

On the validity of breeding records for Long-toed Plover *Vanellus crassirostris* in South Africa

by W. R. J. Dean

Received 9 December 1985

McLachlan & Liversidge (1957) give "records [of breeding] from St. Lucia, October 1934 and Southern Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe], Sept. 22nd, in the Bell-Marley collection" for the Long-toed Plover *Vanellus crassirostris*. The October record refers to a single egg, at present in the Transvaal Museum, catalogued TM 34416 (formerly TM 3658) and collected by H. W. Bell-Marley, whose collection was acquired by the Transvaal Museum some years ago. The egg or eggs collected 22 September in Zimbabwe are not in the collection and there is no record of their data. This particular record has been omitted from subsequent revisions of Roberts' Birds of South Africa (McLachlan & Liversidge 1970, 1978) and was discounted by Irwin (1977).

While cataloguing and sorting the various egg collections in the Transvaal Museum, I was able to examine critically the October 1934 egg and accompanying data. This breeding record has become entrenched in the literature as a definite record of *V. crassirostris* breeding in South Africa. The purpose of this note is to point out that the single egg in the Transvaal Museum provides no authentic data for such a breeding record.

The label accompanying the egg states, in Bell-Marley's handwriting:

"? 136. *Hemiparra leucoptera*. Longtoed Plover. St. Lucia Lake, N.Z. 29-10-1934. Only saw one bird feeding on side of a marsh on Frylings [Feylings?] Flats - the nest was close by or near (*sic*) dropping of hippo - no materials egg laid in a rut, fresh."

A note in Dr A. Roberts writing gives the size of the egg as 40.0 x 27.3 mm. The egg in the Transvaal Museum, marked TM 3658 (old access no) has the same measurements and has a brownish-buff ground colour, speckled and spotted with dark brown; it is pale compared with authentic Long-toed Plover eggs, which usually have an olive-brown, greyish-green or greenish-khaki ground colour, heavily blotched, or blotched and spotted, with dark brown over pale grey shell marks and measuring (in 5 authentic eggs from Angola and Zambia) 42.5-45.0 x 29.6-31.0 mm. The nest is typically a pad of water plants, built up in shallow water or on floating water plants; rarely is it a scrape in soil or mud.

The question mark on the collectors label suggests that the collector was himself in doubt about the identity of the egg, and this, coupled with the small size of the egg, its poor resemblance to authentic *V. crassirostris* eggs, the atypical nest and that no bird was seen on the nest, makes this record highly suspect. It should not be used as supporting evidence for the breeding of this plover in South Africa. Both Brooke (1984) and Maclean (1985) do not accept the record, but McLachlan & Liversidge (1957, 1970, 1978), Dean (1971), Cyrus & Robson (1980) and Johnsgard (1981) all repeat the same breeding record. Johnsgard also repeats the 22 September Zimbabwe record.

It is, in fact, doubtful whether *V. crassirostris* does breed in South Africa. It has been recorded only in northeastern Natal north of 28°S and east of 32°E and there are no records of it between the Natal border at about 26°30'S and

the Incomati River floodplain, Moçambique 25°04'S, 32°56'E, where it is highly local and occurs only on the littoral (Clancey 1971). It could be that the northeastern Natal sight records of *V. crassirostris* are of sub-adult birds, moving south from Moçambique. There are, for example, no records in Natal during the months of May and June, although the area was well covered, both in time and number of field cards returned by observers who submitted their data to Cyrus & Robson (1980).

V. crassirostris has not yet been recorded breeding in Zimbabwe, though likely to do so (Irwin 1981). It would be useful to have authentic breeding records from both South Africa and Zimbabwe for this striking and poorly known plover.

Acknowledgements: I thank the Director of the Transvaal Museum, Dr C. K. Brain, for the opportunity to work on the collection, and I thank Richard Brooke for a helpful discussion on this paper. I am grateful for information on Long-toed Plovers in Natal given to me by Dave Ward and I thank John Colebrook-Robjent for data on the nesting of Long-toed Plovers.

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Address: W. R. J. Dean, P.O. Box 313, Knysna, 6570, South Africa.

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Books Received

Parker, S. A. *et al.* 1979, 1985. *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of South Australia*. Parts 1 & 2a. Emus to Spoonbills and Waterfowl. Pp. 1–56, 1–25. Illustrated, indices, maps, gazetteer. South Australian Ornithological Association. Soft covers, 18 x 25 cm. \$3.50 and \$4.50 respectively.

To appear in 4 parts, the aim, successfully achieved so far, has been to provide data on the distribution and status of the birds of South Australia. Part 4 will bring the work finally up to date. The annotations for each species describe range, status and taxonomy and provide a comprehensive summary in considerable detail, which will be a valuable basis for many years to come.

Temple, S. A. (ed.). 1985. *Bird Conservation*, 2. Pp. 181. Published for ICBP U.S. Section by University of Wisconsin Press. Paperback \$12.95, cloth \$17.50. 15 x 23 cm.

The second issue of this useful publication, filling in the gap of reliable information between indigestible scientific statistical analyses and the heart-throb popular articles on decreasing species and habitats. Subjects discussed include the vulnerability to extinction of island birds, distribution and abundance of Hawaiian native birds and their vicissitudes, endangered birds in Micronesia and other conservation articles and news.



Dean, W. Richard J. 1986. "ON THE VALIDITY OF BREEDING RECORDS FOR LONG-TOED PLOVER VANELLUS-CRASSIROSTRIS IN SOUTH AFRICA." *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 106, 87–88.

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