The Birdlife Polokwane Magazine 67 September/October 2026

THE LARK

Club outings

Blouberg

De Loskop

Roberts 8

How can you contribute?

The plumage, wing formula, and measurements of the White-chested Alethe • The supreme skulker—Striped Flufftail • Observations of the Eurasian subspecies of the Great Egret in South Africa • Grit eating by Red-winged Starlings • Pied Kingfisher takes a Levaillant's Cisticola • Pied Starling preying on a presumed Peters' Worm Snake • Short-toed Rock Thrush preying on a Tiny Pygmy Mouse in Namibia • Levaillants Cisticola predation by a Southern Fiscal • Leucistic Crowned Lapwing • Crowned Eagle feeding on an Egyptian Goose • Martial Eagle diet

Birdlife Polokwane

Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA Giving Conservation Wings

The Lark is the newsletter of Birdlife Polokwane and is published bimonthly. It publishes reports of club activities, trip reports, photographic contributions and any natural history notes of birds or events involving birds. Contributions are accepted in English or Afrikaans and are accepted at the discretion of the editors. Non-members are also welcome to contribute, especially if it is of relevance to birds or birding in the Limpopo Province. When submitting images, please submit high resolution images without any borders, frames or signatures.

The editors reserve the right to edit articles as necessary. All images are copyright protected and the property of the author/s of the article unless otherwise stated. Please send all your contributions to the editors at thelarknews@gmail.com.

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

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

15 October 2026

This newsletter is best read in a 'two page view' format.

Cover page theme 2026: Young Birds

Cover Southern Ground Hornbill juvenile © Derek Engelbrecht.

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If you haven't yet visited Blouberg Nature Reserve, ***Jody de Bruyn's*** *report on our recent club outing is sure to pique your interest and inspire you to visit this beautiful reserve.*

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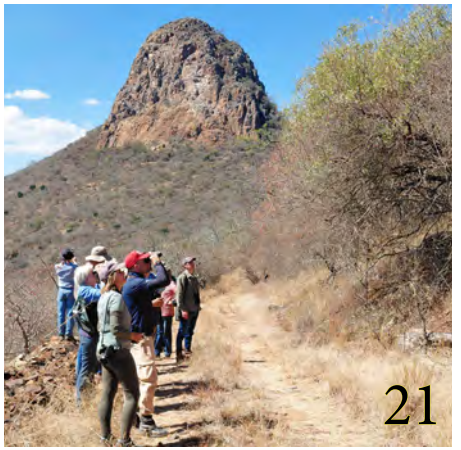
Bird club newsletters are an important source of information for southern Africa's premier ornithological handbook. Find out why your interesting sightings matter—and why supporting your local bird club newsletter is so important.

De Loskop 21
De Loskop Hill is a familiar, yet ornithologically unexplored landmark on the Polokwane Plateau and our August bird club outing was sure to spring a few surprises. ***Derek Engelbrecht*** *reports back.*



For a lark ...

Yoga stork © Adam Buckham.

P.O. Box 699
Fauna Park 0787
Tel: 015 263 6473
www.birdlifepolokwane.co.za
www.facebook.com/birdlifepolokwane

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Editors' chirps

We start this issue with a gigantic shout-out to all our contributors who have made this such a memorable edition of ***The Lark***. We cannot recall a previous issue featuring such a diverse collection of interesting notes from so many different authors. Thank you for choosing ***The Lark*** as your outlet for sharing your observations with the wider birding community. Your contributions not only make for fascinating reading, but also add valuable pieces to our collective knowledge of southern African birds.

There is an added incentive to keep those interesting observations coming: your contribution may find its way into the 8th edition of Roberts Birds of Southern Africa, a collaboration with Birds of the World. We are particularly excited about this opportunity to ensure that the observations and experiences of birders are captured for future generations. On this topic, be sure to read the article by the Roberts 8 editors on page 15. Many bird club publications are facing increasingly difficult times as member contributions dwindle. So, please support your editor, share those unusual sightings, breeding records, photographs and observations, and leave your legacy in future editions of Roberts.

In this issue, we report on two bird club outings: one to the stunning Blouberg Nature Reserve in the northeast of the province, and another to De Loskop Hill, that familiar landmark just north of Polokwane. Both outings produced some excellent sightings, but we won't spoil the surprises—read the reports for yourself!

Our Bird Briefs section is packed with a record 11 notes. These cover a fascinating range of topics, from studies of museum skins and the field identification of Great Egret subspecies in southern Africa to several highly unusual predation records. Each observation adds to our understanding of the species involved, whether as predator or prey. This is precisely the sort of information the Roberts 8 editors are calling for. What may seem like a simple or isolated observation can become a valuable contribution to our collective knowledge when documented and shared.

And then there is the Striped Flufftail. Flufftails are renowned for their secretive habits, and seeing one well is a prize in itself. In a family of accomplished skulkers, the Striped Flufftail sits near the head of the table. Hugh Chittenden's exceptional series of photographs on page 71 is therefore nothing short of remarkable.

As breeding season gets underway, check out our quick flow chart (page 65) to see what to do if you find a juvenile bird.

We hope you enjoy this edition as much as we enjoyed compiling it. Thank you for your continued support of ***The Lark***, and please keep those observations coming. Who knows? Your next sighting could become part of the legacy of Roberts.

Raelene and Derek

birding

BLOUBERG

text and photos **Jody de Bruyn**

With an early start from Polokwane, we arrived at the reserve entrance gate just before 7:00 on 4 July 2026. After a quick check-in at reception, our convoy of six vehicles headed out to explore the reserve. We kept to the main track heading westwards, and we found ourselves stopping every so often to observe the birds we sighted or listen for activity. At the reception area, we already started adding species to the outing list, some of which included: White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Fork-tailed Drongo, Blue Waxbill, Chinspot Batis, Long-billed Crombec, Southern Red-billed Hornbill, Crested Francolin, and Ring-necked Dove, just to name a few.

MAIN Burnt-necked Eremomela.

BELOW Blouberg's "N1", the central track linking the eastern and western parts of the reserve.

Above Southern Crested Guineafowl is one of the specials in the reserve, and we were lucky to come across them.

Opposite above Despite its colourful plumage, this Purple Roller seemed to melt into its environment.

Opposite below This Brown Snake Eagle is a study of concentration as it scans the ground for prey.

Driving along the main track, we managed to add species such as the Southern Black Tit, Striped Kingfisher, Marico Sunbird, Gabar Goshawk, Black-backed Puffback, Southern Crested Guineafowl, and Bearded Woodpecker. Richter pointed out a Purple Roller perched in a tree just in front of us, and it took me a few seconds to get visuals of it. It just goes to show how well birds can blend into their natural environment, and how easily they can be missed. A skittish Brown Snake Eagle made a welcome appearance and proceeded to perch a fair distance away, ensuring that it could keep a watchful eye on us as we managed to get a few photos.

After several kilometres down the main track, we arrived at an open area where we decided to have a welcome coffee break. We started

to explore the area and managed to add a number of species to the day's list, which included: Pearl-spotted Owlet, Green-winged Pytilia, Crested Barbet, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Burnt-necked Eremomela, White-browed Scrub Robin, Marico Flycatcher, Acacia Pied Barbet, Crimson-breasted Shrike, and Yellow-breasted Apalis.

Our next major stop was the enchanting Fig Tree Forest. It was evident where the name was derived from. The area was engulfed by a number of large fig trees, forming a striking micro-habitat with dense undergrowth. While exploring the area, we managed to record the following species: White-throated Robin-Chat, White-browed Scrub Robin, Black-backed Puffback, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Black-headed Oriole, Natal Spurfowl, Orange-breasted Bushshrike, Southern Boubou, Spectacled Weaver, and Grey-backed Camaroptera. A few Terrestrial Brownbuls kept us entertained while

Opposite A grumpy-looking Pearl-spotted Owlet.

Below Green-winged Pytilia.

we tried to spot them foraging in the dark undergrowth. A calling Red-capped Robin-Chat had a number of us try to get visuals on the bird, but it managed to evade us.

From here, we made our way to Buffelpan, but had a quick stop at the large Baobab tree. The enormous tree dwarfed everything around it, and this was the perfect spot for a group photo. The bird activity was excellent, and we managed to add the following to our list: White-crested Helmetshrike, Retz's Helmetshrike, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Black Cuckooshrike, Green Wood Hoopoe, Southern Black Tit, and Grey-headed Bushshrike, just to name a few.

BELOW Retz's Helmetshrikes are very photogenic little birds, and coming across a foraging flock of Retz's Helmetshrike is always a treat.

ABOVE Getting a good view of Jameson's Firefinch is often a challenge, but this one showed beautifully at the Buffelpan Hide.

The Buffelpan Hide and adjacent waterhole add another unique birding spot at the reserve, with its sunken photographic hide right on the edge of the waterhole. From here, birds and mammals can be observed up close. At the entrance of the hide, we managed to get sightings of Grey Penduline Tit and Ashy Flycatcher while a small group of Retz's Helmetshrike moved through the area. A Natal Spurfowl kept calling from the open shrub while a Brown-crowned Tchagra added its call every so often. From within the hide, we managed to observe: Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, Blue Waxbills, Jameson's Firefinches, and Lesser Masked Weaver, just to name a few.

As the afternoon approached, we made our way to the campsite where Johan "Fires" Janse van Vuuren already had the braai fire going. With close to 75 bird species recorded on the day, the outing was truly enjoyed by all who took part. We extend our gratitude to everyone who joined, and we eagerly look forward to our next outing!

Author email: jmdebruyn@gmail.com

Blouberg collage

Yellow-breasted Apalis

White-crested Helmetshrike

Emerald-spotted Wood Dove

Grey Penduline Tit

SHARING IS CARING

Your local bird club newsletter or journal needs your bird observations

and so does Roberts 8!

For more than 80 years, *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa*, published by the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund (JVBBF), has been a leading ornithological reference work for southern Africa. The revision of the landmark *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa* (*Roberts 7*), published in 2005, is now underway, with revised species accounts being published online through Birds of the World (BoW).

But why publish *Roberts 8* online at Birds of the World?

Roberts 8 is a monumental undertaking. Since the early 2000s, digital search engines and platforms have become increasingly powerful, and many newsletters and journals that were once difficult to access or hidden behind paywalls are now available online. This has resulted in a rapidly expanding body of literature that needs to be searched and evaluated for each species. At the same time, advances in digital photography and sound-recording technology have put high-quality equipment into the hands of ordinary birders. The result is an enormous and continually expanding wealth of photographs, sound recordings and observations, including countless records of behaviours and vocalisations that have not yet been documented.

Recognising that this would be a multi-year project, the JVBBF formally partnered with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York. The BoW platform is the Cornell Lab's signature ornithological resource, providing dynamic, curated life histories for every bird species in the world. In exchange for updating the southern African species accounts on the BoW platform, the JVBBF has negotiated free access to BoW for anyone in Africa. Yes – it's ***free***! All you need to do is register an account, and you will have access to the world's premier ornithological resource.

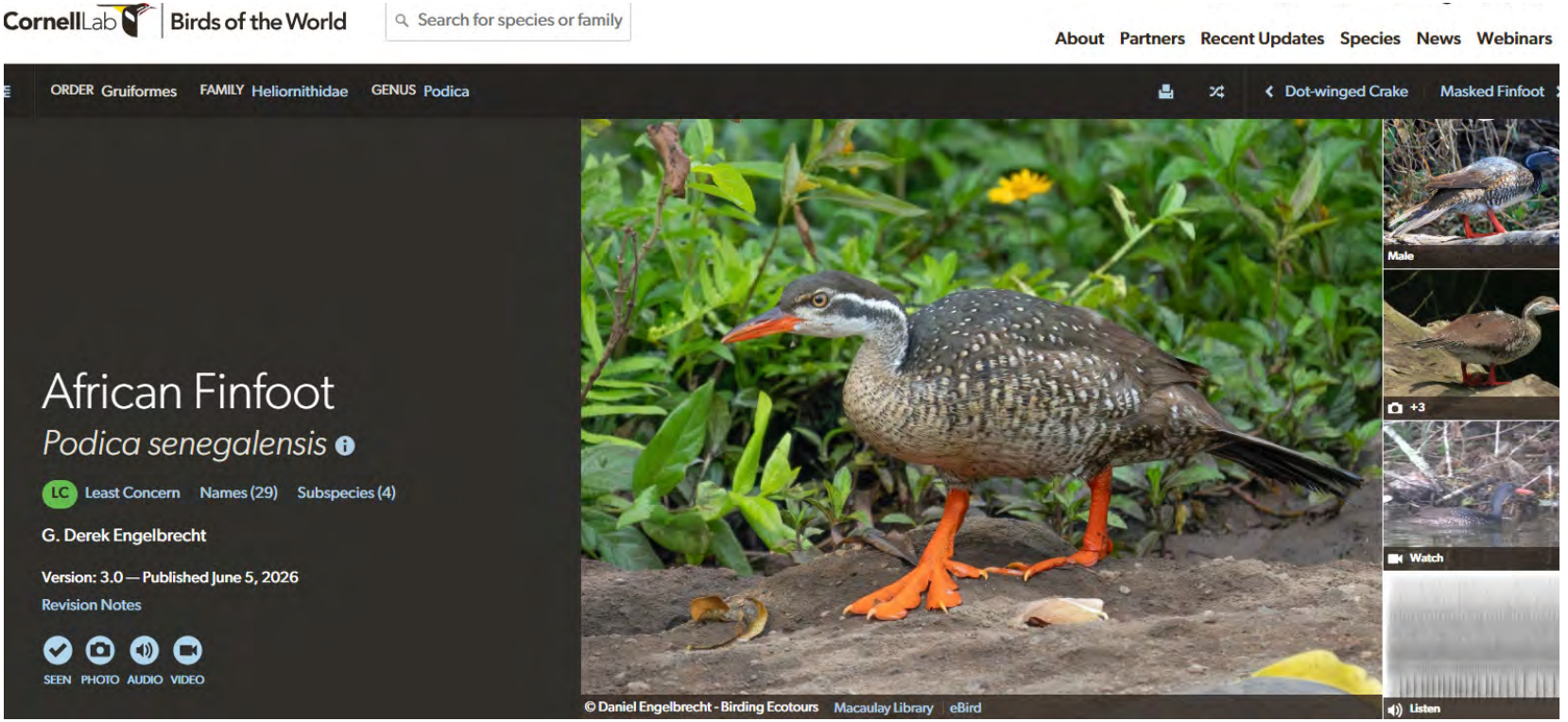
In a break-away from traditional publishing, each revised "*Roberts*" account is published online on the BoW platform immediately upon completion. The advantage of publishing accounts online is that they can be continuously updated as new information, observations and media become available. For some of the most recently published accounts, look here.

Your observation could fill a gap in our knowledge

Roberts 8 is not only about documenting everything we already know about a species; it is also about identifying what we don't know. This is where birders can make an important contribution. Have you seen a Secretarybird eating

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Birds of the World

ROBERTS 8



Above An example of a landing page of one of the species accounts on Birds of the World.

something unusual? Watched a snake catch a bird? Witnessed an aggressive interaction between two species? Recorded an unusual call? Observed an unusual feeding, breeding or roosting behaviour? **Tell us about it – and, importantly, share it with your local bird club newsletter or journal!**

As editors, we also aim to move beyond broad descriptions of, for example, a species' diet. While it may be known that a bird feeds on snakes, fruits, or nectar, we would ideally like to identify these food items as precisely as possible—determining which snake species are consumed, which plant species provide the fruit, and which flowers are visited for nectar. Advances in digital photography, together with increasingly sophisticated image-processing software, now make it possible to identify and document these details in many cases.

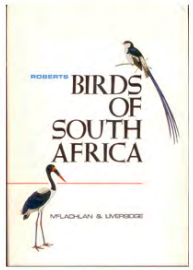
At a time when many bird club newsletter and journal editors often struggle to find material, we encourage recreational birders, photographers, citizen scientists, and researchers to support their local publication and to report their interesting observations and unpublished data. Some bird club publications have been produced continuously for 60–70 years and have become invaluable sources of information for the editors of successive editions of *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa*, including *Roberts 8*. They remain an important repository of ornithological knowledge and will continue to be so in the future—but only if birders continue to contribute their observations and records. So, please support your bird club and its editor.

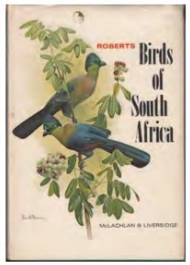
When possible, please include the date, location and photographs or other supporting evidence. The observation does not have to be recent – something you witnessed 15 years ago may still be important if it documents behaviour that is poorly known or has never been recorded.

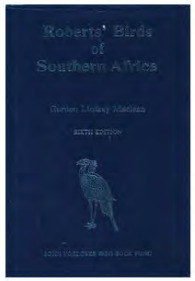
We also encourage you to upload your photographs, sound recordings and other media to online repositories such as eBird and the Macaulay Library, where they can become part of the permanent scientific record.

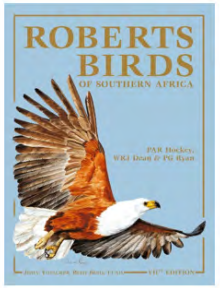
As editors of *Roberts 8*, we actively search bird club newsletters, journals and other publications for these kinds of observations. Your short note in your local bird club newsletter may ultimately find its way into a species account that is read by birders, researchers and conservationists around the world.

Our beloved *Roberts* has always prided itself on being a people's book – a place where an interesting observation by a recreational birder can be just as valuable in documenting the natural history of a species as a scientific paper in a high-end journal. The *Roberts 8*/BoW partnership takes this a step further: by sharing your observations, you









ABOVE A proud legacy—seven editions of Roberts have come before. Now, you can help shape the legacy of Roberts 8.

can help build the world's knowledge of southern African birds.

So, next time you see something unusual, don't just tell your birding friends – write it down and send it to your bird club newsletter editor. **Your observation might be the one piece of information that *Roberts 8* is missing.**

To learn more about *Roberts 8* or how to upload your media to the Macaulay Library, please contact Derek Engelbrecht at roberts8revision@gmail.com or Sanjo Rose at sanjo.roberts8@gmail.com, or visit the Roberts 8 project on Birds of the World.

ROBERTS 8

BIRD OF THE YEAR 2026

BLACK HARRIER

(Circus maurus)

KEY LANDSCAPES

Black Harriers depend on extensive, open, and intact ecosystems. Their core breeding areas are within the **Cape Floristic Region**, one of the world's famed biodiversity hotspots. Important habitats within the Cape Floristic Region include **strandveld, fynbos and renosterveld**, while **grassland habitats** in the **Eastern Cape, Lesotho** and the **Free State** are also important for the species.

Black Harriers are considered a **flagship species** because they only breed in large, connected natural areas. This means protecting them also helps protect many other species.

Renosterveld is a key breeding habitat within the Cape Floristic Region, but is also one of the **most threatened habitats** in South Africa (and in fact, the world!), with up to **95% of its area already transformed for agricultural use**.

HUNTING STRATEGIES

Unlike many raptors, Black Harriers **hunt using both sight and sound.** It flies low over vegetation, watching and listening for movement below, and makes use of a **special facial disc** that helps **amplify and direct** sound to its ears.

This hunting style is **similar to that of owls**, which is why harriers are sometimes referred to as **'day owls.'**

DIET

The Black Harrier is a **rodent specialist**, feeding mainly on **mice** and **other small mammals**, although it **also takes small birds** and especially **quail**.

HANS HOHEISEN charitable trust

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA

For more information visit: www.birdlife.org.za

Created By JENNIFER GEORGE

DE LOSKOP

text and photos by Derek Engelbrecht

To most of us living in Polokwane, the distinctive outline of Loskop Hill is a familiar landmark on the plains north of the city. Rising some 350 m above the surrounding plains of the northern Polokwane Plateau, the hill is visible from as far afield as Blouberg, the Soutpansberg and the Wolkberg. Between 2007 and 2016, I spent considerable time conducting research on Al3 De Loskop, but my work was confined to the plains below the hill, which lies on a neighbouring farm. I had seen Loskop from virtually every angle, yet had never viewed it from one of the Polokwane Plateau's most prominent hilltops.

While studying larks at Al3 De Loskop, I would often find myself gazing at Loskop and wondering what birds might call its slopes and summit home. Nearly 20 years after I first began visiting the area regularly, the opportunity finally arose to explore the hill itself—and it was one I certainly wasn't going to miss. Avid birder Richard Schulenberg invited Birdlife Polokwane to visit

Below Loskop Hill viewed from the plains below .

Above A pair of Groundscraper Thrushes in a clearing at the farmsstead set us off to a good start.

the farm with the express purpose of identifying which bird species are on Loskop Hill. To increase our chances of finding birds, Richard strategically placed water bowls at several points along the track leading to the summit.

So, on 15 August 2026, 21 of us set off for De Loskop. I got a fright when my car started beeping an unfamiliar sound, but it turned out that it was warning me that my car's traction control system was activated – the temperature gauge registered the outside temperature as a balmy 2°C!!

Upon our arrival, Richard welcomed us, and we quickly hatched a plan to make the most of the day. We opened our birding account with some birds around the farmstead, which included the likes of Southern Red-billed, Southern Yellow-billed, African Grey Hornbill, Spectacled Weaver, Groundscraper and Kurrichane Thrush, Namaqua Dove, Common (African) Hoopoe, Black-collared Barbet, White-fronted Bee-eater, and Magpie Shrike, to name a few.

Left Two Cape Vultures contemplating when to leave their roost .

We then headed for the hill but briefly stopped at the start of the ascent to see what a fallow field and adjacent bush had to offer. We added Zitting Cisticola, White-throated Robin-Chat (the first of many), Black-backed Puffback, Southern Black Tit, and an uncooperative Pearl-spotted Owlet.

We then drove to the neck, where we enjoyed some coffee and a quick breakfast. Our opening treat was a small group of Cape Vultures leaving their roost, trying to find a thermal – easier said than done when it is only about 10°C! A flowering Coral Tree resulted in a constant stream of sunbirds, mainly White-bellied and Marico, as well as opportunistic nectarivores such as bulbuls, tits, and canaries. A pair of Black-winged Kites soaring at a great height above the "kop" looked strangely out of place here.

After our caffeine boost, we walked along a track to the eastern side of the hill. On the way, we recorded Southern Boubou, Grey-headed Bushshrike, Long-billed Crombec, White-browed Scrub Robin, and two apalis species, Bar-throated and Yellow-breasted Apalis, both of which generated SABAP2 ORFs. A mystery bird at the summit being mobbed by Mocking Cliff Chats and a Streaky-headed Seedeater eventually turned out to be a Natal Spurfowl perched in a low bush. We counted at least four Mocking Cliff Chats, and judging by their aggressive chasing and singing and counter-singing, all was not well in their neighbourhood.

We then returned to the neck and followed another track. This rewarded us with Common Scimitarbill, Green Woodhoopoe, Bleating Camaroptera (Grey-backed form), Golden-tailed and Cardinal Woodpeckers, Sombre Greenbul (SABAP2 ORF), numerous Yellow-bellied Greenbuls (SABAP2 ORF) enjoying Richard's bird baths, and a Bushbuck. A surprise, but perhaps not unexpected, was a Black Stork, which likely calls the Loskop cliffs home.

All our birding up to this point was on the south-facing side of the hill, so we decided to work the northern slopes a bit. The orographic effect on the vegetation was immediately visible, even on such a relatively small hill. By then, it was much warmer, and bird activity had slowed, but we found numerous

Below Yellow-breasted Apalis was one of several species that generated SABAP2 ORFs.

Above The Streaky-headed Seedeaters enjoyed Richard's water bowls .

estrildids foraging along the track, including Blue Waxbill, Jameson's Firefinch, and Green-winged Pytilia. We came upon a bird party, with the main protagonists being Southern Black Tits (surprised?), Black-backed Puffbacks (surprised?), and Yellow-breasted Apalis (surprised?).

Further along the track, we saw some delightful White-crested Helmetshrikes. Although we trawled for Striped Pipit at various potentially suitable spots on the day, we were rewarded with only a brief sighting of one bird, but it is good to know they are there. Walking back to the cars in the neck, a lone Brown Snake Eagle flew by.

Although my party had to leave, some others explored the lowlands a bit, and they were rewarded with some returning migrants, notably Red-breasted and Lesser Striped Swallow, but also Pearl-breasted Swallow, as well as good views of a Black-chested Snake Eagle carrying a snake! A small group of Southern White-crowned Shrikes saw us drawing a line for the outing. When consolidating the various checklists, we ended with a respectable total of 98 species for the morning.

Our thanks go to Richter and Marcia for arranging the logistics, and the Schulenburgs, especially Richard, for allowing us access to visit this very special landmark.

Author email: faunagalore@gmail.com

Below Usually only heard, this Acacia Pied Barbet briefly paused for a photo.

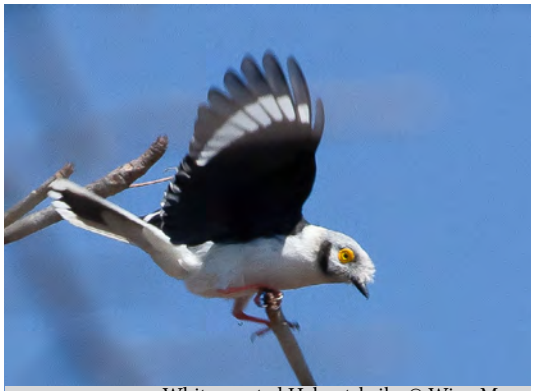
De Loskop collage

Loskop Hill in 2°C © Derek Engelbrecht.

© Derek Engelbrecht.

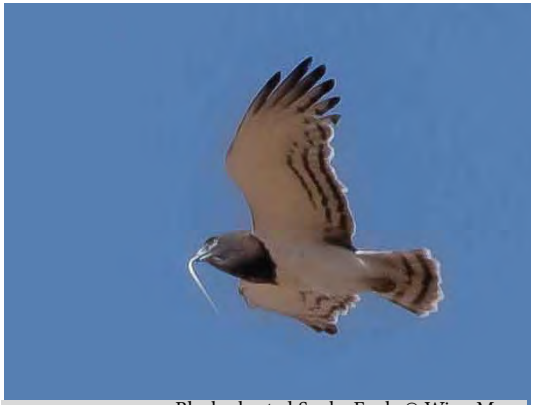
View from Loskop Hill © Derek Engelbrecht.

Mountain Aloes and Euphorbias © Julia Friskin.


White-crested Helmetshrike © Wian Marx.

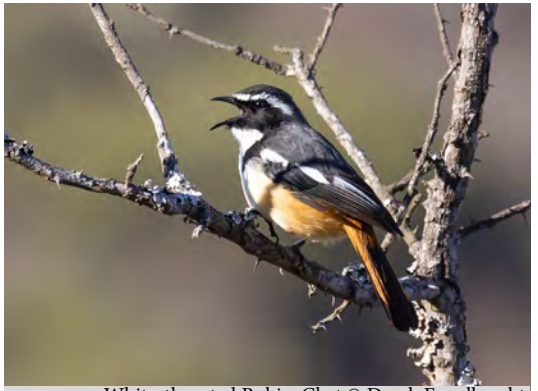
© Derek Engelbrecht.

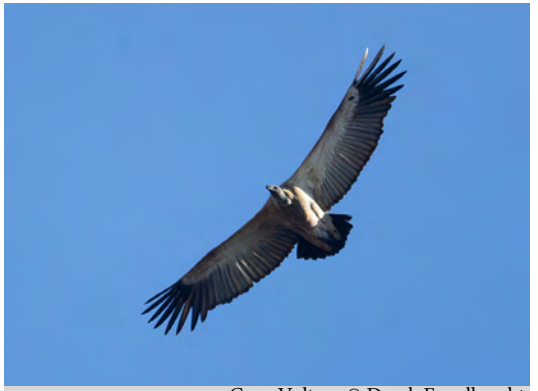
Black Stork © Derek Engelbrecht.


Black-chested Snake Eagle © Wian Marx.

Bushbuck © Derek Engelbrecht.

Black-winged Stilt © Wian Marx.


White-throated Robin-Chat © Derek Engelbrecht.


Cape Vulture © Derek Engelbrecht.

For the love of birds, and their future

KNYSNA TURACOS JO GROBLER

AFRICAN JACANA THINUS VAN STADEN

"Birding has brought me great joy over the years, from quiet garden moments with a Cape Robin-Chat, to the call of a Fiery-necked Nightjar on a summer night, to the flash of a Crimson-breasted Shrike in the bushveld. Each encounter has deepened my appreciation for South Africa's birds and wild places.

I want to give back and help ensure that species such as the Botha's Lark, African Penguin, and Secretarybird continue to inspire future generations. That is why I have chosen to leave a legacy gift to BirdLife South Africa – so that the wonder of birds endures.

Leaving a gift in my will is my way of protecting habitats, supporting research, addressing threats to birds, and ensuring that the joy of birding continues beyond my lifetime."

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA | Giving Conservation Wings

Thinking about the future of birds?

After taking care of your loved ones, you might consider leaving a gift in your will to BirdLife South Africa. Even a small portion can help ensure that birds – and the joy of birding – endure for generations to come.For more information, visit **birdlife.org.za/support-us/leave-a-legacy/**

ROBERTS 8 WISH LIST

Derek Engelbrecht
roberts8revision@gmail.com

Do you have any unpublished data, observations, images or sound recordings of any of the species below you'd like to share with the world? Please email me at roberts8revision@gmail.com.

Southern Crested Guineafowl
- Showing behaviour
- Habitat photos

Brown-backed and Green-backed Honeybirds
- Habitat
- Interspecific interaction and other behaviour
- Handheld images
- Diet

Flufftails (all southern African species)
- Nests, eggs, chicks, and different age categories
- Behaviour
- Diet
- Typical habitat

Bearded Vulture
- Typical habitat
- Feeding or dropping bones
- Interesting behaviour

Martial Eagle
- Photos showing diet
- Photos showing behaviour, interactions, birds at nests, nestlings, etc.
- Photos of nests, eggs, or nestlings.
- Photos showing behaviour and diet

Recently published species accounts

Chestnut Weaver
Green Tinkerbird (update)
Double-banded Courser
African Finfoot (update)
Monteiro's Hornbill (update)
White-chested Alethe

Verreaux's Eagle

Regulars

Birds in Art

Verreaux's Eagle

Text and Artwork

Willem van der Merwe

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:

DEVIANT ART

Verreaux's Eagle (*Aquila verreauxii*), was named for French naturalist Jules Verreaux (pronounced "vero"), who visited southern Africa in the 19th century and collected the type specimen of this eagle species for the French Academy of Sciences. It is also called the Black Eagle, especially in South Africa, but this name might confuse it with other black eagle species occurring elsewhere. In Afrikaans, it is called a "Witkruisarend" (translated as White-rumped Eagle), but the white rump is not always visible. It is striking, though, if the bird is seen from above in flight.

This is one of the most impressive and iconic eagles in Africa. It is among the largest, growing to a length of 96 cm from beak to tail, and with a wingspan that can reach 200–280 cm. It is lighter than it looks, weighing on average 4.2 kg, but some females (the larger sex) reach 5.8 kg. Adult birds are striking jet black, with a contrasting white rump that stretches into a Y-shape over the back and shoulders. There are also pale panels in the wings, lightest towards the wingtips, visible when the birds are in flight. They have yellow feet, ceres (the fleshy skin at the base of the bills), eyebrows, and rings around the black eyes. Juveniles are quite different, with plumage a mottling of blacks, browns, and whites, a golden crown, and a ginger or rufous rump and upper back. They attain full adult plumage over about 5-6 years.

Verreaux's Eagle has a very specialised way of life. They are associated with rocky hills and mountains, where they feed almost exclusively on Rock Hyraxes. These conveniently sized chunks of meat are also targeted by many other predators. An adult eagle couple typically catches and eats one medium-sized hyrax per day between them. You can imagine the heavy toll this takes on hyrax populations, but luckily, these

Below A stooping Verreaux's Eagle, showing the white rump or "wit kruis" (Afrikaans) © Warwick Tarboton.

Above Head profile of an adult © Derek Engelbrecht.

Above A nest containing two eggs and some fresh green leaves for lining © Warwick Tarboton.

strange little mammals breed rapidly enough to offset the predation. Hyraxes are most often caught by surprise while they bask in the sun; the eagle will swoop rapidly over the hillside, grab the hyrax, and quickly kill it with its extremely powerful claws. When hyraxes can't be caught, the eagles target other small mammals like monkeys, rodents, small carnivores, or even small antelopes. They also eat a variety of birds, and even on occasion termites, as do almost everything in Africa when the winged alates are swarming. Despite farmers' fears, they've only been observed eating domestic lambs on a couple of occasions, often when the lambs were already dead.

Verreaux's Eagles make extensive use of the updrafts of warm air around the mountain slopes and rock outcrops. These rising columns of air enable the eagles to soar almost effortlessly, hardly needing to flap a wing at all for many hours. They are most often spotted soaring like this. When not, they typically perch conspicuously on a big rock, like in my painting. From here, they can both see much of their territory and be seen by potential intruders.

Overall, Verreaux's Eagles respect each other's territories, and conflicts are rare. Home range size varies from about 10 km² in the productive Matobo Hills of Zimbabwe to over 65 km² in the Magaliesberg and Drakensberg of South Africa. While adults stick to their territories, juveniles range widely in search of suitable living spaces. Settled adults use a display flight that includes soaring, tumbling, and side-to-side swaying. Males and females may soar together, making circles or figures-of-eight over their territories. A very spectacular display is when two birds lock their claws together and tumble precipitously out of the sky, dislodging and swooping up again at the last minute – though one time a pair of eagles doing this landed in the sea! This is also done aggressively between a resident bird and an intruder.

The nests of these eagles are almost always built on cliffs, from sticks and twigs, forming an often huge, bulky structure. The eggs are laid on top of this. The rocks around the nest are streaked white with the eagles' droppings. A behaviour that this eagle and some related species are notorious for is so-called Cainism, in which typically two chicks hatch, some days apart, and the elder, stronger chick kills its sibling. This happens almost always; even on the rare occasions when the older chick doesn't kill the younger, it will dominate the food so that the other one starves to death. But there are very rare occasions where two chicks survive to fledging. Chicks are also sometimes threatened by other predators, and the eagle parents have been seen to drop sticks on them to drive them away! The eaglets fledge at 90 to 100 days. For 45 to 50 days, the parents still feed the fledgling, but then it is responsible for feeding itself. It still flies with its parents for six months before seeking its own territory. This allows the adults to breed every year. But only 40–50% of breeding attempts result in a successfully fledged chick. An eagle that survives to adulthood can expect to live for about 16 years.

Currently, these eagles still occur widely across sub-Saharan Africa wherever suitable habitat exists; they appear rarely in the Middle East, from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, like any large eagle, they occur few and far between, so that their global population numbers only in the tens of thousands. Still, their habitats are fairly secure, and they don't suffer much from human activities or persecution. If the wild hills of Africa and their hyraxes survive in fairly decent numbers, then so should these magnificent eagles.

Author email: willemsvandermerwe@gmail.com

Reflections

Birding in SANParks

Chris Patton has worked for SANParks for three decades. He is also a birder and shares his memories and insights on birding in National Parks for readers to enjoy and perhaps use to plan trips to the various parks.

Seeking Higher Ground

Golden Gate Highlands National Park Birding Memories and Insights Part 2 – The Loop Roads, Highlands Mountain Retreat, the Vulture Hide, and east to the Basotho Cultural Village

Chris Patton

In the previous edition of *The Lark*, I shared reflections on birding at Golden Gate Highlands National Park's main rest camps and hotel, in the west of the Park. This edition, we head east, and I'll document my memories of birding around the Park's two loop roads (the Blesbok and Oribi Loops), and the stretch of road along the R712 tar road that runs through the Park towards the Basotho Cultural Village, the Park's eastern gate, and ultimately on to Phuthaditjhaba in the eastern Free State province and Harrismith in the KwaZulu-Natal Province. It is in this section of the Park that one is most likely to find some of the prized high-altitude species that birders will most want to see.

Let's deal with them in proximate order from west to east. The first Loop heading east from both the Golden Gate Hotel and Glen Reenen Rest Camp is the Blesbok Loop, a scenic, tarred 6.7 km one-way self-drive and cycling route in the Park that, after leaving the R712, heads in the direction of Lesotho and the heights of the Maluti Mountains. It starts about 1 km east of the Glen Reenen Petrol Station and features steep hill climbs, panoramic views, Langtoon Dam, the Generaal se Kop viewing point, and, of course, plenty of local wildlife… Although

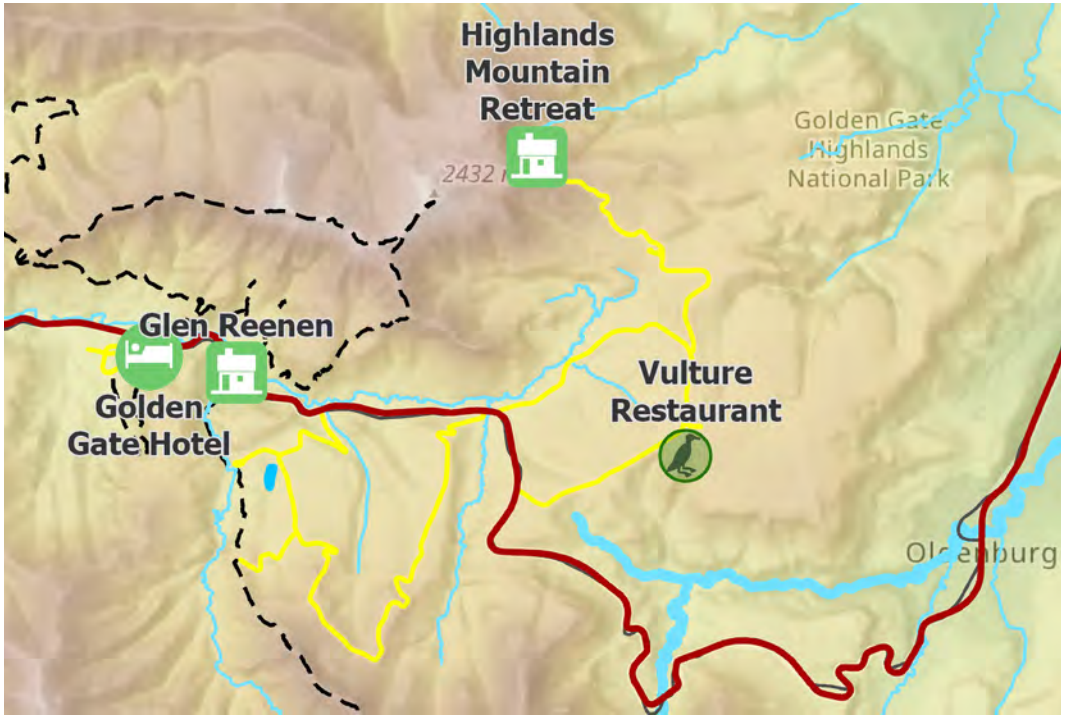
Above Generaal se Kop on the Blesbok Loop is a place to look for Mountain specials © SANParks archives.

Above Sometimes people visit the Park for other experiences – not the birds © SANParks archives.

Left A Ground Woodpecker in a roadside Ouhout at the start of the Blesbok Loop © Chris Patton.

in wintertime visitors may be more interested in a little white powder… no, not that kind!

The first part of the loop is a steep initial incline that zigzags the contours to gain rapid height. But birders, keep your eyes peeled for roadside birds during this ascent, like



Above Zoomed map of the Blesbok Loop - Note the two cul-de-sac offshoots on the Blesbok Loop – the 1st (top) to Langtoon Dam, the 2nd to a scenic viewpoint.

Cape and Sentinel Rock Thrushes, Mountain Wheatears, Buff-streaked Chats, and Ground Woodpeckers.

Readers traversing this Loop should pay attention to the two cul-de-sac roads along the route, as both lead to rewarding birding opportunities. The first takes one to an aerial viewpoint overlooking Langtoon Dam, named after the African Jacanas, which are perhaps not the waterbirds one would expect to find in such a high-altitude location. The access road fords a stream, where Levaillant's Cisticolas can be expected. From the elevated vantage point at the end of the cul-de-sac, visitors should hear Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warblers from the reedbeds below (it's amazing how the sound travels in the mountain theatre). Common Moorhen, and like at the dam near the hotel, African Rail can often be heard too, while a selection of weavers and bishops, the freshwater cormorants, African Black Duck, African Darter, African Jacana, Giant Kingfisher, Little Grebe, and the odd heron should be on view.

Above Lazy Cisticolas can be found on the cul-de-sac to the western viewpoint along the Blesbok Trail © Dries de Wet.

Top A Yellow Bishops are found all year round, but not always in breeding plumage © Chris Patton.

The second cul-de-sac takes one to a viewpoint offering breathtaking views of a mountain valley, but the road hugs a watercourse and is great for Wailing and Lazy Cisticolas, the former offering good contrast with the Levaillant's Cisticolas just a few hundred metres further down the slope. In summer, Red-collared Widowbirds and Yellow Bishops will be obvious, and are still there in the winter months, just in more sombre plumage. Cape Grassbird and Bush Blackcap are other possibilities.

Returning to the Loop proper, the road banks against the steep mountain slopes of the Maluti Mountain Range and with patience, this is a place to look for Drakensberg Rockjumpers. African Rock Pipit is another target on this stretch, and Rock Kestrels, Alpine and African Black Swifts should be seen, while with good timing Black Stork, Verreaux's Eagle, and Bearded Vulture can also be seen soaring overhead.

There is another viewpoint where the road veers left and descends the mountainside into the valley below. This offers views of a peak known as Generaal se Kop, a throwback to Boer War activity of yesteryear. While it is best regarded for its spectacular views, it was also where I was treated to a wonderful surprise in December 2007 when a Yellow-breasted Pipit alighted at this very spot. I'd seen this species before in Wakkerstroom and Machadodorp, but had to work much harder than this gift sighting.

Above Bearded Vultures can be seen soaring at the highest portions of the Blesbok Loop © SANParks archives.

Right A Yellow-breasted Pipit was a wonderful surprise at Generaal se kop viewpoint © Mike Buckham.

After leaving Generaal se Kop lookout, the road descends quite rapidly down to the R712 waiting below. It is a good area to see many of the Park's antelope species, and one of my colleagues got

a nice photo of a Serval along this stretch. But for me, the bird I always associate with the descent is the Cape Longclaw, and several of these birds should flush in front of your vehicle (or bicycle) as you descend the road. But getting them to pose for a photo is incredibly difficult, and you really must be quick on the draw to capture their richly coloured throat, as this photo bears testament.

As soon as you return to the R712 in the valley bottom and continue east, it is only a short distance until the start of the Park's second Loop Road, but this time to the north of the road, away from the direction of Lesotho. This is the wonderfully named Oribi Loop, named after the beautiful antelope that were still regularly seen when I first started working for SANParks in the 1990s, but which now are a real rarity in the Park despite reintroduction efforts.

The Oribi Loop is a scenic 4.2-kilometre, one-way tarred drive located within the Park. It features open montane grasslands, sweeping distant views of the northern Drakensberg, access to Highlands Mountain Retreat, an exclusive camp, and the Park's vulture feeding hide.

The grassland around this loop is generally a lot longer, ranker and moister than that on the Blesbok Loop. African Stonechat and, in summer, the lumbering flight of breeding plumage Long-tailed Widowbirds will be the most prominent sightings, and all three South African bishop species can be seen, but it is also where one must brush up on the calls of South Africa's aerial-type cisticolas, as all five of these incredibly similar looking LBJs occur in the Park and the Oribi Loop is one of the best places for separating Wing-snapping, Cloud and Zitting in particular, but Pale-crowned and Desert can also be found in the Park.

Below African Stonechat (left) © Scott Chalmers and Long-tailed Widowbird (right) © Chris Patton are prominent species along the Oribi Loop

Above Good luck trying to identify aerial-type cisticolas on sight alone © Chris Patton.

The nomadic and eruptive Common Quail are regularly heard calling along the Loop, but one of my most unexpected and memorable experiences on the Oribi Loop took place on the 21st of November 2008. I was due back in Pretoria (mainly because it was my wife's birthday), but I had stayed overnight at either Glen Reenen or the Hotel; I can't remember which. On my way home, I thought I'd quickly drive the Oribi Loop. It was early in the morning, much earlier than one would normally traverse this route… the grass was wet with dew, and as I was drifting along in the car, I saw a buttonquail in the road ahead of me doing that curious freeze walk of theirs. I could see immediately this one was a little different to the Common (then Kurrichane) Buttonquail I knew from the Kruger National Park and the Highveld, with a darker appearance and a ginger head… As I edged closer

Above Grey-winged Francolin on the natural earth rooftops of Highlands Mountain Retreat cottages © Chris Patton.

to the bird, it took flight, displaying a clear black V-shaped rump, and I'd just had a lucky and rare sighting of a Black-rumped Buttonquail. Sadly, when I got back to Pretoria, it didn't count in my wife's eyes, and I still had to lavish her with gifts.

Sleeping above the Clouds

The first turn off clockwise along the Oribi Loop leads to Highlands Mountain Retreat, the perfect getaway for visitors craving a secluded setting. The wooden cabins, tucked into the mountainside at 2200 m above sea level, are among the highest altitude accommodations in South Africa and offer unbelievable vistas of the surrounding Malutis, which seem to stretch as far as the eye can see. A great escape for the mind, body and soul. Highlands Mountain Retreat is a luxury camp home to thirteen log cabins.

The units have been designed to allow the natural earth of the mountain slopes to grow over their roofs. This means that coveys of Grey-winged Francolin can be seen foraging on the rooftops. Red-winged also occur in the Park, but the only time I've stayed in the Camp (in June 2025), I was treated to Grey-wings, as these photos illustrate.

Birds are generally scarce at these lofty altitudes, but what is seen is always interesting. Cape Buntings are always naturally inquisitive and will come right up to the units, but Drakensberg Siskins were another thing I picked up on the slopes above the units. The Cape Eagle-Owl is reportedly seen here too.

There are other birds to see on the access road into the camp, which runs for a good couple of kilometres, and things like Buff-streaked Chat stand out.

"I beg of you, monsieur, watch yourself. Be on guard. This place is full of vultures. Vultures everywhere. Everywhere!" – From Casablanca, 1942

These days, the most popular reason to go on the Oribi Loop is probably to visit the Golden Gate vulture hide to hope that the Cape Vultures and

Below Buff-streaked Chat can be seen on the road up to Highlands Mountain Retreat © Chris Patton.

Bearded Vultures are in attendance, and indeed my most memorable encounter with Bearded Vultures took place along the Oribi Loop, but a few years before the Vulture Hide was built (December 2007 to be precise). About 500 m past the current turnoff to the parking area for the Hide, the road is flanked to the left by a ridge that now hosts the Vulture Hide on the other side of its crest. I think I'm right in saying that although the hide was only built a few years later (2012), the Park was already in the habit of leaving carcasses out for the vultures at this site, but out of sight of the visiting public. As I drove, I excitedly clocked a Bearded Vulture gliding over the ridge with a long bone in its talons, and as I watched, it dropped it on the rocks below in the classic habit that we've all heard about. The photos are not the greatest, but readers can get the drift of the action: first, the bird in flight with its long bone, then descending to the rocks to feed on the marrow from the shattered bone.

BELOW The classic Bearded Vulture bone dropping and feeding on shattered bone © Chris Patton.

The turnoff to the parking area to access Golden Gate's vulture hide is a couple of hundred metres past the point where the access road to Highlands Mountain Retreat leaves/joins the Loop. Visitors then must hike the path up the hillside and over the ridge to the hide, where carcasses are regularly put out for the area's Cape and Bearded Vulture populations. It is a few hundred metres, but it is paved and firm all the way, making it accessible to wheelchair users like me. To give readers a visual image of what the access route and view from the hide look like, I've included this sequence of images on the right.

The accessible pathway up to the Vulture Hide (TOP) and the view of where the carcasses are left (MIDDLE). While vultures are hit or miss depending on the stage of decomposition of the carcasses, White-necked Ravens are more reliable (BOTTOM). All © Chris Patton.

I most recently visited the Vulture Hide earlier this year – we had a hospitality services workshop/ conference there for staff from all the parks, and three colleagues asked to join me up there rather than go ziplining or pony trekking like the others. There were three fresh eland carcasses at the hide, but probably too fresh for the vultures, and as far as scavengers go, only ravens and jackals were present, but there was an immature Black Harrier, buzzing around, with its distinctive heavy flight. I assured my colleagues, who are enthusiastic but inexperienced birders, that this was as good as, if not better than, seeing the vultures.

Other birding titbits to look out for in the summer months on the remainder of the Oribi Loop are Banded Martins and, in late summer, Amur Falcons. I mentioned seeing the Black Harrier, but there are also African Marsh Harriers in the area.

BELOW An immature Black Harrier was a highlight during a visit to the Vulture Hide earlier this year © Mike Buckham.

Road to the Basotho Cultural Village

I haven't birded this part of the Park as much as I would like, because my work or meetings are usually concentrated at the Hotel or in the Interpretation Centres at Glen Reenen, but on the few occasions I have, I have encountered some fantastic stuff. The first point of interest is the evocatively named Protea Corner… which is a scenic viewpoint and designated stop along the R712 tarred road within the Park. It features sweeping uphill mountain vistas and a local grove of proteas. A prime viewing point off the main road to spot nectar-loving birds drawn to the protea bushes, including Gurney's Sugarbirds and Malachite, Greater and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds.

The R712 then descends to lower levels, and a public gravel road provides an alternative route through the Park to the village of Kestel. There are some wetlands along this gravel route that are good

The three primary targets at Protea Corner: Gurney's Sugarbird (TOP) © Dries de Wet, Greater Double-collared Sunbird (MIDDLE) © Chris Patton and Malachite Sunbird (BOTTOM) © Daniel Thomas.

Above Grey Crowned Crane can be seen between Glen Reenen and Basotho Cultural Village © Phil Patton.

for Marsh Harrier, Grey Crowned Crane, Purple Heron and Pale-crowned Cisticola.

The 26 or so kilometres along the R712 from Glen Reenen Rest Camp (and the Kgodumodumo Dinosaur Centre – see The Lak 66) to the Basotho Cultural Village and then the Park's eastern gate is the place in the Park to look for large ground-dwelling birds, with Secretarybird, Black-headed Heron, Blue Crane, Denham's Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan, and Blue Korhaan all being possible. Southern Bald Ibises will be seen foraging (often in the company of Hadada Ibises) and can pose for great photo opportunities.

Hopefully I've given readers a taste of some of the terrific birds one can see on the Golden Gate drives… But I must also direct you to the excellent BirdLife South Africa YouTube presentation on Golden Gate Highlands National Park's birds by accomplished Free State bird expert Rick Nuttall, which is a must-watch for any bird enthusiasts wanting to maximise their birding experience in visiting the Park and will go into far more detail about the various species one can find than I share in this article. Barratt's Warbler, Fan-tailed Grassbird, Striped Flufftail, and Short-tailed Pipit are other species he documents as being found in the Park, of which I have no personal reflections from the Park myself, but which only add to the allure.

Above The Southern Bald Ibis can be seen throughout the Park, but the drive to the Basotho Cultural Village offers some good roadside photo opportunities © Chris Patton.

And if you feel that you need a lucky charm to see some of the specials that Park is home to, while in the Park, you might also want to go on a tour to visit the local Basotho Chief at the Basotho Cultural Village for some powerful muti. I mention this, and we can only pray that vulture products are not part of the

ABOVE Visiting the Basotho Cultural Village is a wonderful complimentary activity when visiting Golden Gate
© SANParks' Archives

supply, as is reported for the muti market in many other rural parts of Africa. For readers who might be unaware, vultures face a global extinction crisis primarily due to human-driven threats. Over 70% of vulture species are threatened, driven heavily by intentional and accidental poisoning, illegal trade for traditional medicine, electrocution on energy infrastructure, and a lack of food (hence why the Park and other destinations throughout the country have controlled feeding schemes to replace the natural food supply that would result if macro predators were able to coexist more easily alongside human populations).

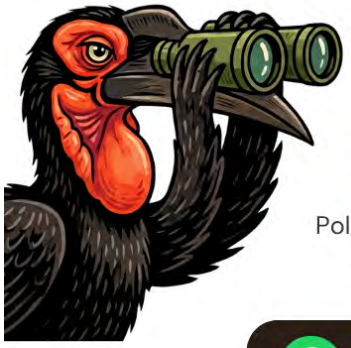
It is far more rewarding to visit places like Golden Gate, where you can still see these magnificent masters of the sky. Bearded Vultures particularly have the following ecological and modern symbolism:

- **Resilience and Survival:** Because they survive by eating what other animals discard—swallowing bones whole after dropping them from the sky to crack them—it represents turning adversity and scarcity into strength.
- **Environmental Health:** Conservationists view the Bearded Vulture as a vital indicator of a healthy mountain ecosystem and successful habitat restoration.

Author email: chris.patton@sanparks.org

Pecan Farm Guesthouse offers exceptional birding, with an impressive diversity of species recorded on and around the property. Some of the highlights include Crowned Eagle, Lemon Dove, African Wood Owl, Tambourine Dove, Gorgeous Bushshrike, and Red-faced Cisticola, among many others.

For those wishing to explore the region's rich avifauna in greater depth, guided birding excursions can be arranged with renowned local bird guide Samson Mulaudzi (+27836629960). These trips provide excellent opportunities to see sought-after species such as Bat Hawk, African Broadbill, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Olive Bushshrike, and Blue-spotted Wood Dove.



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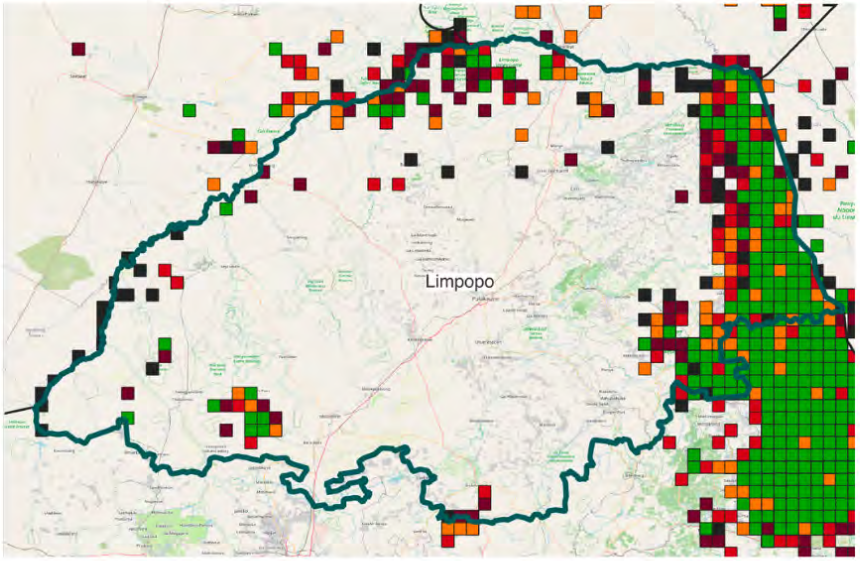

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Help us fill the gaps on our map to fully understand what is happening with our ground-hornbill population at a national scale. Send a WhatsApp message or email with as much information as possible.

Save our number to your phone as "Hornbill Hotline" to send GPS pins on the go.

WHAT TO INCLUDE

1. **GPS pin** or WhatsApp location
2. **Number of birds** in the group
3. **Age & sex** if known (adults, juveniles)
4. **Photos or video –** even distant shots help

Saving Botha's lark

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I found a baby bird ... now what?

Is the bird in immediate danger?
Traffic, pets or people

Yes

Move or shepherd it to a safe location.
It is OK to handle the baby bird, the parents won't abandon it if touched by humans.

No

Contact a wildlife rehabilitator, the SPCA or a veterinary surgeon for advice?
Do not feed or give it water; place the bird in a dark box with ventilation and some padding for warmth.

Is the bird bleeding or visibly injured?
Laboured breathing; weeziness when breathing; appearing sleepy/drowsy; puffed-up feathers; flopping

Yes

No

What does it look like?

Hatchling to about 3 days old; Chick naked or it may have down; eyes closed.

Nestling, 4-16 days old; Eyes open, initially as slits; body and flight feathers emerging but feather sheaths still visible.

Fledgling; may flutter or fly short distances, hops or shuffles on the ground; wings and tail short.

Can you see the nest?

Yes

If possible, return the chick to its nest. If not, follow the instructions under 'No' or contact a wildlife rehabilitator, the SPCA or a veterinary surgeon for advice.

No

Construct an artificial nest, fill it with grass or natural soft lining and place near the nest; monitor the nest from a distance to see if the parents attend to the chick.

Is it in immediate danger?

Yes

Move or shepherd it to a safe location; keep cats, dogs and people away

No

Leave the bird where you found it, the parents know where it is and will continue to look after it.

The plumage, wing formula, and measurements of the White-chested Alethe

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

email: faunagalore@gmail.com

The aim of this note is to describe the plumage and wing structure and to provide biometric data for three females and one male White-chested Alethe collected in Malawi and housed in the Ditsong Museum of Natural History. An additional adult male specimen, collected at Inhamitanga in the coastal forests of Mozambique, was available for examination of wing length only. All three Malawi specimens were collected at elevations of approximately 1,800–2,000 m in northern Malawi. Biometric data are presented in Table 1.

The specimen tags describe the legs as pale mauve and the soles of the feet as yellowish.

The wing formulae recorded for the four specimens are:

- p7 = p6 > p5 > p8 > p4 > p3 > p9 > p2 > p1 > p10
- p6 > p5 ≥ p7 > p8 > p4 > p3 > p9 > p2 > p1 > p10
- p7 = p6 ≥ p5 > p8 ≥ p4 > p3 > p9 > p2 > p1 > p10
- p6 = p5 ≥ p7 > p4 > p8 > p3 > p9 > p2 > p1 > p10

A consolidated wing formula for four specimens is: is therefore: **p6 ≥ p7 ≥ p5 > p8 ≥ p4 > p3 > p9 > p2 > p1 > p10**.

Weak emarginations are present on the outer vane of primaries p4–p9, with the deepest emargination occurring on p7, followed by its neigbours p6 and p8. In the single adult male from Mozambique, p5 was the longest primary (88 mm), followed by p6 (86 mm), p7 and p8 (84 mm), p9 (65 mm), and p10 (36 mm). Primary p10 is markedly reduced, measuring approximately 41% of the length of the longest primary and 55% of the length of p9. The wing point is formed by p6, although p7 and/or p5 may occasionally form the wing point.

BIRD BRIEFS

BIRD BRIEFS

Table 1. Biometric data for White-chested Alethes in the collection of the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History. For the three females, the data are presented as mean (range). The data are presented for a single intact male specimen, except for wing length, which is for two adult males.

Parameter	Female	Male
Wing Length	104.0 mm (102.0–105.0)	104.0 mm, 106.0 mm
Tail Length	70.7 mm (68.0–73.0)	72.0 mm
Culmen	21.0 mm (20.1–21.8)	20.7 mm
Culmen-Nare	11.4 mm (10.7–12.0)	11.5 mm
Bill Depth	5.6 mm (5.2–6.1)	5.6 mm
Bill Width	4.9 mm (4.1–5.6)	4.8 mm
Tarsus Length	34.1 mm (33.8–***34.5)***	33.7 mm
Hind Claw Length	8.6 mm (8.5–8.7)	9.5 mm
p10/p9	55.1% (53.9–56.6)	58.6%
Total Length (unsexed)	186.5 mm (172.0–204)	

RIGHT Wing of an adult male, showing the emarginations on pp4–9.

BIRD BRIEFS

Ventral (TOP) and dorsal (BOTTOM) views of White-chested Alethes from Malawi. The male is second from the right, the other specimens being the females.

Bird Briefs

Bird Briefs

All three Malawi specimens showed fine scalloping on the chest. In contrast, examination of images of lowland birds from Mozambique indicates that their underparts are clean white and lack this scalloping. The absence of scalloping on the underparts was formerly used to distinguish the lowland populations as the subspecies *xuthura* (Clancey and Lawson 1969). This treatment, however, was not supported by major taxonomic authorities, and the species is currently regarded as monotypic.

Acknowledgements. I wish to thank the collection manager at the the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History, Mpho Malematja, and Mpho Kalo, for granting access to the collection to examine skins.

References

Clancey P. A., and W. J. Lawson (1969). A new race of White-breasted Alethe from Mozambique. Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club 89(1):4–6.

LEFT View of the underparts, showing the scalloping on the chest of this specimen from northern Malawi.

Bird Briefs

Bird Briefs

Photoblog: The supreme skulker—Striped Flufftail

TEXT AND PHOTOS Hugh Chittenden

email: hugh@rarebirds.co.za

The Striped Flufftail is definitely one of the more difficult bird species to glimpse in southern Africa. If you've seen a Striped Flufftail, consider yourself one of the few lucky ones. Apart from being extremely shy and secretive, they inhabit damp upland grasslands and rarely come out into the open! Fortunately, they give their presence away by their haunting, mournful calls. This series of photos shows a relaxed adult male. Note the plain chestnut tail, which gave rise to an alternative common name, the Red-tailed or Chestnut-tailed Flufftail. This is the only flufftail in southern Africa with a plain chestnut tail.

BELOW So, you may ask, do flufftails really have fluffy tails? Yes, they do as these wispy-looking tail feathers of museum specimens show. Male (left), female (right).

Both sexes incubate.

ABOVE Frontal view of an adult male.

Above Lateral view of an adult male.

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Above An adult male stretching his wings.

Bird Briefs

Observations of the Eurasian subspecies of the Great Egret in South Africa

Vincent Parker

email: vinparker@yahoo.com

The Eurasian subspecies of the Great Egret (*Ardea alba alba*) is a migrant. Birds which breed in Europe winter in southcentral Europe, Africa, the Middle East and South Asia (McCrimmon et al. 2025). That the migrants reach as far south as South Africa, specifically the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, which forms the northern extremity of the Northern Cape Province, bordering Botswana and Namibia, is confirmed by two records with supporting photographs that were submitted to the second Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2).

Figure 1 shows a bird photographed by John Randell at an undisclosed location within the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in January 2021, and Figure 2 shows another photographed by Otto Schmidt near Twee Rivieren in March 2026. The nominate subspecies *alba* can be differentiated from the African subspecies (*A. a. melanorhynchos*), which is resident in southern Africa, by the length of the gape, which extends well beyond the eye in *melanorhynchos*, and only marginally, if at all, beyond the eye in nominate *alba* (McCrimmon et al. 2025). On that basis, the birds depicted in Figures 1 and 2 appear to be of the migratory Eurasian subspecies *alba*.

From 2007 to the present, all of the records of Great Egret in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park submitted to SABAP2 fall in the austral summer (SABAP2 Great Egret), but the co-existence there of the southern African resident subspecies *melanorhynchos* is confirmed by another photograph contributed by John Randell in January 2021 (Figure 3), showing the gape extension which is typical of that subspecies.

It is unfortunate that the current field guides for southern Africa list the extension of the gape beyond the eye as diagnostic

BIRD BRIEFS

Figure 1. Great Egret (*Ardea alba alba*) at Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in January 2021 © John Randell.

Figure 2. Great Egret (*A a alba*) at Twee Rivieren in March 2026 © Otto Schmidt.

Figure 2. Great Egret (*A. a. melanorhynchos*) at Nossob in January 2021 © John Randell.

for separating the Great Egret and the Yellow-billed Egret (*Ardea brachyrhyncha*), because it is not true. Rather, the gape extension, or lack thereof, can be useful for separating migrant Great Egrets from Europe from the resident subspecies in this region.

Acknowledgements. John Randell and Otto Schmidt made their photographs available for reproduction in this article.

Reference

McCrimmon Jr., D. A., J. C. Ogden, G. T. Bancroft, G. D. Engelbrecht, G. M. Kirwan, D. C. Lumpkin, P. C. Frederick, P. Pyle, and P. F. D. Boesman (2025). Great Egret (*Ardea alba*), version 2.0. In Birds of the World (G. D. Engelbrecht, B. K. Keeney, and G. M. Kirwan, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.greegr.02

Grit eating by Red-winged Starlings

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

email: faunagalore@gmail.com

A few years ago, I saw two Red-winged Starlings clinging to a brick wall on the campus of the University of Limpopo, shortly after dark. Initially, I thought they were targeting insects attracted to a nearby light, but closer observation revealed they were actively scraping and pecking at the mortar between the bricks, presumably to ingest grit.

On 22 May 2026, I again noticed about 20 Red-winged Starlings clinging to a wall of one of the high-rise buildings on the campus. Fortunately, it was World Biodiversity Day, so I ran to my office to get my camera so I could take a few pictures. As I walked around to get a better view, I came upon a murmuration (or should I rather say a "mural") of starlings. There must have been at least 50 birds coming and going. The

BELOW A mural of Red-winged Starlings.

ABOVE A distant perspective of the flock gathering grit from the brickwork.

birds were actively pecking and scraping at the wall's mortar. This feeding frenzy persisted for approximately 20 minutes before activity diminished, concluding within 25 minutes. It's not known how long this has been happening before I noticed it though.

While grit consumption is well-documented in birds, the mass gathering to feed on the grit seems unusual or unrecorded. Large winter foraging flocks have been recorded in the Overberg region, though these were driven by a temporary caterpillar irruption (Weiersbye, 2025). The mass gathering reported here is unusual in that the birds were consuming grit, a resource that is constantly and readily available. Also, all the starlings gathered on the wall of one building, despite there being many other similar-looking brick-and mortar buildings around. Incidentally, this is not the same wall where I first observed a pair collecting grit a few years ago.

Reference

Weiersbye, I. (2025). Red-winged Starling - some observations. The Lark 59:86–92.

Pied Kingfisher takes a Levaillant's Cisticola

TEXT AND PHOTOS Eckhart J. Buchmann

email: ejbuchmann@gmail.com

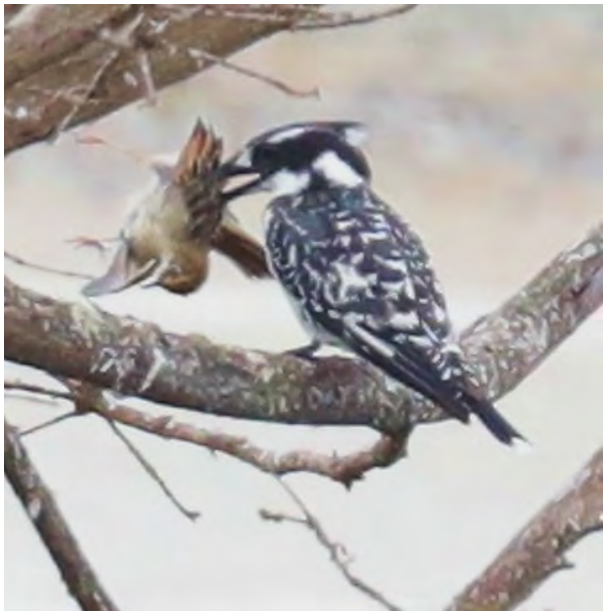
In the early afternoon on 9 June 2026, I parked my vehicle at the head of a small bay in Midmar Dam near Howick, KwaZulu-Natal. I noticed a Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*), in typical fashion for its species, repeatedly battering its prey on a low branch of an exotic Swamp Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*). To my surprise, the prey item was not a fish, but a bird. My photographs later showed that this was a female kingfisher battering an adult Levaillant's Cisticola (*Cisticola tinniens*), I observed and photographed this behaviour for 21 minutes, up to the first attempt to swallow the cisticola. Given that the tree was 67 metres from my vehicle as measured on Google Earth, the images are cropped and grainy but demonstrate the bird and its behaviour sufficiently well, as shown in the figures. The cisticola was battered into a mangled, wet and flaccid potential meal at 12 minutes. During this process, the kingfisher left its perch at least twice, possibly to dunk its prey in water to facilitate swallowing. At 20 minutes, the first attempt to swallow the cisticola failed, and the kingfisher then continued to manipulate its prey. At 21 minutes, personal commitments forced me to leave the scene, with no record of what happened further.

Pied Kingfishers are not known to prey on birds, and there appear to be no credible records of this behaviour in the ornithological literature. My search for original research articles found no such descriptions. My hand search of authoritative ornithological texts with comprehensive species descriptions, including diet, found no mention (with one exception, described below) of these kingfishers preying on birds (Cramp 1985, Woodall 2001, Fry 1988, Fry et al. 1992, Hustler and Dean 2005, and Woodall 2020). Pied Kingfishers are primarily piscivorous, while also taking frogs, tadpoles, aquatic invertebrates, and even terrestrial invertebrates. The exception is an unreferenced

mention by Clancey (1992) in his illustrated monograph on African kingfishers, where he writes of "a recent interesting record for the Zambesi region (at Katondwe, Zambia) of a Pied Kingfisher carrying a small sandpiper in its bill". Nothing more.

Regarding my observation at Midmar Dam, questions remain. How did the kingfisher catch the cisticola? Does this individual have a peculiar predilection for catching birds? Did it eventually manage to swallow its avian prey, flight feathers and all? The latter question may be answered by considering the smaller Brown-hooded Kingfisher (*Halcyon albiventris*), which is known to occasionally take birds such as waxbills and cisticolas (Turpie, 2005). Thus, it should be possible for a Pied Kingfisher to swallow a small bird. Nevertheless, the observed duration of 21 minutes of battering and manipulation seems abnormally long. Clearly, this was no easy task. This may be the first detailed account of the Pied Kingfisher taking avian prey. I would welcome

Above The Pied Kingfisher holding the Levaillant's Cisticola in its bill.



Above Battering its prey on the branch.

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knowing of any experience or source that describes similar observations for this species.

Acknowledgement. Adam Riley, for allowing me access to his ornithological library.

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Above Trying to swallow the cisticola, head first.

Bird Briefs

Bird Briefs

An unusual encounter while atlasing: Pied Starling preying on a presumed Peters' Worm Snake

Martin Potgieter and Melanie Potgieter

email: potgiemp@gmail.com

One of the great pleasures of taking part in the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) is that almost every atlasing trip produces something memorable. It may be an out-of-range species, an unusual interaction between birds, a wetland alive with waterbirds, an unexpected mammal sighting, or simply a spectacular landscape. Whatever the case, there is usually something that makes the day memorable.

Such a moment occurred on 2 November 2025 while we were conducting a SABAP2 full-protocol survey between Clarens and Fouriesburg in the eastern Free State.

The surrounding landscape comprised typical eastern Free State high-altitude grassland, dissected by sandstone ridges, with the Little Caledon River flowing over a broad sandstone pavement below (Figure 1). As we made our way slowly across the bridge (28.6114° S, 28.3021° E), our attention was suddenly caught by a Pied Starling (*Lamprotornis bicolor*) that flew onto a broad, flat rock slab bordering the river, carrying a small snake in its bill. It immediately began striking the snake repeatedly against the rock, pausing briefly between blows to reposition its prey, until the snake eventually stopped moving. The starling then picked up its prey and flew off, still carrying the snake.

Fortunately, we managed to obtain several photographs of the event (Figures 2a and b), although the distance prevented us from obtaining the close-up detail needed to identify the snake with confidence. The snake's small size (estimated at less than 25 cm), slender body, the locality, and overall appearance strongly suggest that it was a Peters' Worm Snake (*Leptotyphlops scutifrons*). However, because diagnostic features such as the head scales could not be examined, the identification should be regarded as tentative rather than confirmed.

Figure 1. Habitat at the observation site between Clarens and Fouriesburg, Free State. The predation event occurred on the extensive sandstone slab on the left bank of the river, illustrating the open, vegetation-free surface the Pied Starling used to subdue the snake.

Watching the sequence unfold, it appeared that the starling specifically selected the exposed sandstone slab before dispatching its prey. Whether this represented deliberate prey handling cannot be determined from a single observation, but the choice of substrate was noteworthy. The hard rock would have provided a firm surface against which the snake could be struck repeatedly, while the absence of dense vegetation would have reduced the opportunity for the snake to escape into cover. A number of bird groups are known to use hard surfaces when handling difficult prey, although we have been unable to find any published reference describing similar behaviour in Pied Starlings.

The observation naturally raises another question. Is snake predation by Pied Starling already known? A search of the available literature suggests that it is either extremely uncommon or has simply gone unreported. According to Craig (2005), it is a predominantly ground-foraging bird and stomach contents analysis showed mostly termites, ants, beetles, and other arthropods, with the occasional small lizard also recorded (Craig 2005). Likewise, Craig and Feare (2020) note

a

b

Figure 2a) Pied Starling carrying and subduing a presumed Peters' Worm Snake on a sandstone slab adjacent to the Little Caledon River between Clarens and Fouriesburg, Free State, 2 November 2025. b) Although the photograph does not permit definitive identification of the snake, its size, general appearance, and locality are consistent with Peters' Worm Snake.

that the Pied Starling is an adaptable omnivore whose animal diet includes carrion, small lizards, ticks, solifuges, centipedes and a wide variety of insects, while also feeding extensively on fruit, seeds and nectar. Neither source mentions snakes as prey, and despite searching the available

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literature, we were unable to find any prior record of Pied Starlings preying on snakes.

The ecology of the presumed prey species makes the observation even more intriguing. Peters' Worm Snake is a tiny fossorial snake that spends almost its entire life underground, feeding primarily on ants and termites, and is therefore seldom encountered on the surface.

There is, however, an interesting ecological link. Marais (2004) notes that Peters' Worm Snake has been found beneath semidry cow dung near Harrismith in the eastern Free State. Independently, Craig (2005) mentions that Pied Starlings regularly turn over dry cowpats while searching for insects and other invertebrates. Although entirely circumstantial, these two independent observations suggest a plausible mechanism by which predator and prey could encounter one another. A worm snake sheltering beneath or close to a drying cowpat could easily be exposed when a foraging Pied Starling turns the dung over in search of beetles, termites or other invertebrates.

Whether this is how our bird first encountered the snake will, of course, never be known. It is equally possible that the snake had emerged from beneath nearby stones or was moving through the surrounding grassland when it was detected. Nevertheless, the known behaviour and ecology of both species fit remarkably well with the hypothesis that the encounter resulted from the starling's normal foraging behaviour.

Whether snake predation by Pied Starlings is genuinely rare or simply seldom observed is impossible to determine. The combination of a secretive fossorial snake and a brief predation event means that opportunities to witness and photograph such behaviour are probably uncommon. Observations such as this illustrate how routine bird atlas fieldwork can occasionally provide useful insights into the natural history of even our most familiar species.

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BIRD BRIEFS

Short-toed Rock Thrush preying on a Tiny Pygmy Mouse in Namibia

TEXT AND PHOTOS Lance Robinson

email: lancerobinson.za@gmail.com

On 13 July 2026 at 17:07, at Etosha Safari Lodge, south of Etosha National Park, Namibia, an adult Short-toed Rock Thrush (*Monticola brevipes brevipes*) was observed subduing a small rodent, later identified as a Tiny Pygmy Mouse (*Mus minutoides*).

During a three-minute observation period, the thrush repeatedly struck at the mouse, in an apparent attempt to immobilise or kill it. The prey was manipulated several times and subjected to repeated blows before the bird flew off carrying the rodent securely in its bill. The thrush subsequently disappeared from view, making it impossible to determine whether the rodent was ultimately consumed.

This observation provides a noteworthy record of vertebrate predation by the Short-toed Rock Thrush, a species more commonly associated with invertebrate prey and fruits (Dean 2005, Collar 2020).

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OPPOSITE A series of images showing the Short-toed Rock Thrush processing its prey, a Tiny Pygmy Mouse.

Behaviour: Predation

Levaillants Cisticola caught, impaled, and fed on by Southern Fiscal

Thurlow Game Reserve forms part of the Midmar Dam public resort in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. The reserve comprises a large body of water surrounded by extensive wetlands and grasslands.

The area supports six species of cisticola, with Levaillant's Cisticola by far the most abundant. The reserve is also home to around a dozen Southern Fiscals, each holding territories in the area.

The image of the left shows a partially consumed Levaillant's Cisticola impaled on a thorn, suggesting that this species may form part of the Southern Fiscal's diet.

Ingrid Weiersbye • ingridw@polka.co.za (received 29 July 2026).

Plumages, Moult, and Structure: Plumages

Leucistic Crowned Lapwing

While staying at Clive's Camp in the Makalali Private Nature Reserve (Near Hoedspruit) on 7 May 2026. we saw this leucistic Crowned Lapwing. It stayed near the waterhole for the two days we were there.

Charles Hardy • charlois1044@gmail.com (received 4 August 2026).

Diet and Foraging: Diet

Crowned Eagle eating an Egyptian Goose

A juvenile Crowned Eagle has been seen in my neighbourhood on the outskirts of Tzaneen since the beginning of July 2026. On 18 July, we had a great sighting of it feeding on an Egyptian Goose it had caught in our garden.

Leigh-Ann Hoets • lhoets@hotmail.com (received 18 July 2026).

Diet and Foraging: Diet

Martial Eagle feeding on a Southern Small Spotted Genet

The image below was taken at 08:30 on 8 August 2020 along the H14 (Phalaborwa–Mopanie road) in the Kruger National Park, at approximately 23.815670° S, 31.295271° E. It shows an adult Martial Eagle feeding on a Southern Small-spotted Genet (*Genetta felina*). It is not known whether the eagle killed the genet, as this species is predominantly nocturnal, or whether it scavenged or stole the carcass from a nocturnal predator, such as an owl.

Johan Janse van Vuuren • johan.jansevanvuuren@tcrescent.co.za
(received 10 August 2026).

Bird Briefs

Interesting sightings

16 June 2026 - 15 August 2026

Share your interesting sightings seen within the Limpopo Province. Please submit your sightings to thelarknews@gmail.com and include the date, locality and a brief write-up of your sighting. Photos are welcome but will be used at the discretion of the editors.

SABAP2 Out of Range; Regional Rarity; National Rarity, †Unvetted

Compiled by Derek Engelbrecht

Non-passerines

Black Sparrowhawk - 27 June 2026. A pair seen at the Polokwane Golf Club (Jody de Bruyn).

Black-necked Grebe - 8 August 2026. One found at Rietgat farm and released (Annette van Schalkwyk).

Black Stork - 15 August 2026. One seen at De Loskop hill (Birdlife Polokwane club outing, see p.21).

Fiery-necked Nightjar - 9 August 2026. One seen over several days

Black Sparrowhawk © Derek Engelbrecht

in a garden in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

Freckled Nightjar - 29 July 2026. One calling regularly near the Mankweng Magistrate Court (Modjadji Lebepe).

Long-crested Eagle - 18 June 2026. One seen at Turfloop Nature Reserve (Prince Molokomme).

Shelley's Francolin - 4 July 2026. One seen on the Randfontein road (Annette van Schalkwyk).

Southern Bald Ibis - 25 July 2026. Two seen on the University of Limpopo golf course (Susan Dippenaar).

Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill - 28 July 2026. One seen in Welgelegen (Rupert Harris).

Red-throated Wryneck - 7 July 2026. One seen at the University of Limpopo campus (Susan Dippenaar).

Swallow-tailed Bee-eater - 27 July 2026. Several overwintering birds seen near Tzaneen (Stefan Els).

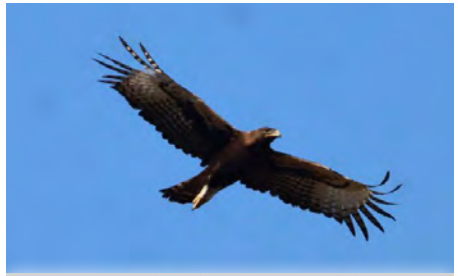
Passerines

Bar-throated Apalis - 15 August 2026. Several individuals recorded at De Loskop hill (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Crimson-breasted Shrike - 26 July 2026. A xantochroic individual seen in the Platkoppies area (Juan van den Heever).

Mocking Cliff Chat- 15 August 2026. At least four seen at De Loskop hill (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Black-necked Grebe © Annette van Schalkwyk



Long-crested Eagle © Prince Molokomme

Shelley's Francolin © Annette van Schalkwyk

Swallow-tailed Bee-eater © Stefan Els

Sombre Greenbul - 15 August 2026. One heard calling at De Loskop hill (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Striped Pipit - 15 August 2026. One individuals seen at De Loskop hill (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Yellow-bellied Greenbul - 15 August 2026. Several individuals recorded at De Loskop hill (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Yellow-breasted Apalis - 15 August 2026. Several individuals recorded at De Loskop hill (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Best of the Rest
Limpopo Province

Non-passerines

African Skimmer - 12 August 2026. One seen on the western side of the Olifants River bridge in the Kruger National Park (SA Rare Bird News Report - 13 August 2026).

South African Shelduck - 16 June 2026. Seen near Bela-Bela (Pieter Verster); 16 June 2026. A female seen north of Thabazimbi (SA Rare Bird News Report - 18 June 2026).

passerines

Capped Wheatear - 24 July 2026. One seen near the Mooiplaas reservoir in the Kruger National Park (Gavin Watson).

Crimson-breasted Shrike © Juan van den Heever

Yellow-breasted Apalis © Derek Engelbrecht

South African Shelduck © Michael Lötter

Capped Wheatear © Gavin Watson

BirdLife South Africa — Giving Conservation Wings

environmental affairs
Department: Environmental Affairs
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

HELP SAVE OUR SEABIRDS

The Mouse-Free Marion Project is a partnership between the South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and BirdLife South Africa, which established the Non-Profit Company (MFM NPC) to help restore Marion Island to its once-pristine beauty by eradicating the invasive mice plaguing the island.

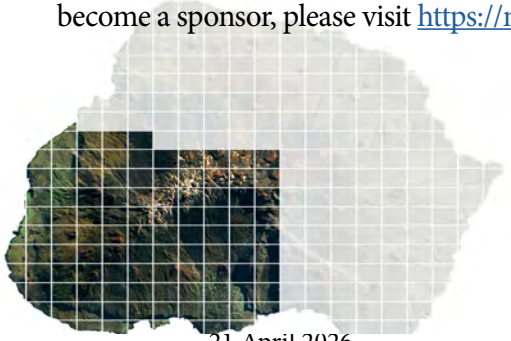
To help raise the necessary funds, please would you consider sponsoring one or more hectares of land on Marion Island.

At R1000, you can aid us in ensuring that this monumental project will be successful.

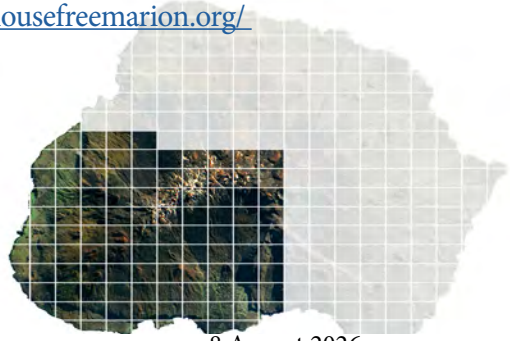
Once completed, Marion Island will be the largest island from which mice have successfully been eradicated in a single attempt.

Be a part of history, and sponsor one (or more) hectares of this beautiful oceanic gem.

For more information about this very worthwhile project and how to become a sponsor, please visit https://mousefreemarion.org/



21 April 2026
Percent of target reached: 45.3%
Sponsored Hectares: 13592 ha
Sponsors: 2717



8 August 2026
Percent of target reached: 46.4%
Sponsored Hectares: 13905 ha
Sponsors: 2755

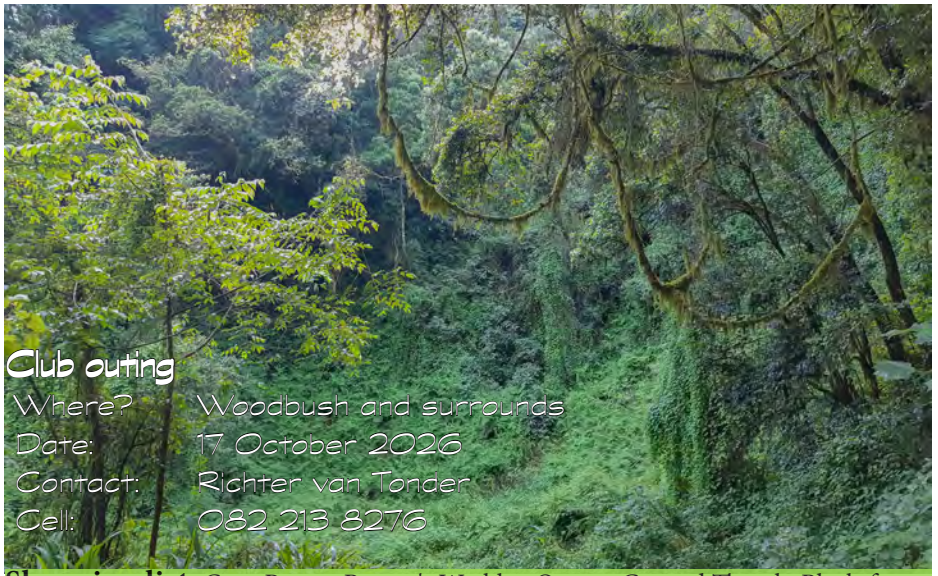
UPCOMING EVENTS

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 1 September 2026
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 6 October 2026
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Birdlife Polokwane Year-end Function
Date: 18/25 November 2026
Time: 18:30
Venue: TBA

Shopping list: Pel's Fishing Owl, Meves's Starling, Tropical Boubou, White-crowned Lapwing, Meyer's Parrot, Temminck's Courser, Kori Bustard, White-backed Night Heron, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Southern Ground Hornbill, and many more.



Shopping list: Cape Parrot, Barratt's Warbler, Orange Ground Thrush, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Brown Scrub Robin, Levaillant's Cisticola, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Cinnamon Dove, Green Twinspot and more.

All birds are equal

In 2026, the front covers of **The Lark** will be dedicated to Young Birds and the back cover to other special birds.

Green Malkoha © Hugh Chittenden.