

N o t i c e s  
on the migration of birds in Durban Natal  
given by letter of  
Colonel J. H. Bowker F. Z. S.

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Durban Club. Durban. Natal.  
July 26th 1886.

My dear Sir!

I must apologize for not writing before, but at the sametime I have great pleasure replying to your letter and will do all I can to add, to what is wanted in noting the migration of Birds and I do not see, why the bird exodus from North to South should not predict storm or sunshine as well as the Telegraph wires. South Africa is an extra-tropical country and birds have not the necessary migration as in cold climates, but we have another reason and that is the long droughts during which time all migratory birds as well as the bees leave us for some more genial climate. The wild game also may be included, as the springbuck is well known to watch the track of a thunderstorm and the lightning and move away to the green grass followed quickly by the Bushman hunter, who knows well that if he does not do the same he will lack a breakfast in a few days time. The migratory Boobies of the Karroos did the same and followed for the wet waters and grass for their flocks. There is however one serious exception to this and that is the locust, who makes his appearance when least wanted in wet season and herbage. Plentiful he is not seen, but only during the time when he may be expected; but I am happy to say that the locust advent about fifty years ago has not been followed up by successive flights but on the

contrary have been gradually diminishing year by year and is now almost looked upon as a plague of the past. About 1840 large flights of the »*Ciconia alba*« described in Layard's South African Birds made their appearance giving the idea, that their food supply had failed in Central Africa from the move of the locust southwards, and they well followed them up, and to the present time 1886 are to be seen in scattered troops subsisting upon the ordinary grasshopper of the country, but hitherto I have failed to find out whether the birds have nested here or not, and the conclusion I have come to is, that they do not, and are with the locust dying out probably to revive again in the interior at some future time and play the game over again. About 1845 they were in large numbers roosting upon the ground, sometimes covering from twenty to two hundred acres of ground and when the spot was examined the following day, numbers of eggs would be found scattered about, but in no instance could I ever hear of their return for the purpose of incubation. The cases related in books upon South African Ornithology are not reliable and I believe apply to some other bird of the same family, some of which are not unlike in appearance. There is one peculiarity. I may note that they follow grass fires like many other birds and I have often seen a circle of them round a patch of burning grass, keeping well out of the dense smoke and ever ready to capture any underdone grasshopper which might be attempting to escape the fire.

There is also a sea-eagle *Haliastur vocifer* (Layard and Sharpe) which frequents the mouths of rivers and salt water lagoons near the coast and but little notice is taken there of their habits, but from ten to two hundred miles inland their presence predicts storm or wind and hence it is known to the natives as the wind-bird or windvogel. Keeping at a height in the air from two to three thousand feet and uttering at intervals of one or two minutes a wild prolonged wail which can be heard at a great distance and according to the natives predicts (and I think truly) a change in the weather.

Of the sea-birds I am not in a position to give much information but will for the future gather what I can; we have not the vast treats of cold coming as you have to the north of Europe and with the exception of a few scattered islands and rocks southward of the Cape of Good Hope we have the, vast cold sea ending only in the hitherto unexplored south pole, a region which has hitherto defied the efforts of the scientific as the mercantile explorers.

Believe me your truly

*James Henry Bowker.*

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