

The Lark

Newsletter of Birdlife Polokwane

Issue 13

September/October 2017




Birdlife
Polokwane



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<p>Welcome to our Spring Issue of The Lark. It is great to see that our members have kept busy – birding both locally and in our neighbouring countries. Mark and Julia's trip to Botswana sounds amazing and is enough to whet anyone's appetite!</p> <p>One is reminded of the fantastic places we can visit in our own province, that are literally on our doorstep, and the wonderful birding opportunities that exist here.</p> <p>Happy Birding</p> <p>Daniel and Raelene</p>		

The opinions expressed by contributors in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the editors or the committee of Birdlife Polokwane.

Cover page: Bennett's Woodpecker, Kruger National Park (April 2017) © Annaliese Pretorius

NEWS

The Large Brown Jobs (Raptor) course

Rahul van Manen

On a chilly Saturday morning, good for a movie in bed, 18 raptorphiles and I went to the 'Ons Tuiste' hall to attend an LBJ course presented by Joe Grosel. This time it was Large Brown Jobs and (thankfully) no larks! As always Joe made it an enjoyable experience and our raptor facts were sprinkled with stories and jokes. Apart from experiencing some problems with the sun shining on the screen everything went smoothly. We had frequent breaks for tea, cookies and of course lunch. The course took up almost the whole day and, in my opinion, it was a day well spent. The course covered all brown raptors, bigger or the same size as a wine bottle (this was our measuring instrument!). Joe provided us with an identification guide to the brown raptors, note paper and a pen.



A study of concentration. Some of the participants at Joe Grosel's Large Brown Jobs identification course.

The course started with an overview of the anatomy and feathers of raptors. Then we worked through each raptor in the guide and, as with the other LBJ course (Little Brown Jobs), we ended with a 'test'. Joe is an interesting and entertaining presenter and even if the only bird I liked was KFC chicken wings (luckily not the case), I would still have enjoyed the course. Unfortunately, I have yet to test my raptor knowledge but I know that the first raptor we see will be identified much faster and more accurately than before the course. At the end of the day my brain had new information and knowledge, the ink level in my pen had dropped and my notes were full. Raptors here we come!



Birdlife Polokwane outing to the Mockford Vulture Restaurant – 8th July 2017

Richter van Tonder (text) and Jody de Bruyn (photos)

The visit to the Mockford Vulture Restaurant is now a regular outing each year and the farm always delivers! With great anticipation, nine of us met at the gate of the farm at 7am - we were not to be disappointed.

We were greeted by calling Pearl-spotted Owlets being mobbed by other birds. Our list grew quickly and about halfway to the vulture restaurant we already managed to tick species like Cape Grassbird, African Wattled Lapwing, Black-faced Waxbills, Violet-eared Waxbill, White-throated Robin-chat and Ashy Tit.



A soaring Cape Vulture at the Mockford Vulture Restaurant.



A special for the Polokwane area – Hooded Vulture.



Inside the Mockford Vulture Restaurant.

As we arrived at the vulture restaurant, the clients were already waiting: the regulars such as Cape Vulture, White-backed Vulture and Marabou Stork were joined by a very special sighting for the Polokwane plateau - a Hooded Vulture! We quickly made ourselves comfortable and after the carcasses were dropped, the vultures slowly moved closer. Unfortunately, they were a little too weary on the day and none of them were able to pluck up the courage to start the

feeding frenzy. Nevertheless, we managed to see lots of vultures soaring and spiralling close by and we were delighted to spot a Lappet-faced Vulture amongst them.



Always a joy to see - Lappet-faced Vulture.

Other very special birds seen were Pearl-breasted Swallow, Cape Shoveler, Cape Teal and African Hawk-eagle. Unfortunately, we didn't see the long-time resident Palm-nut Vulture. Next time! Our list ended close to a 100 species for the morning.

Thanks to Yana Mockford for allowing us access to the farm and contributing to the preservation our vultures.



Birding in Botswana

Mark and Julia Friskin

On the 15th July 2017, we headed for Botswana on a special family holiday. We camped overnight at a site near Orapa where African Red-eyed Bulbuls, Namaqua Doves, Long-billed Crombecs and White-browed Scrub Robins were plentiful. It was our first night to endure the incessant clanging of animal bells; one would incorrectly presume cows and goats rested at night! We woke to the noisy quacking of Mallards congregating outside our tents, hopeful for any crumbs from our breakfast rusks.

En route to Maun we encountered the white expanse of the dry salt pan near Mopipi. We stopped to take photos and were amazed to see so many birds in the area - prinias, lapwings, rollers, pipits, flycatchers and a gorgeous pair of Lanner Falcons. Cows, goats and donkeys that graze on the roadside are a hazard and we did see a cow roadkill with some White-backed Vultures perched on the carcass.



African Oriole – lifer#1!

We were welcomed to the Island Safari Lodge and shown to our spacious campsite for the next three nights. A beautiful African Golden Oriole made an appearance (our first lifer) and was a daily visitor in the camp. On our late afternoon sunset cruise, we were thrilled to see many Senegal Coucals. Flocks of White-faced Whistling Ducks live in the reeds and take flight in their hundreds when disturbed. African Fish Eagles, African Jacanas and Pied Kingfishers were also abundant! Around camp, the Swamp Boubou and the Red-billed Spurfowl were common sightings.

The next day we took to the skies (in a very small plane!) to view the Okavango Delta. It was truly magnificent to see the breath-taking views of the waterways and the animal sightings from the air. Unfortunately, not all of us stomached the flight so well! Our mokoro trip was another bucket list experience. What a thrill to glide



Swamp Boubou at Island Safari Lodge

through the maze of water channels in the reeds and soak in the peace and beauty of this paradise. We encountered elephants in our path and watched them from a safe distance feeding in the water. We picnicked on an island and walked the perimeter in search of the Coppery-tailed Coucal. No luck, but on our return trip our guide heard their call and we came across a family of singing Coppery-tailed Coucals ... viewed on the water in our mokoros...an unforgettable sighting!! The cheerful Chirping Cisticolas and Little Rush Warbler made an appearance as we glided to our home base. We were thrilled to also see and hear Hartlaub's Babblers on the day.

The next leg of our journey took us to Nata travelling through the Nxai Pan National Park where we saw many Greater Kestrels, Black Crows and Purple Rollers. We camped in the soft sand - and oh those wretched animal bells clanging



Coppery-tailed Coucal - one of the highlights of our trip.



Chestnut-banded Plover.

throughout the night! We visited the Nata Bird Sanctuary the following morning where fields of yellow grasslands opened up to dry, sandy pans. We were fortunate to see the Double-banded Courser and, closer to the Makgadikgadi Pan, flocks of Greater and Lesser Flamingoes. The Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans were a special sighting for us. The pan is filled with water expanding over a 60 x 45 km area - the water and sky merging in a blue mass...it was incredible to see! We returned for a guided sunset drive and were shown the cute Chestnut-banded Plovers. The red glow over the pan as the sun sunk lower was awesome!!

We travelled north onto Chobe and spotted flocks of Bradfields Hornbills, and kept a watchful eye out for elephants as we neared Kasane. The Chobe River has abundant birdlife and is best viewed from the cruise boats which take you to the banks of the many islands. We saw Grey, Purple, Goliath, Squacco and Black Herons, Spoonbills, Open-billed and Yellow-billed Storks, various egret species, Grey-headed Gulls, African Skimmers, Collared Pranticoles and Long-toed Lapwings to name but a few! We also saw the Luapula Cisticola - a lifer for us! We were blessed to see a pair of White-backed Night Herons hiding in a leafy tree overhanging the river. The wildlife



Collared Palm Thrush.

on the Chobe is exceptional - views of elephant herds swimming across the river to the greener pastures on the island, the resident buffalo, Puku and Red Lechwe all make this a very special place indeed.

Our last highlight was the Collared Palm Thrush – a totally unexpected sighting as we walked into town for supplies. A memorable trip and a total of 15 Lifers!



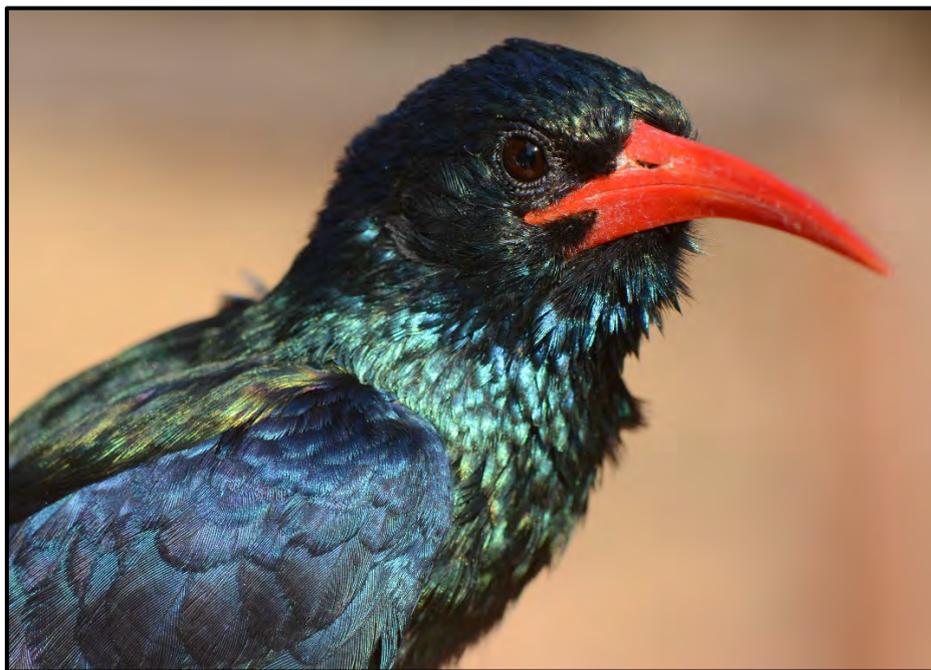
Birding in Blouberg - and the origin of the name 'Helmetshrike'

Daniel Engelbrecht

From the 30th June to the 2nd of July we set out to spend the weekend at Blouberg Nature Reserve's Tamboti Camp. Situated just over 120km from Polokwane, Blouberg Nature Reserve is well known for hosting the largest breeding colony of Cape Vultures in the world. We arrived at the reserve and quickly picked up our first species, namely Southern White-crowned Shrike, Southern Red-billed Hornbill, Black-headed Oriole, and Kurrichane Thrush to

name a few, while preparing the area to put up some mist nets as we also wanted to do some bird ringing. Our first afternoon at Tamboti Camp also provided us with a few highlights such as Striped Kingfisher, both Retz's and White-crested Helmetshrikes and a drumming Bearded Woodpecker, all of which are relatively common in the reserve's broad-leaved woodland. Sitting around the campfire in the chilly night also delivered a few nocturnal birds, including Southern White-faced Owl, Western Barn Owl as well as African Scops Owl with its distinctive, froglike 'krruup' call.

Day two, up before the crack of dawn and the mist nets up and open shortly thereafter, we were in high hopes of catching and ringing a few of the local specials. Whilst waiting for our first catch of the day we picked up Southern Black Tit, Alpine Swift and Yellow-breasted Apalis. A quick scan in the sky for raptors revealed a kettle of the iconic Cape Vultures and while checking the mist nets we were rewarded with a Lesser Honeyguide and pair of Green-winged Pytilias. As the day progressed, the bird numbers picked up and so did the mist net captures. Some of the ringing highlights included Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Green Wood Hoopoe and a few Retz's Helmetshrikes. We believe we now know why they are called



Green Wood Hoopoe is always a nice catch.

helmetshrikes. The group bond of helmetshrikes is extremely strong, and if one bird voices the alarm call, the others will come to its defence. As my dad was taking one of the captured Retz's out of the nets, he was attacked by the other members of the group. He was struck several

times and one of the strikes on his head actually drew blood. Hence, it is a good idea to wear a helmet when working with these crazy birds! The undisputed highlight of the trip was a Southern White-crowned Shrike caught in a mist net with a partially swallowed worm snake in its mouth. We wrote a short note about this unusual record for Biodiversity Observations which can be viewed at <http://bo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=333>.



Don't forget to wear a helmet when working with helmetshrikes. (Retz's Helmetshrike, Blouberg Nature Reserve).

The weekend was beginning to take good shape but no trip to Blouberg Nature Reserve is complete without a drive to the Fig Forest – an approximately 15 km drive through lovely broad-leaved woodland and open bushveld. Here we spotted Grey Tit-flycatcher, Barred Wren-warbler, Brown-backed Honeybird and the first of the summer migrants, a single Lesser Striped Swallow on the 2nd July. We also saw a brave Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill probing several White-browed Sparrow-weaver nests. See <http://bo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=330> for more information about this interesting observation.



An early returning migrant - Lesser Striped Swallow seen on 2 July 2017 in Blouberg Nature Reserve.

Overall the weekend was very successful and productive with a total of 72 species being recorded.



Morning outing to Steendal Farm – 12 August 2017

Derek Engelbrecht

One of the nice things about birding is the element of surprise: sometimes you may see a new bird, sometimes you visit an area you have never been to before and are amazed by the scenery, or sometimes you see a bird in an area where it has never been recorded before. Sometimes you get to see all three in one go. On 12th August 2017, eleven of us met at the Polokwane Nature Reserve from where we made our way to David Van Ryneveldt's farm Steendal, about a 20 minute drive to the south of Polokwane. Although the air didn't feel like it, we saw evidence that summer is on the way in the form of a pair of Red-breasted Swallows, summer migrants, sunning themselves on a fence along the road. A quick scan of some cattle rewarded us with Red-billed Oxpecker for our list.

Our arrival at Steendal was announced by a pair of duetting Black-collared Barbets and the resident pair of Mocking Cliff Chats, some Yellow-fronted Canaries, Blue Waxbills, Grey Go-away-birds and a Common Scimitarbill completed the welcoming party. David then took us to a nearby rocky outcrop which, in Polokwane terms, can be called 'world's view'. Surprise #1: what a view! Standing there I couldn't believe we were less than 20km from Polokwane.



Polokwane's World's View at Steendal.

Birding here yielded several gamebirds including Natal Spurfowl, Coqui Francolin and Shelley's Francolin, great views of Southern Boubou, White-throated Robin-chat, a pair of

Chinspot Batises and Kurrichane Thrush, amongst others. In the distance we could hear the distinctive 'Victorrrr' call of a Greater Honeyguide before we alerted to the striking, musical call of another bird. My first thought was that we had been foxed by a mimicking cliff chat. But we had not. Surprise #2: Striped Pipit. Although the habitat is suitable for the species, it still came as a bit of a surprise to see this species so close to Polokwane. It stayed just long enough for us to see it before it flew past us down the valley. Surprise #3: A lifer for many.

With our spirits - and lifer tallies - lifted for many, we started exploring the ridges. Some of us also walked down the well-wooded valley in the hope of getting another view of the Striped Pipit, but without luck. However, our efforts were rewarded with views of typical woodland birds such as Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, White-browed Scrub Robin, Bar-throated Apalis, Southern Black Tit, Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Black-backed Puffback, to name a few.



White-browed Scrub Robin singing along.

Back to base where we had a quick 'cuppa' before we explored the more open, grassy areas on the farm. Here we ticked the likes of Long-billed Crombec, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Chestnut-vented Titbabbler, Lesser Honeyguide, Golden-breasted Bunting and, to my delight, Sabota Lark. Above us some Cape Vultures showed nicely, but our attention was drawn to something smaller in amongst them. It turned out to be a Hooded Vulture! Following on the success of the club outing to the Mockford Vulture Restaurant on the 8th July, where the group recorded a Hooded Vulture (see article on page 4 in this issue), we were delighted to record another Hooded Vulture on the Polokwane Plateau. This sighting is only 20km from the Mockford Vulture Restaurant so it is possible that this could have been the same bird. Another highlight shortly after this was some Pearl-breasted Swallows passing by.

We had a wonderful day at Steendal and all of us agreed that a summer visit to the farm is a must. On behalf of Birdlife Polokwane, I would like to thank David Van Ryneveld for inviting us to his farm and for his friendly hospitality.



A new-found joy – birding outing to Kurisa Moya

Peter Mokumo (text) and Makhudu Masotla (photos)

Birding in the Afromontane forests at Kurisa Moya is now a regular feature on the Birdlife Polokwane birding calendar. This year's outing was on 19th August 2017 and it turned out to be one of the coldest days of the year so far. We were shivering as 18 of us walked towards the forest, but the beautiful calls of the forest birds made us forget about the cold and focus on the task at hand – five-star forest birding. As we entered the even colder – believe it or not – forest interior, we were awestruck by magnificent scenery of old man's beard hanging from the thousands of trees surrounding us. You could only wonder what secrets this forest was keeping. We were finally here: Kurisa Moya, a place where the soul is uplifted.



David Letsoalo scanning the tree tops for some of the many Afromontane specials on offer at Kurisa Moya.

David Letsoalo, our bird guide, called one forest special after another as he spotted a bird or heard a call. He would point in the trees and say 'Square-tailed Drongo' and we would look for it as he shouted another name! The sight of Knysna Turacos crossing our path and showing their brilliantly red wings got the 'oohs aahs' they deserved. Deo, Julia and Richter had a great time at the hide where they took beautiful photos of Sweet Waxbills and Green Twinspots. Unfortunately, they missed the Lemon Dove that was accidentally scared away by Peral. Julia's persistence paid off as she managed to get some good views of the Lemon Dove



A gorgeous female Green Twinspot photographed at the aptly named 'Twinspot Hide'.

a little later. Some of us were also lucky enough to see the very shy Tambourine Dove which made a brief appearance at the hide before being chased off by the Lemon Dove.

Amongst us were new birders like Therminah, Tebatso and Thato. Therminah described the experience as refreshing and 'eye-opening'. She said her perspective towards birds has changed and described birding as 'a new-found

joy'. Amongst others, her 'lifers' included the Red-backed Mannikin, Chorister Robin-chat, Olive Woodpecker, Forest Canary, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Knysna Turaco, Cape White-eye, Grey Cuckooshrike, Amethyst Sunbird, Streaky-headed Seedeater and Scaly-throated Honeyguide.



The brilliant red of a Knysna Turaco in flight is always awe inspiring.

Other specials on the day included African Emerald Cuckoo, Black Sparrowhawk, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Brown Scrub Robin, Crowned Eagle, Forest Canary and Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler.



Forest Canary

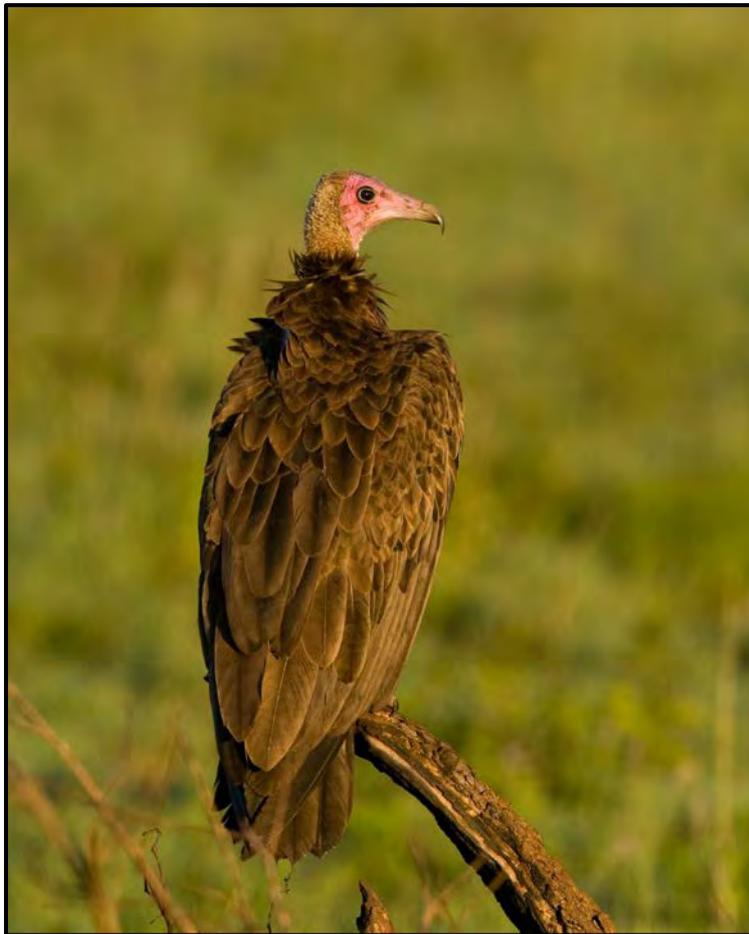
All in all we had a great time and for some of us this was our first visit to the interior of a forest. We wish to thank Lisa Martus for allowing us access to the farm and we were privileged to have a legendary bird guide of David Letsoalo's calibre to share his incredible knowledge of birds with us – and for his patience trying to manage such a large group of enthusiastic birders.



BIRD OF THE MONTH

Hooded Vulture

The Hooded Vulture, *Necrosyrtes monachus*, is one of the smallest vulture species occurring in the southern African region. No trip to the Kruger National Park is complete without a sighting of this bird and it remains a highlight of any birding outing. However, the species' rapid decline in numbers over the last few years resulted in it now being listed as a Critically Endangered by Birdlife International (2015). In the 1970s, the Hooded Vulture was considered one of the commonest vultures in Africa (Brown 1971) and as recently as 2010 the IUCN Red List considered the species as Least Concern. Unfortunately, things have gone haywire very rapidly for the species: accidental and deliberate poisoning, powerline collisions, accidental drownings, illegal trade for traditional medicine and bushmeat, anthropogenic development, stricter control of dead animal disposal at abattoirs and susceptibility to avian influenza are just some of many threats facing this icon of the savannah.



Hooded Vulture.

Being one of the smallest vultures in Africa at only 70 cm, the Hooded Vulture is easy to identify. Its overall dark-brown plumage, red-coloured, bare face and characteristic long, slender bill separate it from all other vultures in southern Africa. Adults are covered in whitish, downy feathers on the neck whereas juveniles have pale-brown coloured downy feathers. The only possible confusing species are juvenile Egyptian Vulture and juvenile White-headed Vulture. Juvenile Egyptian Vultures lack the pinkish-red face of a Hooded Vulture and have spiky, contour feathers on their nape, rather than the dark-brown downy feathers of a juvenile Hooded

Vulture. In flight, the tail shapes of the two species also differ, being wedge-shaped in the Egyptian Vulture and rounded in the Hooded Vulture. Juvenile White-headed Vulture are predominantly dark brown, but have a red-tipped bill and in flight they show a distinctive white line along the underwing coverts. The flight feathers of a juvenile Hooded Vulture also appear paler compared to those of the White-headed Vulture.

Hooded Vultures build a small, well-concealed stick nest below the canopy in the fork of a large, leafy tree. They only lay one egg which are incubated for about 50 days and the chick fledges after 3-4 months. Like most other vultures their diet comprises almost entirely of carrion, but they will also feed on insects extracted from the soil or animal dung, and scavenge food scraps and excreta near human settlements. Ultimately the Hooded Vulture is one fantastic bird and without it our Kruger skies would be incomplete.

Where and When?

Although relatively common in the eastern and northern parts of the province the Hooded Vulture is an uncommon visitor to the Polokwane region. Recent sightings in the area are encouraging, so keep an eye in the sky.

REGULARS

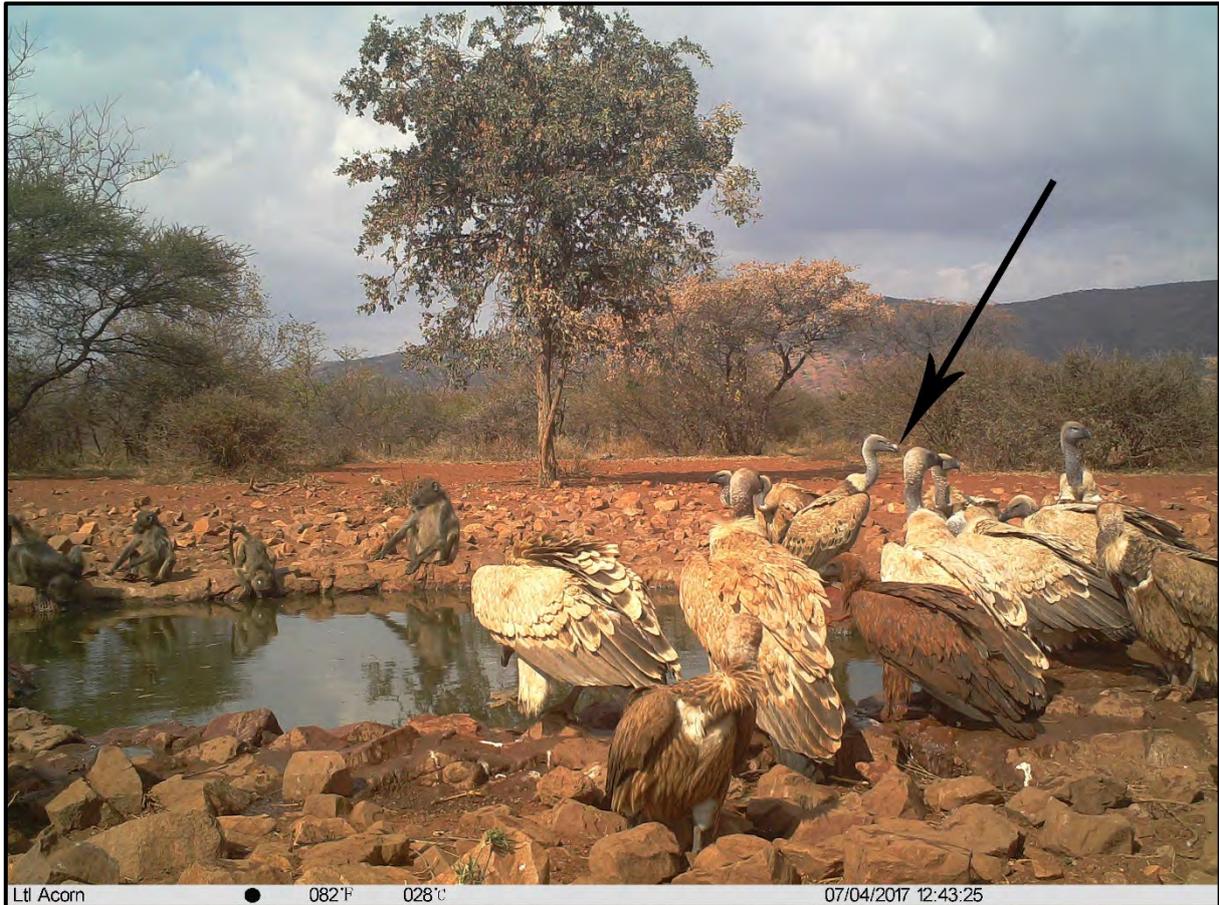
Bird briefs

When Rüppel's and Cape Vultures share a cliff

Johan Van Wyk

Historically, Rüppel's Vultures' most southerly distribution was northern Tanzania. The species was first reported in southern Africa in the early 1990s (Mundy 1995; Mundy 1998). The first record of Rüppel's Vulture in South Africa was in June 1994 when vulture guru Gerhard Verdoorn observed a single bird at the vulture colony on Blouberg Nature Reserve (Snyman et al. 1994). In 1995, there were at least three individuals in the Blouberg area (Snyman and Snyman 1994) and a few years later eyebrows were raised when a Rüppel's and Cape Vulture were recorded nesting on the cliffs at Blouberg (Snyman 1999). Since these initial sightings, there have been sporadic sightings of Rüppel's from elsewhere in the subregion (Verdoorn 2004; Botha and Neethling 2013).

After the initial hype of the Rüppel's Vulture at Blouberg, it either left the area for a few years, or it was there but no one noticed or reported it. In 2013, a bird was repeatedly photographed by camera traps at a vulture restaurant in the Blouberg Nature Reserve (Demey 2014). During the annual survey of this colony in 2015, the Rüppel's Vulture was yet again recorded on the nesting cliffs. Once again, it was paired with a Cape Vulture.



Is this bird with the pale-coloured bill perhaps a Rüppel's x Cape Vulture hybrid?

Now the questions start. What do Rüppel's x Cape Vulture hybrids look like? According to Verdoorn (2004), a male Rüppel's and female Cape Vulture at the Blouberg colony successfully fledged two young in two breeding seasons, so hybrids could theoretically be around. On the 4th July 2017, a possible Rüppel's x Cape Vulture was caught on a camera trap



A more 'typical' Rüppel's Vulture photographed in the Blouberg Nature Reserve. ©Rob Haynes

at the Blouberg Vulture Restaurant. The bird on the photo had a partial, ivory-coloured bill typical of adult Rüppel's Vultures but lacked the prominent 'scaling' typical of the species. It would be the first prize to get some DNA material from this bird, but in the absence of this, it will require some other evidence. Maybe the discovery of its carcass someday - who knows? How many Rüppel's Vultures are there at the Blouberg colony? What drives this sort of phenomenon in nature? What will the result of this 'foreign' DNA be in a population of a

species that is already under threat? Or is this nature's intervention to inject new diversity into its genetic pool? At this stage, we can only wonder and speculate.

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An influx of African Skimmers into the Limpopo Province

Derek Engelbrecht

The year 2016 saw the welcome return of African Skimmers as a breeding migrant in South Africa after a 73-year hiatus. Before 2016, the last confirmed breeding records of this iconic bird in South Africa were in October 1943 at Lake St Lucia in KwaZulu-Natal (Beven 1944). Although there have been sporadic sightings of mostly singletons over the years, the frequency of records has definitely shown a steady increase in the last decade or so. The boom year for skimmers in South Africa in recent years was 2014, when an unusually large 'flock' of four birds was recorded at Vaalkop Dam in the North West Province.

In 2016, a pair of African Skimmers had two breeding attempts at Albasini Dam in the Limpopo Province, South Africa (Engelbrecht and Mulaudzi 2017). Unfortunately, both attempts failed but, interestingly, another pair managed to fledge a chick at Nottingham Estate, just north of the Limpopo River in Zimbabwe at the same time. Even by Zimbabwean standards, the Nottingham Estate breeding record was unusually far south. Be that as it may, the pair at Albasini Dam left its shores towards the end of October 2016, presumably migrating north as the species is an intra-African migrant.



The Limpopo Province has seen an influx of African Skimmers in 2017 with breeding reported at several localities in the province.

The first record of African Skimmers in South Africa in 2017 came from Makuleke Dam in the north-east on the 10th March 2017. In April 2017, Stefan de Meillon reported a pair of African Skimmers on the Letaba River in the Kruger National Park (Hardaker 2017a). While this pair remained in the Engelhardt Dam area during May and June, another single bird was reported at Bilene, just north of Maputo in Mozambique on 17th June 2017 (Hardaker 2017b). Good news was received on the 5th July 2017 when the head guide at Letaba Rest Camp, John Adamson, reported an African Skimmer nest containing three eggs at Engelhardt Dam (Adamson 2017). Even better news followed on the 16th July 2017 when John Adamson observed a single chick in the nest. It is possible that a second chick went undetected by the author as two adults and two juveniles were observed at the site in late August 2017 (Hardaker 2017c). This breeding attempt was a case of third time lucky for African Skimmers breeding in South Africa as, following the two failures recorded by Engelbrecht and Mulaudzi (2017) in 2016, the Engelhardt Dam pair was the first pair in 74 years to successfully fledge young on South African shores. Furthermore, as far as I could establish, this record is also a new addition to the list of breeding birds in the Kruger National Park! It is worth noting that there had been regular sightings of two African Skimmers on the Letaba River at Shimuwini Bush Camp, about 40 km upstream from the Engelhardt Dam pair, throughout the winter of 2017 and these two birds may well be a different pair (Adamson 2017). Yet another single African Skimmer was seen and photographed by Renier Balt flying along the Sabie River in the Kruger National Park on the 30th July 2017 (Hardaker 2017d).

As if these records were not enough, a group of seven African Skimmers was seen at a dam outside Phalaborwa on the 30th July 2017 (Hardaker 2017d). A few days later, it was confirmed that at least three pairs were nesting at this site (Hardaker 2017e)! On 12th August 2017, another pair of African Skimmers was seen mating at Banana Dam at Letaba Estates (Johan Botma and Dalena Mostert, pers. comm.) and on 25th August 2017 we found a nest containing four eggs. The records just kept pouring in as another pair was seen and photographed at the Middle Letaba Dam near Giyani on the 23^d August 2017.



A clutch of four African Skimmer eggs.



African Skimmers are pugnacious in the defence of their nests. Here an adult African Skimmer is swooping down on a Grey Heron which ventured too close to its nest. The other parent remained on the nest.

This influx and breeding of African Skimmers at multiple sites in South Africa are encouraging and we can only hope that this is the start of a long-term return of African Skimmers as a breeding migrant to South Africa. At the time of writing this, I still don't have details about the success of the breeding attempts at Phalaborwa and Letaba Estates, but these nests are monitored and hopefully I will have some more good news in the next issue of *The Lark*.

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Common Whimbrel in the Limpopo Province

Derek Engelbrecht

On 31 August 2017, I received a message from Johan Botma at Letaba Estates about the presence of a possible Common Whimbrel foraging in short grassland adjacent to one of the dams on the property. Johan managed to get a picture of the bird and, together with some key identification features noted by him, it was confirmed to be a Common Whimbrel. Unfortunately, the bird must have continued its migration during the night as it could not be relocated the next day.

Although Common Whimbrels are common summer visitors to the southern African coastline, it is considered a vagrant inland (Underhill 1997). According to Tarboton et al. 1987, Underhill (1997) and Turpie (2005), there are no records of the species from the Limpopo Province, nor are there any records in the province since the commencement of SABAP2 in 2007 (see Common Whimbrel http://sabap2.adu.org.za/species_info.php?spp=268# Accessed 3 September 2017).

Well done Johan, this may well be a new addition to the Limpopo bird list!

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Common Whimbrel at Letaba Estates © Johan Botma.



Summer migrant arrivals: July-August 2017

Derek Engelbrecht and Joe Grosel

The summer migrants are now well on their way and some have already arrived. We have received notice of the following species so far. Please keep an eye or ear open for these and send your record with a date and locality to either Joe or me. The bulk of the migrants will arrive in September and October, so this is a very exciting time to be out there. You can expect anything as was recently shown with some of the species seen at Tankatara Salt Works in the Eastern Cape, not to mention Johan Botma's sighting of a Common Whimbrel in the Limpopo Province.

Species	Migrant	Observer	Date	Locality
Lesser Striped Swallow	Intra-African	DE	2 July 2017	Blouberg Nature Reserve
Wood Sandpiper	Palaearctic	JG	4 August 2017	Olifants River (KNP)
Ruff	Palaearctic	JG	5 August 2017	Olifants River (KNP)
Green Sandpiper	Palaearctic	JG	5 August 2017	Olifants River (KNP)
Yellow-billed Kite	Palaearctic	JG	7 August 2017	Olifants River (KNP)
Red-breasted Swallow	Intra-African	RvT	8 August 2017	Steilloopbrug
Greater Striped Swallow	Intra-African	DE	9 August 2017	Polokwane Nature Reserve
Common Swift	Palaearctic	JG	17 August 2017	Gravelotte
Lesser Grey Shrike	Palaearctic	LE	17 August 2017	Polokwane area
Wahlberg's Eagle	Intra-African	DE	25 August 2017	Letaba Estates
Common Greenshank	Palaearctic	DE	25 August 2017	Letaba Estates
Marsh Sandpiper	Palaearctic	DE	25 August 2017	Letaba Estates
Little Stint	Palaearctic	DE	25 August 2017	Letaba Estates
Klaas's Cuckoo	Intra-African	BG	27 July 2017	Mokopane
Common Whimbrel	Palaearctic	JB	31 August 2017	Letaba Estates

BG – Bruce Goetsch; DE – Derek Engelbrecht; JB – Johan Botma; JG – Joe Grosel; LE – Lynette Els; RvT – Richter van Tonder.



SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Derek Engelbrecht

This series features an old (40+ years) and a new (less than five years old) bird-related article.

Something old

Last season, with help of Samson Mulaudzi, I had the opportunity to study the breeding behaviour of the enigmatic African Finfoot on the Levubu River. While doing a literature search for a paper on our findings, I came across this interesting note by Peter Ginn in *African Wildlife* Vol 31(2) of 1977.

The bellyflop bird

by
Peter Ginn

It was a small river with reeds along the banks and trees dipping the water. They danced slowly in the tugging current, rippling the pool with the shine of summer sun. We almost missed the dark shadow skimming the bank. An African Finfoot! It did not leave the cover of the overhanging vegetation, and dived under a reed to avoid exposing itself by swimming into the open. The bird delicately pecked an insect from a plant, and then disappeared under a riverside tree.

We waited for another glimpse of the bird, but when it did not reappear we went to investigate. A large branch trailed into the water, a natural stairway to a basin-shaped nest.

The finfoot is a shy bird, often considered rare because its retiring nature keeps it hidden. Although I had believed there must be finfoot near Marandellas, in Rhodesia, where I live, I had not seen one until the Bomfords found a nest on their farm. The nest had been exposed when cattle had grazed the shielding reeds. Time spent quietly watching the river led us to the second nest. It was a large mass of grass, like flood debris, easily over-

looked as an untidy tangle, but in the middle was a deep basin with two brown eggs.

We constructed a hide in the gloom of underbrush, and at first light one morning I settled down four metres from the nest to watch for the finfoot. I sensed, rather than heard the bird as it glided through the water to the nest branch. Its long tail was carried fanned out on top of the water. The bird moved cautiously back and forth below the nest, and then deciding that the coast was clear, started up the sloping branch. It was the female, and halfway up the branch she stopped to scrape water off her plumage. What was the significance? (Other water birds I have watched have not worried about damp plumage when entering their nests). At the nest she stopped again to look around carefully before settling to brood the eggs. I mused about the bright-orange legs and feet — they looked incongruous on an otherwise cryptically-coloured bird.

More than an hour later the bird left the nest quietly, plopping onto the water. During my long hours in the hide I never saw the finfoot dive from the nest, although once,

when alarmed, she splashed from her branch and then dived underwater.

Usually the finfoot walked up the branch stairway when returning from the water, but on one occasion she flapped heavily from the river with a noisiness unlike her usual silent actions.

I did not see the male at the nest although sometimes he swam past below. Did he ever take a turn at brooding the eggs, or did his turn at parental care come later? The male South American Finfoot has pouches under its wings, and soon after the young birds hatch they climb, or are placed, inside these pouches and are then carried about. Does our finfoot also have these pouches? I hope to find out some day.

After ten days the eggs in my nest disappeared, but I could not tell whether they had come to grief, or hatched and the young been removed.

If you are near a quiet pool in the eastern part of South Africa, look out for the elusive finfoot. They are not uncommon, but they are retreating as banks are cleared for agriculture. We need to know more about this interesting but secretive bird. □





**Does Papa
do an airlift
of the young?**



Something new

Who would have thought our Pin-tailed Whydah would be considered an invasive species in the Americas? I came across this interesting article about Pin-tailed Whydahs in the US and how their distribution closely follows that of one of its local host species, the Common Waxbill. Both species are popular in the pet trade and escapees managed to successfully establish feral populations in parts of the Americas, including two biodiversity hotspots. At this stage, the whydah seems to track its waxbill host, but there are concerns that the Pin-tailed Whydah may eventually parasitize native species.

Crystal-Ornelas R, Lockwood JL, Cassey P and Hauber ME 2017. The establishment threat of the obligate brood-parasitic Pin-tailed Whydah (*Vidua macroura*) in North America and the Antilles *The Condor* 119: 449-458.

Abstract

The Pin-tailed Whydah (*Vidua macroura*) is a generalist obligate brood parasitic bird native to Africa, frequently found in the pet trade, which has successfully established exotic populations in 2 biodiversity hotspots in the Americas. We analyze the species' potential future distribution by identifying key locations in the continental United States, Hawaii, and the Antilles that contain suitable climatic characteristics, host species, and habitat requirements. We used species distribution modeling (MaxEnt) to depict the geographic patterns of possible Pin-tailed Whydah establishment and compared the predictive power of models that included combinations of climatic data ("climate"), land cover ("habitat"), and localities of historical and one known novel host ("hosts"). The preferred model, the "hosts" model, was the highest performing. The most important variable characterizing Pin-tailed Whydah distribution in the preferred model was the presence of a frequent historical host that is also established in the Americas, the Common Waxbill (*Estrilda astrild*), followed by a less frequent historical host, the Bronze Mannikin (*Spermestes cucullata*). Our research demonstrates that in the continental United States, Hawaii, and the Antilles, there are locations that possess the needed exotic host species that may facilitate further invasion by the Pin-tailed Whydah. Given that Pin-tailed Whydahs are known to exploit 20 host species from 4 families of birds, clear next steps include assessing their ability to parasitize novel, native species within the highly suitable areas identified in this research.

If you are interested in a copy, feel free to write to the author at:

Email: rob.crystal.ornelas@rutgers.edu



IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENTAL DATES: September/October 2017

Month	Event
01 September	National Arbour Day
16 September	World Ozone Day
19 September	International Coastal Clean-up Day
22 September	World Rhino Day/ World Car-free Day
24 September	World Rivers Day
03 October	World Habitat Day
10-15 October	National Marine Week



UPCOMING CLUB EVENTS

Month	Event	Contact
02 September	Outing to Pierre Homan farm – Tzaneen	RvT
05 September	Birdlife Polokwane monthly meeting – Polokwane Golf Club	LG
07-10 September	Eastern Soutpansberg birding excursion with Limpopo Birding Routes	LG
09 September	'Spring Ring': Bird ringing in the Polokwane Game Reserve	DE
09 September	Outing to the Eshowe Farm on the Limpopo River to search for Boulder Chat	RvT
03 October	Birdlife Polokwane monthly meeting – Polokwane Golf Club	LG
05-08 October	The Mapungubwe Birding Experience with the Limpopo Honorary Rangers	CH
12-15 October	Raptor Identification Course (Tembele Eco-training and Limpopo Honorary Rangers) – Letaba Rest Camp, KNP	CH
19-22 October	Birds and Forest Festival – Magoebaskloof with Limpopo Birding Routes	MM
02-05 November	Spinetails and Pennant-wings birding excursion to the far northern Kruger National Park	LG
03 November	Night Drive in the Polokwane Game Reserve	RvT
09-12 November	Punda Mania Team Birding Event – Hosted by the West Rand Honorary Rangers at Punda Maria Rest Camp, KNP	MO
22 November	Birdlife Polokwane year-end social function and prize-giving for the various club competitions – Polokwane Golf Club.	LG

Charles Hardy – CH (083 457 1721); Derek Engelbrecht – DE (082 200 5277); Joe Grosel – JG (082 415 5250); Lisa Grosel – LG (083 380 2322); Marianne McKenzie – MM (082 835 4185); Richter van Tonder – RvT (082 213 8276); Monika O'Leary – MO (084 304 3017).

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