

# Ornithological Observations



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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.

**Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen**

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## **ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE OF GREAT WHITE PELICAN *PELECANUS ONOCROTALUS* IN THE FISH RIVER CANYON, NAMIBIA**

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## ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE OF GREAT WHITE PELICAN *PELECANUS ONOCROTALUS* IN THE FISH RIVER CANYON, NAMIBIA

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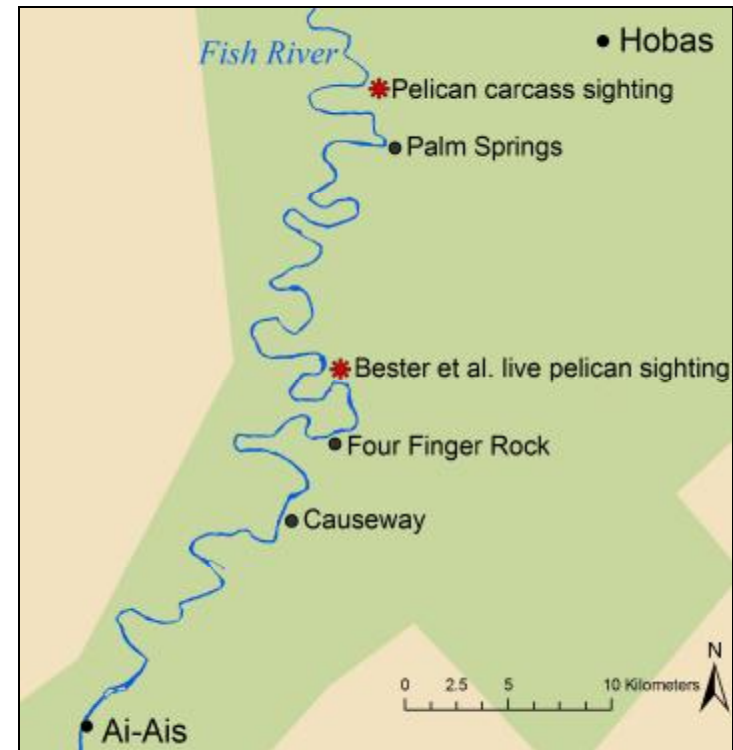
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Bester *et al* (2011) reported a sighting of an injured Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* beyond its recorded distribution (Williams & Borello 1997a) on 18 August 2010 in the Fish River Canyon. Here, we report additional evidence of Great White Pelican in the Fish River Canyon National Park, Namibia – a sighting of a pelican carcass on 2 June 2010. Our sighting was 11 weeks prior to that of Bester *et al* (2011), and the carcass was approximately 15 km north of their sighting, 3 km north of the Palm Springs on the Fish River Canyon hiking trail (Fig. 1).

The carcass was in the dry stage of decomposition, but its large size, bare facial skin, and highly contrasting white underwing coverts and black flight feathers were diagnostic of the Great White Pelican (Chittenden 2007). Chew marks on the keel bone indicate some scavenging, perhaps by a small carnivore, but the carcass was fairly complete and still largely articulated (Fig. 2). The cause of death was not clear. Whether the bird died in the location where the carcass was found or washed downstream with the river from a location further north remains unknown. However, the carcass was approximately 3 m above the water line at the time.



**Figure 1:** Approximate location of Great White Pelican carcass found on 2 June 2010 in relation to the sighting of Bester *et al* (2011).

Our party did not record any other evidence of pelicans on the five-day, 85 km hike along the river. The hiking party of Bester *et al* did not see the carcass reported here (LP Snyman, personal communication).

Bester *et al.* (2011) discuss the nearest inland breeding site (occasional) 450 km upstream at the Hardap Dam. Due to the largely intact carcass, it is unlikely the body washed down from the Hardap Dam. However, sick or injured pelicans unable to fly (*eg* the individual recorded by Bester *et al* (2011)) might travel down river



**Figure 2:** Great White Pelican carcass found 2 June 2010 in the Fish River Canyon

and end up in the Fish River Canyon. Atlas data does indicate Great White Pelican records on the Fish River 220 km north of the Fish River Canyon sightings.

Alternatively, though not reflected on distribution maps, it may be relatively common for wandering pelicans to visit the Fish River Canyon, potentially on long distance movements between coastal and inland sites. Atlas data indicate Great White Pelican records near a series of pans 200 km northeast of the Fish River Canyon and at the Orange River mouth 150 km to the southwest (Williams & Borello 1997a). Great White Pelicans have also been reported, though infrequently, on the Orange River 120 km south of the Fish River Canyon sightings (Williams & Borello 1997a). Interestingly, several tourism websites list pelicans amongst the bird-life at Hobas campsite, approximately 12 km east of the Fish River Canyon (e.g. MadBookings.com). However, the source of this claim is uncertain because the same text appears on several websites, and it is unclear to which species they refer as wandering Pink-backed Pelicans *Pelecanus rufescens*, presumably

from the Okavango breeding colony, occasionally visit southern Namibia (Williams and Borello 1997b). However, Great White Pelicans may potentially use the stand of trees at Hobas campsite to roost on trips between inland and coastal sites and could take advantage of feeding opportunities in shrinking pools in the Fish River during the dry season.

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