

8 September 2006. The African Scops-Owl has been putting in a regular appearance the past ten days, always about 90 minutes after sunset and on the same branch of the camelthorn every time. This is either a regular roost (I haven't been able to locate it during the day) or may be close to a nest - there are two old woodpecker holes in close proximity. I must check for pellets next week when I am back on site.

Two nights ago the usual call was interrupted by a second Scops calling from a different part of the same tree. I reached for the spotlight and went out to investigate. I couldn't locate the second caller until both owls suddenly flew up and seemed to be entwined mid-air before separating and settling in opposite sides of the camelthorn, with call and response continuing for nearly another hour. Is this perhaps the start of courtship? Maybe I'll have a pair of breeding Scops to monitor over my final two months in the Hotazel field camp!

Since the last week of May, when I began the work there, I've seen dozens of Burchell's Sandgrouse every day, with not a Namaqua Sandgrouse in sight - it is supposed to be a common bird in those parts. Presumably they moved deeper into the Kalahari for the winter. This morning, driving past the main waterhole on my way out and back to Joburg, there were the Burchell's for their morning drink with a single male Namaqua among them, so presumably the southern migration for the summer has begun. No other obvious summer migrants yet though. No Yellow-billed Kite or cuckoos calling - apparently Great Spotted arrives on the farm every October, so maybe I'll get lucky with that one.

Another surprise was in store on the drive back. Halfway between Biesiesvlei and Lichtenburg foraging in mealie stubble no more than 50m off the main R52 were 4 Blue Cranes. My first record for the North-West province. I tend to associate these birds with much greener climes, Western Cape, Dullstroom and Harrismith areas, as well as the Karoo, so seeing them in a mealie field rather caught me off guard.