



new breeding record

African Skimmer

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The year 2016 was one in which we all came to expect the unexpected. Recall the political events in the UK and USA, the Chicago Cubs winning the World Series for the first time in 108 years and the Irish securing their first win in 111 years over the mighty All Blacks of New Zealand. To this we can add the first breeding record of African Skimmers in South Africa in 73 years...

News broke of the presence of two African Skimmers at Makuleke Dam in the far north-east of Limpopo Province in July 2016. The pair remained in the area for some weeks before they (presumably the same pair) relocated to Albasini Dam, approximately 80 kilometres to the west of Makuleke Dam, in August. This pair bred twice (two eggs in September

and three eggs in October 2016), but both attempts failed during incubation. Interestingly, while the Albasini pair was trying their luck in South Africa, another pair of skimmers managed to breed successfully just north of the Limpopo River at Nottingham Estate near Beitbridge, Zimbabwe. This site is only some 120 kilometres north of the Albasini Dam.

The African Skimmer is a partial intra-African migrant, arriving in southern Africa in late April-May and departing with the onset of the wet season when sandbanks become flooded, usually some time between November and January. However, in years of severe drought some birds remain in the subregion. Although they are most common on the large northern river systems such as the Chobe, Zambezi and Okavango, they are becoming increasingly common on large lakes and dams away from these rivers, particularly in Zimbabwe.

The skimmer is regarded as extinct as a breeding species in South Africa; the last known breeding event occurred at Lake St Lucia in KwaZulu-Natal in October 1943. Although there have been scattered records of mostly singletons over the years, particularly from northern South Africa, the species is still considered a national rarity in the country. There have, however, been an increasing



SAMSON MULAUDZI (2)

above A pair of African Skimmers had two unsuccessful breeding attempts at Albasini Dam in the Limpopo Province. This clutch of three eggs was the pair's second attempt.

left Back from the brink of extinction as a breeding species in South Africa – a pair of African Skimmers in Limpopo Province.

below One of the African Skimmers incubating its eggs at Albasini Dam.

number of sightings in recent years, the most noteworthy being a group of four birds at Vaalkop Dam in the North West Province in 2013.

In their account of the African Skimmer in the 2015 edition of the *Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*, the authors wrote somewhat prophetically, 'Colonisation of large artificial impoundments or sites along the Limpopo River remains a remote possibility'. A single pair of breeding skimmers doesn't equate to colonisation, but the signs are encouraging.

The increasing number of sightings of the African Skimmer in South Africa and elsewhere in the subregion away from its traditional strongholds is of course very exciting, but it does raise some questions. Is this a natural recolonisation or range expansion into areas where it used to occur, or does it reflect 'forced dispersal' from its traditional strongholds as a result of habitat loss, exploitation and disturbance? Only time will tell, but for now one could argue that in this instance extinction is not necessarily forever – at least not as a breeding species.

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