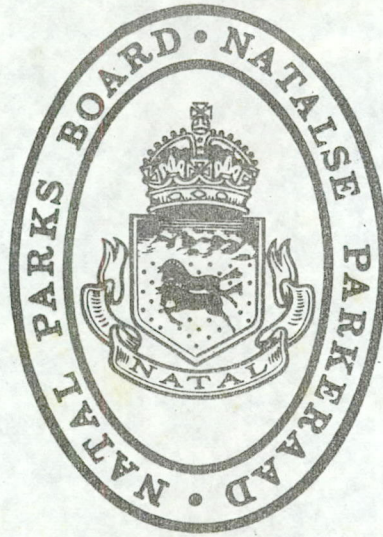


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THE BIRDS OF ST. LUCIA LAKE

Notes compiled by Keith H. Cooper

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For an environment such as Lake St. Lucia which constitutes a mixture of salt and fresh water, coupled with the fact that this area lies at the Southern tip of the Eastern Tropical Littoral Plain, one can expect the bird life to be of some considerable interest. This is indeed so and it is, therefore, not surprising that we find large breeding colonies of White and Pink-backed Pelicans, Spoonbills, Caspian Terns, Grey-headed Gulls, White-breasted Cormorants, Wood Ibis, Sacred Ibis and Goliath Herons here. Occasionally the rarer Glossy Ibis also nest on islands in the Lake.

Two birds which constitute a tremendous attraction to St. Lucia are the Flamingoes and Fish Eagles. The former do not breed here but can sometimes be observed in their thousands as they feed in the plankton-rich shallows of the lake, while the latter are usually seen perched high up in the trees around the shore. The characteristic call of the Fish Eagle is often referred to as the "Call of Africa". It is a magnificent bird and exists largely on stranded and dead fish but also descends in a tremendous stoop at free-swimming fish in the water. It nests commonly at St. Lucia, usually high up in large trees.

Other aquatic birds for which the lake provides a suitable habitat are Stilts, Avocets, Darters, Little Egrets, Grey, Purple and Great White Herons, Pied Kingfishers, Egyptian Geese, Red-knobbed Coot, Yellowbill and White-faced Duck, Red-bill, Cape and Hottentot Teal.

During the summer months one is also likely to see several of the palaeartic migrants such as: Ruff, Greenshank, Marsh, Curlew, Common and Wood Sandpiper, Little Stint, Ringed & Grey Plover & the rarer Pratincole.

In the dense reed-banks of Phragmites one finds a different composition of birds. These are usually shy species of skulking habits and include the Purple Gallinule, Moorhen, Black Crake, Squacco Heron, Little Bittern, Night Heron and Cape Rail. On one occasion when the weather was particularly bad with storms at sea and the lake very rough a single Cape Hen was observed flying above our boat; also recently after the cyclone "Claude", Frigate Birds were recorded at St. Lucia. These are both oceanic birds which are very seldom recorded from the South African coast.

Much can be written about the variety and abundance of aquatic bird forms at St. Lucia but of even greater variety and importance are the forest birds which inhabit the floristically different forests of the Eastern and Western Shores. Many enjoyable hours can be spent in these remote and Primeval forests. On the Western side the forests are drier and more open and common species include the White-browed Scrub Robin, Purple-Crested Loerie, Orange-breasted Bush Shrike, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, Bar-throated and Yellow-breasted Apalis and the Black-crowned Tinker Barbet. Species which have their southern-most limit of distribution in this area include: Neergaard's Sunbird, Bearded Robin, Grey-rumped Swallow, Mouse-coloured Flycatcher, Purple-banded Sunbird and the Pink-throated Twinspot.

On the Eastern side, however, are much larger and moister forests and this area also constitutes the most southerly limit of distribution of such interesting species as Woodward's Bates, Reichenow's Loerie (a race or sub-species of the Knysna Loerie), Rudds Apalis, the

Broadbill and in the open glades or grasslands the Pink-throated Longclaw. This latter species was first discovered in the Durban area in 1845 and was common all along the Natal and Zululand coastal areas wherever there was suitable habitat. Today, with the conversion of our natural coast grasslands into fields of sugar-cane and exotic plantations, we have all but pushed the species right out of our Province. Unlike its cousin the Orange-throated or Cape Longclaw it will not tolerate the higher altitudes.

Another bird that is becoming rare in Natal but still found quite commonly around St. Lucia is the Black-bellied Korhaan. This is also a bird of the open grasslands adjacent to forest. Common forest birds of the Eastern shores are the Trumpeter Hornbill, Sombre, Yellow-breasted Terrestrial and Black-eyed Bulbul, Bleating Bush-Warbler, Gorgeous Bush Shrike, Rameron Pigeon and Natal Robin. This latter species has the amazing ability of being able to mimic other bird calls and sounds and one is often confused by the call of a grassland species emanating from the forest. You soon realise that the Natal Robin is responsible for this.