

Observation of Three-banded Courser *Rhinoptilus cinctus* chick hatching

Observer: Simon Stobbs

Location: Pafuri, northern Kruger National Park

Date: 16 and 17 November 2012

In late November each year, Diverse Africa leads a 3-night birding trip to Pafuri Camp in the northern Kruger National Park. One of the days is spent seeing how many species we can record in a 24-hour period whilst the remainder of the trip is spent searching for some of the Pafuri 'specials'. One of the target species on these trips is always a Three-banded Courser as it is a bird which reaches the southern end of its distribution at Pafuri (there have however been sightings of Three-banded Coursers further south in the Kruger Park over the last few years). As a result of its distribution, people often require it for their South Africa list.

On 16 November 2012, I set out on a morning game-drive from Pafuri Camp with 4 guests. We planned to spend some time in some of the mopane woodland habitats found at Pafuri in search of the Three-banded Courser. We had found a nesting Three-banded Courser on our trip to Pafuri in November 2011 so we were all rather hopeful.

Shortly after entering the first patch of mopane woodland, Allon yelled that we had just driven past a Three-banded Courser. I asked where and he informed me that it was right next to the road. I reversed the vehicle to where I could see the bird and I immediately realised that the bird was sitting on a nest (*Fig 1*).

I positioned the vehicle so that we could all see the bird, but parked some distance away as I did not want to frighten the bird as it was right next to the road. This was interesting to note as I have seen 2 other Three-banded Courser nests at Pafuri which were located right next to the road, one of these being the nest we had seen on our trip to Pafuri in November 2011. In his book "Nests & Eggs of Southern African Birds", Warwick Tarboton makes mention of the fact that Three-banded Coursers often nest on road verges. There could be something in this or it could simply be due to the fact that it is a tricky bird to see and one typically tends to view it if only if it is close to the road. I captured the first image of the bird at 6:29 am.

We all trained our binoculars on the bird and after a while it briefly stood up. This allowed us to notice that the bird had a tiny chick beneath it. When the bird stood up a second time we all had a view of an egg on the ground. Here was a Three-banded Courser right next to the road with a recently hatched chick and an egg that was still to hatch. When the bird stood up for the third time, Johan, one of the guests on the vehicle said that he had seen that the chick inside the egg was busy hatching. Not wanting to miss this, we sat patiently and watched as events unfolded.

After a few minutes, the bird stood up again and this time we had our first views of the newly-hatched Three-banded Courser as it lay in the scrape of a nest (*Fig 2*). We now had a view of both chicks together (*Fig 3*). By this time, the non-incubating adult bird had appeared. The incubating bird proceeded to carry the pieces of egg shell away (*Fig 4*) from the nest and the non-incubating bird began to eat them.

The bird that had been incubating the egg then returned to the two chicks. She immediately sat back down covering the newly-hatched chick beneath her wings. The chick that had hatched first now stood in front of the incubating bird (*Fig 5*) and after a short while, it headed beneath the safety of the adult's wing to join its recently hatched sibling. I took the picture of the adult bird with both chicks beneath it at 6:46 am which meant that all of this had happened in the space of 15 minutes.

We decided that we would head off as we did not want to place too much stress on the birds. We agreed that we would return the following morning to see what had transpired. We returned the following morning and arrived at the site of the nest at 6:30 am.

There was no sign of any of the birds. We slowly drove back down the road and then spotted the Three-banded Coursers about 70 metres from where we had seen them the previous day. They were still in the mopane woodland. We initially had views of two adult birds, but as we looked closer, we managed to spot the

two chicks. One of them was lying beneath an adult bird and the other was huddled up next to a small branch. We watched them for a while and left them in peace when they both curled up beneath an adult bird (*Fig 6*).

IMAGES



Fig 1 – Our first views of the Three-banded Courser on nest.



Fig 2 - First views of the new chick as it hatches.



Fig 3 - Both chicks together and the remaining egg shell.



Fig 4 – Adult bird carrying the egg shell away.



Fig 5 – The first-hatched chick with the adult shortly after the second chick hatched.



Fig 6 - Day 2 and both chicks with an adult.