More observations

MYSTERY WADER

This bird seen by several CBC members on the ID Jamboree weekend in the WCNP in November 2009 posed quite an ID challenge.

Neal Cooper

Mystery wader

The photograph unfortunately does not give any comparative size or shape relationship with other birds, but even in black and white the aberrant leucism of the plumage is clear... the legs are black, but the bill is ORANGE! Was it, is it, a leucistic Ruff, Curlew Sandpiper, Broad-billed Sandpiper or some other species...?

The bill shape, almost straight with just a bend and "bulb" at the tip suggests a Broad-billed Sandpiper but the proportion to the head is far too long and perhaps too curved. Also, the legs are too long for the body of Broad-billed Sandpiper.

The bill is far too long and curved for a Ruff and other body proportions don't fit, with Ruff being much longer-legged.

A consensus of the "experts" present agreed on an aberrant leucistic Curlew Sandpiper... even perhaps some kind of cross-breed... but with what?

Mel Tripp

Footnote: We sent Mel's article and the photograph to **Trevor Hardaker**, who comments as follows - *The bird in the photo is a partially leucistic Curlew Sandpiper. Unfortunately, there are no other birds in the photo for comparative purposes, but, when viewed in the field, this bird was the same shape and size as the surrounding Curlew Sandpipers. As mentioned by Mel, there are various structural characteristics which eliminate the other possibilities mentioned viz. Broad-billed Sandpiper and Ruff, but even the detail and colour of the "normally" coloured feathers would be enough to eliminate the other contenders. The bill shape is not atypical for Curlew Sandpiper and it is probably made to look a little odd purely by the fact that the colour of the bill is not normal. The bill is fairly long which might point towards this being a female. I don't believe there are any inconsistent features on this bird as a Curlew Sandpiper which might push one to consider the hybrid theory. There are a number of differing definitions for the term "leucism", but there seems to be little doubt that the term "albino" is only used if there is a complete lack of pigmentation including soft parts, whereas "leucism" describes the various forms where there is a lack of pigmentation, but where it is not complete.*

CHAMPION CHICKS - WHERE DO THEY GO?

Between August and November 2009 many residents of Cape Town have looked with curiosity at a strange figure clad in fisherman's chest waders wandering around different wetlands. At times he was accompanied by students and other helpers. Sites include popular birding sites like Intaka and Rondevlei, popular public sites like Die Oog, and countless sites, like sections of the Keyser River, that are hardly frequented by birders.

This is all for a project to study the dispersal of nestlings, particularly of weavers, from their natal colonies or nests. The fieldwork requires two very different aspects; firstly, to find nests with chicks old enough to be ringed. When nests with eggs or small chicks are found, the information is carefully recorded and the date estimated when a return visit is needed.

This first phase of the project started in August 2009 and ran until December to cover the breeding season of the wetland birds. The second phase is to discover where the chicks have moved to, and this requires normal mist-netting at as many sites as possible. Some mist-netting has already started but intensive netting will occur from January 2010 onwards.

How easy is it to find and ring chicks? Here is a quick run-down of the statistics thus far. A total of 529 chicks have been ringed: 502 of these were weaver chicks (Southern Masked Weavers, Cape Weavers, and Southern Red Bishops), and the rest were mainly Lesser Swamp Warbler and White-throated Swallow chicks. The effort to reach this number required 3675 kms and 211 hours spent in driving and walking to search for, and ring, chicks. So on average it took 6.9 km and 24 minutes to ring each of these chicks. The northern-most chicks were ringed at Rietvlei and the southern-most chicks in Kommetjie, a north-south distance of 37 km (but much further by road, especially when driving to different colonies along the way).

These statistics do not reflect the physical effort and dangers of the work! Most of the wetlands around Cape Town are very polluted with high *E coli* counts. Fortunately no serious incidents occurred other than regular spider bites, presumably due to the large numbers of small spiders in the reeds.

How far do chicks move from their natal colonies? Several of the weaver species have already been recaptured from 2 weeks to 2 months after being ringed as chicks, many still near their natal colonies and others a few kilometres away. Mist-netting efforts will increase during 2010 to recapture the ringed chicks and obtain more data on how far and how quickly different species dispersed from the colonies where they hatched. Wait for a follow up report in a year's time!

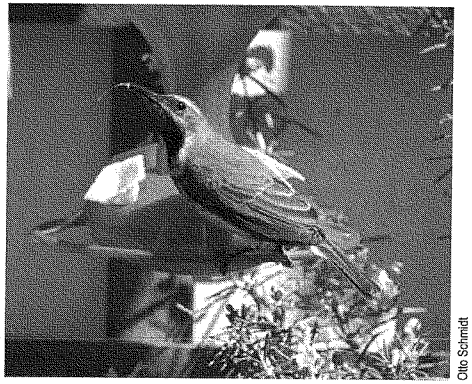
Regular updates to the project, as well as links to photos and a calendar of ringing dates (if anyone wants to join) may be viewed on the web at http://weavers.adu.org.za/res_disper.htm Also listed are acknowledgements for helpers and permission to ring at various sites, and in particular I want to thank the African Bird Club Conservation Fund and and the Cape Tercentenary Foundation for funding.

H Dieter Oschadleus

AMETHYST SUNBIRDS BREEDING IN FERNWOOD, NEWLANDS

As reported in previous issues of *Promerops* (Nos 265:14; 269:19 and 277:9) Amethyst Sunbirds are becoming more numerous on the Cape Peninsula. The pair reported completing a nest in Fernwood Estate by Peter Ryan (*Promerops* 277) is no doubt the same one we have seen in the vicinity of our house.

In late August 2009, we set up a "hummingbird" feeder we had been given as a present in the garden, and within a few hours the Southern Double-collared Sunbirds has discovered this new food source, with up to 3 separate pairs arriving at regular intervals. About 4 days later, on 2 September, the first Amethyst was observed at the feeder, and we then regularly had at least 3 birds, a pair and a juvenile male, coming in.



Otto Schmidt

Amethyst Sunbird female on the "hummingbird" feeder

On the evening of 14 October I heard a chick calling in the back yard, but could only locate the bird concerned the following morning, to discover that it was a recently fledged Amethyst Sunbird. Two chicks were later observed being fed by the female, with the male often in close attendance. The one chick was then regularly observed in the back garden, and it was still being fed by the female on 24 October. On 26 October it was seen to have discovered the feeder, which became a popular spot over the next week or so, after which the chicks seemed to have moved elsewhere.

It is certainly a treat to have Amethyst Sunbirds as regular garden birds, and they seem destined to become more numerous in our area.

Otto & Sandy Schmidt

Otto Schmidt

Amethyst Sunbird chick