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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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Michael A Ford

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INTERACTIONS BETWEEN AFRICAN OPENBILLS AND SPOTTED THICK-KNEES

Michael A Ford
SABAP2 Observer No 1422 – SAFRING Ringer No 1222
mikerval@telkomsa.net

A small number of vagrant African Openbills *Anastomus lamelligerus* have been present along the Overberg coast, Western Cape, for slightly more than 9 months now. They seem to be quite settled and they are feeding on the abundant supplies of both Garden Snail *Helix aspersa* and different species of sea snails as well as black mussels *Choromytilus meridionalis* (pers obs). They are more than 1 500 kilometres southwest of their usual distribution range in southern Africa (cf Figure 1). In southern Africa this species normally occurs in the Kunene region, Etosha Pan, the Caprivi Strip, the Okavango basin and Zambesi River valley. Further south it occurs in the northeastern lowveld areas of the Transvaal, eastern Swaziland and far northeastern KwaZulu-Natal. It is a vagrant in the rest of KwaZulu-Natal, the eastern Cape and Free State (Navarro 1997). The current irruption of these birds has drawn much local interest and much speculation as to the reasons for their far out-of-range movement (Ryan and Hockey, 2010).

On 8 October 2010 the author was on a early birding walk along the coastal path at Vermont, near Hermanus in the Western Cape. He observed two Openbills slowly circling a pair of Spotted Thick-knees *Burhinus capensis*. The Thick-knees were hissing loudly and adopted a spread-winged defensive posture against the Openbills. They were guarding two precocial chicks, still in their early camouflage plumage and crouched low down in the grass.

The Openbills made several attempts to get at the chicks, but each attempt was met with an aggressive and noisy display by the adult Thick-knees. After several failed attempts, the Openbills gave up and

flew off back to the shoreside rocks, where they resumed their search for their mollusc food items.

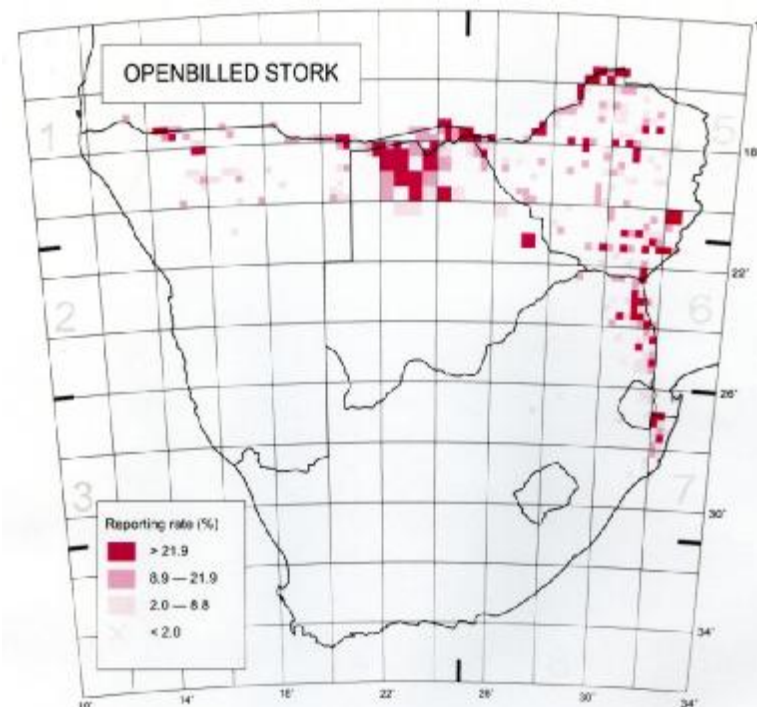


Figure 1 – Distribution of African Openbills according to SABAP1 (Navarro 1997)

The incident caused the author to consider the possible reasons for this confrontation. Did they actually consider the chicks as prey items? Was this a chance encounter whereby the Openbills happened to pass close enough to the Thick-knees to arouse their defensive instincts and thus set off the observed interaction?

The author is of opinion that the latter is the most probable reason for the animated interaction observed between the two species. Openbills have an unusual feeding technique and rather restricted



list of prey items, which rarely varies from molluscs and bivalves (Anderson 2005).



Figure 2 – African Openbill on seashore rocks at Vermont, Western Cape

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