear.

I could find no references to similar behaviour and wondered if this unusual mutual disarmament happens often and/or has previously been observed. I also wonder how it would have eventually resolved had they not been disturbed.

MARK VAN NIEKERK
PINELANDS, WESTERN CAPE

Professor Adrian Craig comments: Red-wings certainly fight very aggressively on occasion; they have a very powerful grip and can drive their claws into a human hand with ease. So I suspect that using the feet to protect themselves from an opponent is a normal reaction, but this is certainly a very unusual situation where they succeeded in immobilising one another. ♦



single morphological traits seldom unambiguously reflect those of either parental species.

Perhaps one of the misleading factors was the pure Natal Spurfowl female associating with this hybrid individual. But that turned out to be the weakest evidence and led me to make the obvious blunder!

The good news is that the Blairs retain their record of Natal Spurfowl in Chobe National Park, and the hybrid should be listed as a confirmed sighting of a Red-billed x Swainson's Spurfowl for northern Botswana. The lesson learned is to pay careful attention to the features of hybrid birds and not be distracted by any pure form with which they may be associating.

I thank Brian Marshall for bringing this to my attention, and Raymond Jansen and Ian Little for supporting the unravelling of this hybrid.

ROB LITTLE
FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE, UCT

TOUCH & GO

My son and I took a road trip from Belfast via the Kruger National Park on our way to visit my other son. As Kruger was fully

booked, we decided to make it a day visit, entering at Malelane which would give us just sufficient time to leave through Orpen Gate before the park closed.

About 20 minutes after we had entered, I saw a Tawny Eagle in a tree next to the road. Excited to see the raptor, I tried to stop the car and grab my camera simultaneously! The next moment a male flew in towards the female in the tree. He quickly approached her and the pair proceeded to mate. After a few seconds of passionate pleasure, he left her and flew away – the entire encounter lasted less than a minute. I captured the images using a Nikon D800, with a focal length of 500 mm.

IRMA PALM
RUSTENBURG

GRIPPING TALE

A keen fellow birder sent me an interesting photograph taken in Pinelands, Cape Town, in early August.

He was in his garden when he noticed two Red-winged Starlings apparently fighting. They were going at it hammer and tongs, rolling on the ground with lots of accompanying vocalisations.