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COORDINATED WATERBIRD COUNTS (CWAC)

INFORMATION SHEET No. 7

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Species identification

Prepare before the counts!

Counters should carefully study field guides before doing the counts, so that they are aware of all of the important identification features of all the species likely to be encountered. Remember that the identification of the juveniles and immatures of some species that are easy to identify as adults, can be tricky. Also, many birds will be seen under unfavourable conditions, e.g. at extreme distances or in flight (or both!). Therefore all the diagnostic features of each species should be memorized. You should avoid being reduced to poring through your field guide, while waist deep in water, to see which waders show white wing bars and which do not. Wetland counts should be done in as short a space of time as possible and there is no time for reading when the count is on.

Try to visit the wetland prior to the count to familiarize yourself with the species present and their identification under the conditions likely to be encountered while actually conducting the count. This will also help you plan the logistics of your count, i.e. how long it will take, where the major concentrations of birds are located, which will be the toughest areas to traverse, etc.

Unidentified species

Despite your best efforts, you are unlikely to be able to positively identify every individual bird seen. Individuals not identified to species should still be counted and recorded, using as precise an indication of their identity as possible, e.g. Curlews or Whimbrels, unidentified large Palaearctic waders, small terns, etc. Such records, however, should comprise a relatively small proportion of your count!

Large concentrations of birds

Under some circumstances, especially when encountering a particularly large (1000+) flock of Palaearctic waders or terns, the observer may feel daunted at trying to identify each individual in the massed ranks of similar-looking grey and white blobs. However, this problem is usually not as bad as it looks. Probably what you are looking at is a flock in which one species (or perhaps two-three) is in the vast majority. Bear this in mind and follow the steps outlined in *CWAC Information Sheet No. 6* under the heading: Counting large, dense concentrations of waterbirds.

Rarities

If a particularly rare species is encountered, which would take detailed examination to confirm, do not waste time with it during the count. Rather go back later to confirm it, when the count has been completed. If identified as a rarity, a National Rarities form needs to be completed and submitted to the National Rarities committee. These forms are available from the ADU or from BirdLife South Africa.

Hard-to-identify groups

Palaearctic waders present the greatest identification headaches. Bear in mind that some individuals may still show vestiges of their breeding plumage. The important features to use in identifying most of these species are:

- relative size - carefully compare the size of the wader with other birds, especially other waders, in the area.
- bill length and shape - note the length of the bill relative to the length of the head. Take careful note of its shape.
- wing bars and rump pattern - look for wing bars in the open upperwing in flight and note the pattern on the rump and upper tail.
- upperparts - note whether the upperparts are brown or grey and whether they are patterned or plain.
- legs - note the relative length of the legs relative to the body.
- soft parts colouration - note the colour of the legs and bill, especially the base of the bill.
- head markings - look for stripes on the crown or around the eyes.

Terns may also be problematic. The important features here are their relative sizes, bill colouration, head patterns and flight action. Common and Arctic Terns are particularly difficult to distinguish. The three small lake terns (Whitewinged, Whiskered and Black Terns) in non-breeding plumage are another problem and can even be difficult to distinguish from Common and Arctic Terns.

Other species pairs or groups which are frequently confused are: Crowned and Reed Cormorants; Whitebreasted Cormorants and immature Reed Cormorants; White and Pinkbacked Pelicans; Great White and Yellowbilled Egrets, Goliath and Purple Herons; Bitterns and juvenile Blackcrowned Night Herons; Greenbacked Herons and Dwarf Bitterns; non-breeding Blacknecked Grebes and juvenile Dabchicks; Greater and Lesser Flamingos (especially where juveniles are involved); female Maccua Ducks and Southern Pochards; Ospreys and juvenile Fish Eagles; African and European Marsh Harriers; Ethiopian and Great Snipe; Whitefronted and juvenile Kittlitz's and Chestnutbanded Plovers; Redwinged and Blackwinged Pratincoles; Hartlaub's and non-breeding or juvenile Greyheaded Gulls; Lesser Blackbacked and Kelp Gulls.

Field guides

The four major field guides (ensure that you get the latest edition!) that should be consulted are:

NEWMAN, K. 1992. Newman's Birds of Southern Africa.

MACLEAN, G.L. 1994. Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa.

SINCLAIR, I. 1992. Ian Sinclair's Field Guide to the Birds of Southern Africa.

SINCLAIR, I., HOCKEY, P. & TARBOTON, W. 2001. SASOL Birds of Southern Africa

Other specialist field guides that are highly recommended are:

HAYMAN, P., MARCHANT, J. & PRATER, T. 1987. Shorebirds. An identification guide to the waders of the world. London: Christopher Helm. (Good for all the waders, i.e. jacanas, oystercatchers, snipes, stilts, avocets, dikkops, coursers, pratincoles, phalaropes, plovers, sandpipers, stints, godwits, etc.)

HARRISON, P. 1984. Seabirds - an identification guide. Cape Town: David Philip Publisher. (Covers all the grebes, pelicans, cormorants, phalaropes, gulls, terns, skimmers, etc.)

MADGE, S & BURN, H. 1988. Wildfowl. An identification guide to the ducks, geese and swans of the world. London: Christopher Helm. (Covers all the ducks and geese).

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