

THE LARK

Club outing
Nylsvley

Club donation
Saving Marion Island's
Seabirds

Power larking
11 species, 1 week

Water lilies and African Pygmy Goose • White morph Levillant's Cuckoo • Interesting resightings
• Southern Black Korhaan nesting • Leucistic Magpie Shrike • Nesting Black-headed Oriole • Dusky
Lark underwing coverts • Bill deformities and aberrant feathers • Bird names: Short-toed Rock
Thrush and Short-clawed Lark • The lazy predator • Facial colour changes in breeding egrets

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 JUNE 2022

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

COVER White morph Levaillant's Cuckoo
© Mark Fox

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Sandrie De Wet joined the club outing to Nylsvley, which sprung a surprise for all.



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*The mission was simple - to see as many as possible larks around Polokwane in one week. How many did **Derek Engelbrecht** and his Swedish friends get?*



Certificate of Appreciation 29

Our club donated R5000 towards the Marion Island Mouse Eradication Project and received a certificate of appreciation.



For a lark ...



Everyone rushed to get free tick-ets © Annette Van Schalkwyk

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Editors' chirps

We are sure this issue's cover must have raised a few eyebrows and resulted in puzzled expressions. If you haven't seen this bird before, then don't worry - only a handful of people have seen it. Our cover sports an extremely rare morph of Levaiant's Cuckoo...and what a good-looking bird it is. Mark Fox was lucky enough to see this morph and get a few photos. Thank you, Mark, for choosing The Lark as your outlet of choice to share this incredibly rare sighting. This issue is packed with many interesting notes covering a variety of species and aspects of birdwatching. It shows how much there still is to learn about birds and how varied people's interests are. We have articles on two trip reports and a variety of short notes, with topics ranging from diets to the origin of bird names, underwing coverts to aberrant birds, and egrets to korhaans.

We also want to take this opportunity to say well done and thank you to all our members for your generous sponsorship of 5 hectares towards the Mouse-free Marion project (see page 29). This worthy cause aims to save our seabirds on South Africa's Prince Edward Islands by eradicating introduced mice from Marion Island. If you want to read more or donate money towards the project, you can get more details on page 100 of this issue.

A hearty welcome to our first-time authors, Mark Fox, Toni Hoenders and John Luyt. We look forward to receiving more notes from you. To all our other regular contributors, members and readers out there, please consider sending us some of your interesting observations.

Enjoy the reading.

Raelene and Derek



Nylsvley

Sandrie De Wet

Na die lekker reën van die afgelope tyd is die vloedvlakte propvol water, met duisende voëls wat wegkruip in die gras en riete. Die hele wêreld lewe van goggatjies, paddas

en selfs vissies wat dit 'n absolute paradys maak vir die voëls. Dis 'n lieflike dag en vroegoggend kom almal bymekaar by Vogelfontein waar die ernstige voëltjie-kyk begin na 'n vinnige koffie.

Die groot verskeidenheid reiers is verstommend, waaronder tientalle Ralreiers (Squacco Heron), Gewone Nagreiers (Black-crowned Night Heron), Groenrugreiers (Striated Heron),





LINKS Witrugende (White-backed Duck) was goed verteenwoordig © Jody De Bruyn.

Swartkopreiers (Black-headed Heron), Kleinwitreiers (Little Egret), Veereiers (Cattle Egret), Klein Rietreiers (Little Bittern), Bloureiers (Grey Heron), Swartreiers (Black Heron), Geelbekwitreiers (Intermediate Egret) en Rooireiers (Purple Heron) getel kan word. Dan sien ons ook nog Skoorsteenveërs

(African Sacred Ibis), Lepelaars (African Spoonbill), Glansibisse (Glossy Ibis), Rietduikers (Reed Cormorant) en talle Hamerkoppe (Hamerkop) wat sommer in groepe saam vlieg.

Tussen die watervoëls is daar onder andere Fluiteende (Fulvous Whistling Duck), Witrugende (White-backed Duck), Geelbek-

eende (Yellow-billed Duck), Nonnetjie-eende (White-faced Whistling Duck), Bruineende (Southern Pochard), Gevlekte Eende (Blue-billed Teal), Rooibekeende (Red-billed Teal), Knobbeleende (Knob-billed Duck), Grootlangtone (African Jacana), Swartriethane (Black Crake), Kleindobbertjies (Lit-

tle Grebe), Grootwaterhoenders (Common Moorhen), Groenpootruiters (Common Greenshank) en Driebandstrandkie-wiete (Three-banded Plover).

Die sangers in die riete stel nie terleur nie en ons kry onder meer Kaapse Vleisangers (Little Rush Warbler), Kaapse Riet-sangers (Lesser Swamp Warbler), Europese Rietsanger (Marsh Warbler) en 'n groot bonus - die Grootrietsanger (Great Reed Warbler).

Roofvoëls is skaarser maar ons sien darem 'n Bruinslangarend (Brown Snake Eagle), Blouvalkie (Black-winged Kite), Visarend (African Fish Eagle) en Oostelike Rooipootvalkies (Amur Falcon).

VORIGE BLADSY

HOOF FOTO Sonop by Vogelfontein in die Nylsvley Natuurreservaat © Minkie Prinsloo.

REGS, BO Tientalle reiers en ibisse van verskillende soorte was te siene gewees © Minkie Prinsloo.

REGS, MIDDEL 'n Groepie ywerige voelkykers beloer die vleiand.

REGS, ONDER 'n Jong Bosveldvisvanger (Woodland Kingfisher) © Minkie Prinsloo.



KLOKSGEWYS VAN LINKS BO Fluiteend (Fulvous Whistling Duck), Swartvlerksprinkaanvoël (Black-winged Pratincole), Ralreier (Squacco Heron), Gewone Nagreier (Black-crowned Night Heron), Grootwaterhoender (Common Moorhen) en Witvlerkflap (White-winged Widowbird). Alle fotos © Jody De Bruyn.



Ekstra spesiaal vir die dag is die Dwergrietreier (Dwarf Bittern), die Kleinkoningriethaan (Allen's Gallinule), die baie Swartvlerksprinkaanvoëls (Black-winged Pratincole), die Kleinwaterhoenders (Lesser Moorhen) en natuurlik, beste van alles die Rooi-

keelreier (Slaty Egret) wat sekerlik die hoogtepunt van die dag is.

Na 'n vinngie draai in die reserwaat met onder meer 'n Gebande Sanger (Barred Wren-Warbler) en Bruinkeelbossanger (Burnt-necked Eremomela) kom die telling op min of meer 120 te staan

aan die einde van 'n fantastiese dag.

Dankie vir 'n heerlike dag saam met ou vriende – dit was baie lekker om almal weer te sien en saam die wonder van ons voëllewe te kon aanskou.

Outeur se e-pos: san3@mweb.co.za

Bo Ongetwyfeld die hoogtepunt van die dag - 'n Rooikeelreier (Slaty Egret). Dié skaars voël in Suid Afrika was 'n lifer vir meeste wat die uitstappie meegemaak het © Minkie Prinsloo.



POWER LARKING

Around Polokwane

TEXT Derek Engelbrecht

Power larking? The Oxford Dictionary describes 'larking' as deriving great enjoyment from engaging in playful or foolish behaviour. Power larking takes this to a new level by trying to

see as many lark species as possible in a short time. This may seem foolish, but one derives a great sense of pleasure while doing it. This is what two of my Swedish friends, Per Alström and Urban Olsson, and I did from 8

to the 15th of February 2022. Let me share our week of power larking.

When someone says they want to see as many larks as possible in the shortest possible time, I will bet that most people would suggest heading

to some dry and desolate region such as the Karoo or a desert. Suggesting a savannah location such as the Polokwane Plateau would probably be near the bottom of people's list of go-to places. Let me let you in on one of



ABOVE A Rufous-naped Lark welcoming us to Polokwane © Derek Engelbrecht.

the worst kept secrets: the Polokwane Plateau must rate as one of the top lark destinations in the world! In late December 2021, we had 13 lark species in the Greater Polokwane region on the same day, all within 40 km of Polokwane! In my excitement, I texted my fellow larkophiles, Paul Donald and Per, to share this momentous occasion. Within minutes Per started enquiring about the possibility to get to South Africa - and we started hatching a plan to see as many as possible larks around Polokwane. One problem - Omikron! South Africa was on the list of banned countries one could travel to, and Europe was in a panic. This got even more complicated when Per got Covid three days before he was due to fly out in mid-January, and he had to postpone his trip. A few weeks later, a negative PCR test meant Per and

Urban could fly to South Africa for a week of power larking.

They arrived at OR Tambo on the 8th of February and made their way north to Polokwane. We had a quick chat to prioritize their needs regarding the species they want to see, photograph, get video footage or voice recordings of. So, of the 13 species possible, two would be a tough call and require luck. Dusky Lark is mainly a passage migrant in Polokwane and is most often seen in December. Finding one in February would almost be a miracle. The Polokwane Plateau Melodious Lark population has a phantom-like status as their whereabouts are somewhat unpredictable. The other tough assignment would be Flappet Lark.

Although reliable at a few stakeouts in the region, February is not the best time of the year to find them. They are easiest to see when they display, and their peak display period in this region is December and January. Finally, the window of opportunity to find the enigmatic, sought-after Monotonous Lark was closing. Although there was an irruption of this nomadic species north of Polokwane in December, most birds at this irruption had completed breeding and singing. Displaying and singing were erratic - making finding this secretive lark also a challenge. Thus, getting this species would be our first priority. The remaining species are all sitters and present no challenge to find: Short-clawed Lark, Spike-

heeled Lark, Fawn-coloured Lark, Sabota Lark, Red-capped Lark, Rufous-naped Lark, Pink-billed Lark, Grey-backed and Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark.

Our first morning saw us head north onto the Bylsteel road to connect with Monotonous Lark. It wasn't long before we found a female carrying food, and a while later, we found a fledgling. We also saw a male briefly performing a song flight. That was target #1 in the bag. Per and Urban got good views, photographs and recordings! We decided to head further towards De Loskop for other larks, but we

BELOW Per and Urban savouring views of Monotonous Lark north of Polokwane © Derek Engelbrecht.





ABOVE A Pink-billed Lark nest found at De Loskop © Derek Engelbrecht.

would return later that afternoon for more video footage. Along the way, we picked up Sabota Lark, Short-clawed and Rufous-naped Lark, and other birding goodies such as Pale Chanting Goshawk, plenty of Shaft-tailed and Long-tailed Paradise Whydah.

Day 2 saw us heading to De Loskop past the Monotonous Lark site - we saw a couple of birds again. At De Loskop we picked up Red-capped Lark, Sabota Lark, Rufous-naped Lark, Short-clawed Lark, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark and Pink-billed Lark. Pink-billed Larks were particu-

larly active as they had just started breeding, and males regularly performed their song flights. We were also treated with good views of Southern Pied Babbler, Amur Falcon, Lesser Kestrel, Quailfinch, Brown-backed Honeybird, Barred Wren-Warbler, Cape Shoveler, Maccoa Duck and, unusual for De Loskop, Blue-billed Teal.

On our way home, we made a quick detour to one of the local abattoirs to see if any were vultures around. And there were! We were

rewarded with excellent views of a few Lappet-faced Vultures, hundreds of Hooded, White-backed and Cape Vultures, Marabou Storks (Per took over 500 photos of these birds!), and Booted Eagle. Also, if the collective noun for crows is a murder of crows, then we saw what must be described as a 'mass murder of crows'. Quite literally hundreds of Pied Crows!



RIGHT White-backed Vulture, Cape Vulture and Booted Eagle at the Ven-cor Abattoir © Derek Engelbrecht.

BELOW A mass murder of crows. This photo captured just a few of the hundreds of Pied Crows at the abattoir © Derek Engelbrecht.



Day 3's main target was Flappet Lark. We left home just after 3 am as we wanted to do some owling along the way and have sufficient time to find Freckled Nightjar, a local special at the Flappet Lark spot. We did well with the owls, picking up Southern White-faced Owl, Western Barn Owl and Spotted Eagle-Owl. We also connected with Fiery-necked, and our early arrival paid dividends with good views of Freckled Nightjar. As the nightjars wrapped up their dawn chorus, our target species burst into applause - yes, Flappet Lark (and a lifer for Per)! Admittedly we did not have the best views of this very shy species. Still, one perched out in the open for quite a while, soaking up the early morning sun, allowing for some photo opportunities. Other species seen here included Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow, Levallant's Cuckoo, Bushveld Pipit and Pearl-breasted Swallow.

Although we achieved our target for the day, it was still early, and we were power larking after all. We had actually set aside the next day for working the grasslands to the west of Polokwane, but we figured if we could get at least some work done here today, it will relieve the pressure on what would have been a lark-packed day the next day. So,



ABOVE This is how you do power larking - Per in full gear © Derek Engelbrecht.

we decided to meander our way back via the Chebeng grasslands west of Polokwane.

In no time, we picked up large numbers of Pink-billed Lark, Red-capped Lark and Grey-backed Sparrow-lark, and also had good views of Rufous-naped, Spike-heeled and Short-clawed Larks. We had a full house of tasks completed for most species: photos, voice recordings, and video footage. We even managed to trap a Rufous-naped Lark for in-hand images. We tried about



A Yellow-bellied Eremomela (ABOVE) and Tinkling Cisticola (RIGHT) at Chebeng © Derek Engelbrecht.

2 hours to trap a Short-clawed Lark, but it was smarter than us and evaded capture. We also failed to find one of our tricky targets, Melodious Lark, but it wasn't the ideal time of the day, and we decided to give it a try early the next day. The larks aside, we also had good views of Tinkling Cisticola, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Cape Penduline Tit, Long-tailed Widowbird and Yellow-crowned Bishop. We called it a very successful day but





ABOVE The Long-tailed Widowbirds put on a lunch time show of note for us
© Derek Engelbrecht.

RIGHT A Marsh Owl nest with four eggs
at Chebeng © Derek Engelbrecht.



would return the next day for more recordings, video footage and photos - and hopefully add Melodious Lark to our list.

The next day saw us back at Chebeng at the crack of dawn. While taking photos of some Grey-backed Sparrow-larks foraging in the track, a Pallid Harrier swooped past. I haven't seen Pallid Harrier around Polokwane for several years, and this was definitely one of the highlights of our trip so far. We spent the rest of the morning

getting better views, photos, video footage and recordings of different larks. Yet again, despite an intensive search effort, we failed to find Melodious Lark. Some of the other highlights included finding a Marsh Owl nest, getting more and better views of Long-tailed Widowbirds and cracking views of Yellow Canary and Capped Wheatear. The undisputed highlight of our trip

(larks aside) was connecting with Double-banded Courser - a scarce bird in the Limpopo Province with only 11 records since 2007, and only the fourth record for the Polokwane Plateau!

BELOW Double-banded Courser was the biggest surprise of our trip
© Derek Engelbrecht.





ABOVE Power larking can be exhaustive - Per taking a breather in the Chebeng grasslands © Derek Engelbrecht.

BELOW A Fawn-coloured Lark ringed south of Polokwane © Derek Engelbrecht.



Our next target was Fawn-coloured Lark. A small, isolated population of this species was discovered in what can only be described as atypical habitat on the southern edge of the Polokwane Plateau in December 2018. Although reliable, we wanted a full house of tasks for this species, and this is easier than done. We left home just before dawn and picked up African Black Duck along the way. We were fortunate that quite a few Fawn-coloured Larks were singing, displaying and chasing each

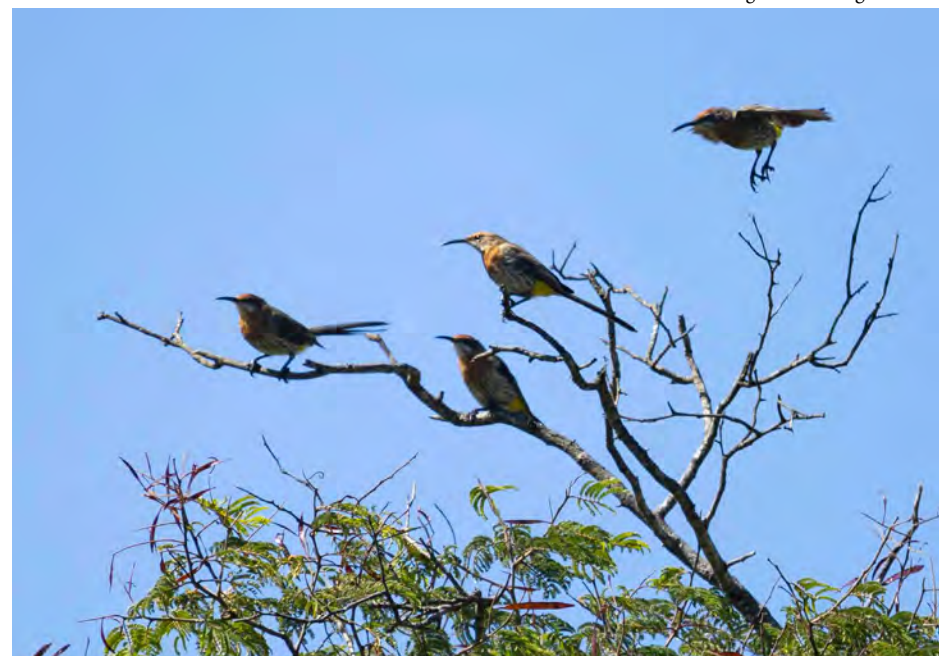
other. We successfully got a royal flush of tasks completed here, including the first ringing record for Fawn-coloured Lark in the Limpopo Province. Although nice to hear and see, a covey of Shelley's Francolin audio-bombed our recordings, leading to many angry expletives hurled towards the francolins.

Fawn-coloured Lark was our last lark we stood a realistic chance of getting. With 11 lark species in the bag, we now had the time to find some of the other species of interest - pipits and warblers. We left the Fawn-coloured Lark site and headed to the Wolkberg, hoping to find some highland specials such as Nicholson's and Striped Pipits, Buff-streaked Chat and Gurney's

Sugarbird. Again, our timing wasn't great, and it was tough going finding the pipits. We dipped on Striped Pipit but had brief views of a pair of Nicholson's Pipit carrying food. We also dipped on Buff-streaked Chat but had excellent views of Gurney's Sugarbird and Wailing Cisticola.

Our next stop was the Haenertsburg grasslands to try for Cape Grassbird, African Yellow Warbler, Fan-tailed Warbler and Drakensberg Prinia. Unfortunately we couldn't find Fan-tailed Warbler. Although the Cape Grassbird gave us a run for our money, we eventually managed to get excellent views

BELOW Gurney's Sugarbirds were plentiful at some flowering Proteas in the Wolkberg © Derek Engelbrecht.





ABOVE One of the Drakensberg Prinias we ringed near Haenertsburg © Derek Engelbrecht.

of it and the African Yellow Warbler. Since Urban has done some research on prinias, we put up mist nets in the hope of catching one so that he could have a closer look at it. We got two birds in no time.

On the penultimate day of our trip, we were targeting Short-clawed Lark east of Polokwane to get some recordings of the eastern dialect of this species. Short-clawed Larks are practically garden birds in one of the villages, and it is somewhat surreal to find such a globally sought-after species calling from someone's garden fence. We got excellent recordings and, a first for me, found a male and female perched together, both singing. Here, other notable sightings included Great Spotted Cuckoo, good numbers of Grey-backed Sparrow-lark, Yellow Canary, and Allen's Gallinule.

A quick visit to the campus of the University of Limpopo delivered, amongst others, Thrush Nightingale, Southern Bald Ibis, Green Wood Hoopoe, Grey-backed Camaroptera and Groundscraper Thrush.

Our last morning was spent in the Polokwane Game Reserve, where Per wanted to get some more recordings of Rufous-naped and Sabota Larks. Per got his fill as both species cooperated nicely. We also had good views of Bushveld Pipits and had no fewer than four individuals foraging together at one stage.

We concluded our week with a tally of 11 lark species and five pipit species. Two noteworthy records

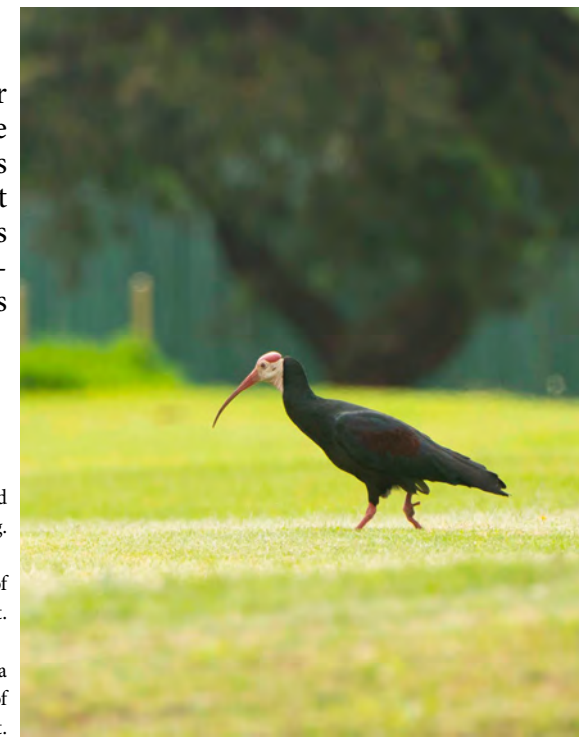
of interest were Pallid Harrier and Double-banded Courser. We ended our trip list on 237 species around Polokwane. This wasn't bad, considering our focus was mainly larks and, to a lesser degree, pipits, the rest of the species being 'bycatch'.

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OVERLEAF The eleven lark species we recorded during our week of power larking.

RIGHT Southern Bald Ibis on the sports fields of the University of Limpopo © Derek Engelbrecht.

BELOW The lark whisperer, Urban, having a quiet moment with a Short-clawed Lark east of Polokwane © Derek Engelbrecht.





#1 Monotonous Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#2 Sabota Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#3 Short-clawed Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#4 Rufous-naped Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#5 Pink-billed Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#6 Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#7 Red-capped Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#8 Flappet Lark © Per Alström



#9 Spike-heeled Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#10 Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark © Derek Engelbrecht



#11 Fawn-coloured Lark © Derek Engelbrecht

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™

The Mouse-Free Marion Project



Certificate of Appreciation

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
&
BirdLife South Africa

hereby confirm that

BirdLife Polokwane

Have sponsored 5 Hectares of Marion Island
towards the Mouse-Free Marion Project

MARK D. ANDERSON
CEO. BirdLife South Africa

8 February 2022

DATE



Regulars

Birds in Art

African Pitta

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe



African Pitta

Here is a ubiquitous bird familiar to all – no bird outing could be complete without a glimpse of one of these! All right, in all seriousness: this is actually one of southern Africa's most elusive and enigmatic birds: the African Pitta *Pitta angolensis*, sometimes called the Angola Pitta. These gorgeous birds are very sought after by birdwatchers but are rarely seen. This is one of two pitta

species in Africa, the other being the very similar Green-breasted Pitta, which is restricted to equatorial forests. The African Pitta is more widely distributed, from West Africa to southern Africa. In South Africa, this bird has only been seen a handful of times as vagrants from further up north. Western populations are resident, but eastern birds migrate

from the DRC, Uganda and Kenya to breed in south-eastern Africa down to our neighbour countries of Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Pittas are a small family of beautiful birds restricted to tropical regions of Africa, Asia and Australia.

They are long-legged, dumpy-bodied birds that spend most of their time on the forest floor. They tend to be beautifully coloured and patterned, leading to their alternative name of Jewel-Thrushes, although they're not thrushes. Pittas belong to a group



ABOVE The dense, dark understory African Pittas frequent present a challenge finding them, let alone getting a good view! But when you find one in the gloomy undergrowth, those lustrous blue spots seem to put one under the pitta's spell, leaving one dumbstruck and in awe of such a stunningly beautiful bird © Derek Engelbrecht.

of birds called the Old World suboscines, or Tyranni. The suboscines are a small group within the huge group of birds called the songbirds. Songbirds constitute the largest present-day order of birds; they evolved fairly recently and have diversified rapidly and enormously. Within the songbirds, the suboscines are more 'basal', meaning they branched off at the base of the songbird family tree. This may be interpreted as them being more 'primitive', and indeed they lack some of the more intricate adaptations to sing, for instance, the syrinx or avian voice apparatus. They've

generally been outcompeted and replaced by the oscines, but a substantial remnant of them is still hanging on. Most of the suboscines today live in the New World, in an impressive diversity: tyrant flycatchers, antbirds, ovenbirds, cotingas and manakins,

to name a few. In the Old World, the only suboscines remaining are the pittas, broadbills and asities of Madagascar. In Australia and New Zealand, the bushwrens and rockwrens – a tiny group – also seem to fall outside of the oscines proper but aren't allied with the Tyranni either, constituting a third group, the Acanthisitti.

The African pitta species may be recent immigrants from Asia, being similar to some of those, and similar to each other, meaning there's been little time for them to diverge. The birds that migrate to southern Africa have longer, more pointed wings than sedentary populations. They're stunning, coloured in vivid

blues, greens, yellows and reds. The African Pitta measures about 20 cm in length, rather stocky in build with a short tail. It can be surprisingly hard to see. From behind, its green back blends in with the forest understory. When alarmed, it will fly up to a branch where, if it still feels threatened, it will crouch low to hide. It forages in forests and thickets, often in swampy areas or near rivers, with dense understory interspersed with small sub-canopy glades.

BELOW Typical African Pitta habitat on the banks of the Angwa River in northern Zimbabwe © Derek Engelbrecht.





ABOVE A male performing its display from a perch. The display comprises a short jump accompanied by a combination of a short, rising whistle and two rapid wing beats, creating a quirky 'prrwheet' sound © Derek Engelbrecht.

It feeds mainly close to termite and ant nests, walking or hopping, now and then flitting its tail. It stands motionless for up to 5 minutes, just watching the leaf litter, then hopping up close if it sees potential prey. It may also, like a thrush, thrash leaves aside with its bill. Occasionally it stops and cocks its head to one side to inspect the soil. When it sights prey, it hops forward and snatches it in its stout bill. It feeds mainly on ants and termites but also beetles, caterpillars, snails, earthworms and millipedes.

These pittas breed during the rainy summer in southern Africa, from November to March. They're likely monogamous, and males set up territories within which they display. They choose a horizontal twig or branch on which they stand as they utter their deep, loud, liquid

trilling calls. These sounds carry far through the forest. Often as it calls, the bird will leap a short distance straight up from its perch, whirring its wings and opening them up wide as it falls back to the twig, showing their beautiful patterns briefly. It fluffs up its breast and belly feathers all the time to draw attention to the vivid red. Although they're mainly ground birds, their nests are mostly built at 2 to 8 m up in a thorny tree. The nest is an untidy-looking ball of twigs and leaves, with an entrance

on the side and a central chamber lined with delicate vegetable matter. There is a shelf projecting beside the entrance, on which the bird perches before going in. The clutch is one to four eggs. We know very little about the incubation and fledging times.

We're also not quite sure yet about the demographics of pittas. Even though the West African population appears to be sedentary, there may still be local movements of the pittas among them. Eastern pittas

undertake long migrations, during which they cross atypical habitats. They are sometimes found in suburbs or cities, stunned from collisions with walls or windows. The ones that turn up in South Africa from time to time are stragglers who somehow got lost. It might be that the air movements of tropical storm fronts push them beyond their target destinations, especially at night. But they may come upon some suitable habitat and stay awhile.

The African Pitta is widespread but rare. Its survival depends on preserving forested habitats in its breeding and non-breeding ranges.

Author e-mail: willemsvandermerwe@gmail.com

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



LEFT P is for Pitta and ... Pietersburg, Potchefstroom and Pretoria. The first three records of Angola Pitta in South Africa were from towns starting with the letter P! The first South African record of African Pitta hails from our own town, then called Pietersburg! It was collected on 6th December 1909 by a certain Mr M. Van de Ende - in his house! The specimen on the left, housed in the Ditsong Museum of Natural History, was collected in Potchefstroom by FD Ayres, son of Thomas Ayres of, amongst other, Ayres's Hawk-Eagle fame © Derek Engelbrecht.

Reflections

REFLECTIONS

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

The lure of Letaba

Chris Patton

I've written a lot about the Far North of Kruger, primarily because I love it and have spent a lot of time there, and I still intend to write Reflections' articles on several of the wonderful localities of the Far North... the

Northern Plains, the Pafuri Region, and drives close to Punda Maria, but for this issue, I thought I'd go a little further south, and write about the lure of Letaba Camp. It might be renowned for its elephants and home to the fantastic Letaba Elephant Interpretation Centre, but for sheer numbers of Park birds, both woodland and water, it is one of the best camps around. It may not have the same regularity of rarities

LEFT A Red-winged Starling - one that nests on the Letaba Restaurant's air-conditioner, perched on one of the restaurant chairs showing the panorama of the Letaba River viewable from Letaba Camp © Chris Patton.



ABOVE The iconic life-size elephant sculpture at the entrance to the Letaba Elephant Hall © Chris Patton.

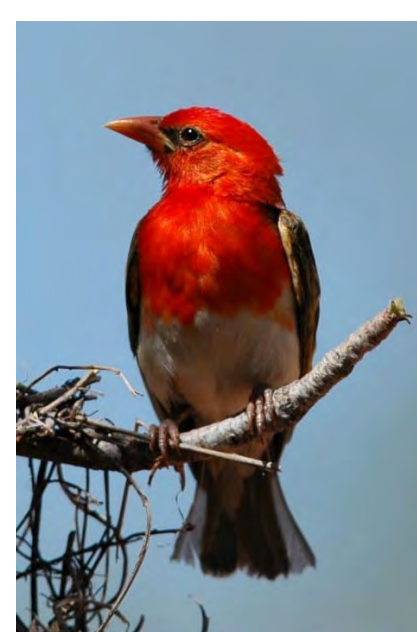
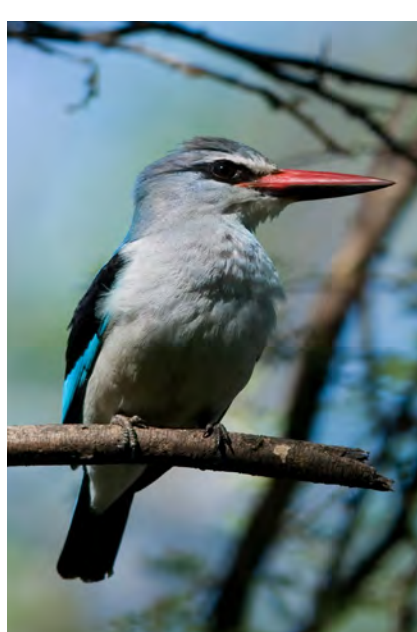
that the far north of the Park produces, but there have been recent records of specials like Sooty Falcon and Wattled Crane from that river vista in front of the Camp restaurant, so one must always expect the unexpected.

We are all shaped by our own birding experiences, and our own sightings will create our own individual associations with specific locations, but there are certain birds that one just associates with Letaba Camp – and for most, if not all birders, the likes of Mourning Collared Dove, Saddle-billed Stork, Red-headed Weaver and White-browed Robin-Chat will be linked

to Letaba Camp... and of course, in summertime between November and April the Camp is synonymous with the mesmerising trills of the Woodland Kingfisher...

Most readers will know Letaba Camp, nestled on the southern bank of a huge bend in the river of the same name. With its sprawling lawns and circles of rondavels, abundant shade and wonderful panorama out over the River, with reeds, and extensive sandbanks





(except when the river's in flood), it is a real Park fan's favourite.

When visiting the Camp either as an overnight guest, or a day visitor, there are two public facilities that one must take advantage of to maximise birding opportunities. Both are very accessible and comfortable to use. The first is the bricked riverside walkway that runs from west to east from the Camp's restaurant along the perimeter

fence to the Camp's luxury guest houses; the second is a polywood boardwalk into the Letaba Day Visitor Picnic Area and the Area itself.

The riverside walk is the more well-known facility. The average guest will head in its direction, often to visit the restaurant and then wander along the pathway to enjoy the accompanying wildlife that is always on view. Looking down from the raised plateau of the Camp into the riverbed, one will have a plethora of birds to watch; multiple herons, egrets and storks, the ubiquitous Blacksmith Lapwings, Egyptian Geese and Hadada Ibises, but also Afri-

can Pied Wagtail, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Spectacled Weaver and White-fronted Bee-eaters. African Fish Eagles will be seen and heard, while vulture species and Bateleurs can often be seen on the sandy banks sunning themselves after taking water baths in the River. African Jacana, Black Crake and Greater Painted-snipe are some of the more skulking aquatic species that will be less obvious but reliably found. The extensive reedbeds in front of the restaurant will host several weaver species, Burchell's Coucal, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Common Waxbill and Red-faced Cisticola.

There are no riverine trees immediately in front of the Restaurant, cleared to maximise the view. Still, as one heads east along the pathway, one walks underneath some large riverside trees, and a

whole suite of the Park's woodland birds will be encountered at close quarters... The grassy lawns of the circles of rondavels will be on the Camp side of the pathway, and African Palm Swift and Little Swift will be seen and heard squealing if one looks skywards.

From the cacophony of the dawn chorus to the incessant daytime chatter of starlings, hornbills and other common species, the Camp is a constant hum of bird sound. Orange-breasted and Grey-headed Bushshrikes will un-

ABOVE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT Letaba Camp's 'Fab 5': Saddle-billed Stork (© Chris Patton), Mourning Collared Dove (© Derek Engelbrecht), Woodland Kingfisher (© Derek Engelbrecht), White-browed Robin-Chat (© Derek Engelbrecht), and Red-headed Weaver (© Derek Engelbrecht),



LEFT The riverside path will offer sightings of birds like Spectacled Weaver © Chris Patton.



ABOVE Orange-breasted Bushshrike in the trees outside Bungalow 37, sadly with offending twigs ruining a good photo! © Chris Patton.

doubtedly be heard, but to catch glimpses of the colourful species is not as easy. Scanning the trees that line the walkway and populate the Camp's interior will give an excellent chance of seeing these species, although frustratingly, twigs can often get in the way of a good photo.

While the riverside walkway is on the north side of the Camp,

on the south side of the Camp is the Letaba Day Visitor Centre. As the name suggests, this facility is intended as a destination for non-camp residents. Still, it is also a must-visit destination for those with overnight accommodation while walking around the Camp. The boardwalk bridge over the creek that separates the Area from the Camp is a delightful feature with tremendous birding and photography possibilities to allow one to have close encounters with some of those more skulking species.

Whether you access the Day Visitor Area across the boardwalk bridge or via the facility's public parking, you will find yourself in a network of narrow pathways leading to shaded picnic tables set in mopane woodland. Like all Park picnic sites, the resident birds have become very tame, and many will show little fear and present up-close photo opportunities. One personal memory from the Area was sitting eating with a couple of visiting American ladies. A Dark-capped Bulbul flew in for some tit-bits. Being non-birders and not really interested in the true identity of the species, the girls christened the bulbuls 'Butter-bums' because of the distinctive yellow vents that they (and their two closely related cousins, Cape and African Red-eyed) display. I've had this pet name for these bulbuls ever since...



ABOVE The bridge boardwalk linking Letaba Camp with the adjoining day visitor area gives terrific access to woodland along the creek that separates the facility from the Camp. © Chris Patton.

RIGHT Birding from the Boardwalk will allow close encounters with species like Long-billed Crombec © Derek Engelbrecht.

I opened up this reflection by writing about birds that one associate with Letaba, and there will be ones that one connects with specific parts of the Camp. When one enters the main gate, the area between the Reception Building, the Elephant Hall





ABOVE The day visitor area is set in mopane woodland © Chris Patton



LEFT Kurrichane Thrush on the Letaba Shop direction sign © Chris Patton.

Then I mentioned Mourning Collared Dove as one species synonymous with the Camp, and indeed this is true. Still, it is also an excellent camp

and the Petrol Station is particularly well wooded with large trees like Sausage Trees and Natal Mahoganies... This is an excellent place to find Kurrichane Thrush, as the photo above reveals one perched on the direction indicator to the Camp curio shop...

for Red-eyed Dove, and it is one of the best locations to compare South Africa's two largest collared dove species at close quarters...

I also named Red-headed Weaver as another of the intrinsic Letaba species, and perhaps the best place to find them and their

nests are by the petrol station. The image below I took while filling up with petrol one day. It's not a good one of the bird, but it perfectly shows the endeavour of their untidy nests and all the hard work that goes into their weave...

But in reflecting on my personal memories of birds at Letaba, I have to end with a favourite one from the nocturnal hours... It's an excellent camp for owls, and Western Barn Owls, Southern White-faced Owls and Verreaux's Eagle-Owls are all regularly recorded, but in my early days with SANParks, shortly after I'd joined them from my environmental studies at UCT, I persuaded a former girlfriend from Cape Town to visit me in the Park. She had never visited Kruger before, and I was determined to show her some of the diminutive owls because I knew how adorable they are to see, and from experience that both African Scops Owl and Pearl-spotted Owlet are commonly heard in the Camp at night, and both respond well to tape recordings. This was long before the ease of smartphone apps or even CDs... no this was in the days



ABOVE This photo of a Red-headed Weaver was taken while having petrol put in - it might not show the bird very well, but it does show the intricate weaving work of their nest © Chris Patton

of Len Gillard and Guy Gibbons cassette tapes and little mini tape recorders. We positioned ourselves by a large Leadwood somewhere between the campsite and the guest cottages, with big sweeping boughs that looked ideal for owls, and we were in position with torch beams ready. I gave a brief whirl of the Scops and then wound forward to the call of the Pearly and gave that a couple of renditions. The next moment I heard an African Barred

CAPE GANNET

A large seabird with impressively long wings, capable of plunge diving at high speed, up to 100 km/hr to catch fish.

TAXONOMY

KINGDOM: Animalia
PHYLUM: Chordata
CLASS: Aves
ORDER: Suliformes
FAMILY: Sulidae
GENUS: Morus
SPECIES: *M. capensis*



ISLAND COLONIES

Cape Gannets only breed in **southern Africa**, on 6 offshore islands, making them **endemic breeders** to this region. Three breeding **colonies** are in Namibia (Mercury, Possession and Ichaboe Islands), and three are in South Africa (Bird Island in Lamberts Bay, Malgas Island and Bird Island in Algoa Bay). Breeding on islands protects them from **predators** that occur on the mainland, such as mongooses and cats. The large colonies of birds also provides safety in numbers.

DISTRIBUTION

Cape Gannets are resident along the coast of the southern part of Africa, feeding close to shore on their favourite diet of pelagic fish such as sardines and anchovies. They occasionally venture as far as Nigeria **foraging** for ever more elusive shoals of fish, often opportunistically **scavenging** discarded fish from fishing trawlers. In winter they gather in their thousands, following the abundant sardine shoals up the KwaZulu-Natal coast.

IDENTIFICATION

Size: 84 - 95 cm high
 Weight: 2.3 - 3.1 kg
 Wingspan: 1.6 - 1.7 m

Juveniles are dark chocolate brown with white spots.

Adults have long, sharply pointed, pale blue-grey bills with black nasal grooves. Black skin at the base of the bill extends down the middle of the throat to form a sharply tapered gular stripe. The eyes are silver-grey with powder blue eye-rings.

Voice is a noisy 'warra-warra-warra' at colonies and when feeding at sea.

Both male and female adults are creamy white with a golden yellow wash on the head.

Tail and flight feathers are black.

The webbed feet are dark grey. Pale yellow-green stripes run down the front of the tarsus (anklebone) and along the top of each toe.

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Created by Leigh Wolfardt



ABOVE African Scops Owl, one of several owl species that will be found in Letaba Camp after hours © Chris Patton.

Owlet calling, which excited me immensely, so I immediately changed my attention to that species and gave it a quick play of that species call... Now I know calling species is a sensitive and controversial matter, and it is advisable to show great discretion in calling up species, and I like to think I usually set a good balance. I am sure we have all had our fair share of disappointments on the calling front, particularly in the pre-2000s when tapes were the order of the day... but on this particular wonderful night in the winter of 1998, things conspired beautifully.

At that moment, all three of South Africa's diminutive owls were briefly seen in a single sweep of the torch beam in one of those everlasting memories. I know it meant more to me than the poor girl, who I haven't seen for over two decades and has subsequently emigrated, so I doubt she even remembers what a unique and exhilarating moment it was...

Author e-mail: chris.patton@sanparks.org

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BIRD BRIEFS

The importance of water lilies in the diet of African Pygmy Goose

Hugh Chittenden and Geoff Nichols

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The colourful and diminutive African Pygmy Goose is one of the favourite duck species among birders in southern Africa. Well documented is the fact that it is linked to the aquatic plant species, the Day or Blue Water Lily *Nymphaea nouchali*, and other water lily species growing in the region. For much of the year, the fruit and seeds of these lilies make up over 95% of this species diet.

BELOW A male African Pygmy Goose glides slowly past a flowering Water Lily (Kruger National Park). Different Water Lily subspecies occur in the KNP, some of which have white (not blue) flowers.

© Hugh Chittenden.



Geoff Nichols

ABOVE An ideal feeding site for African Pygmy Goose © Hugh Chittenden.

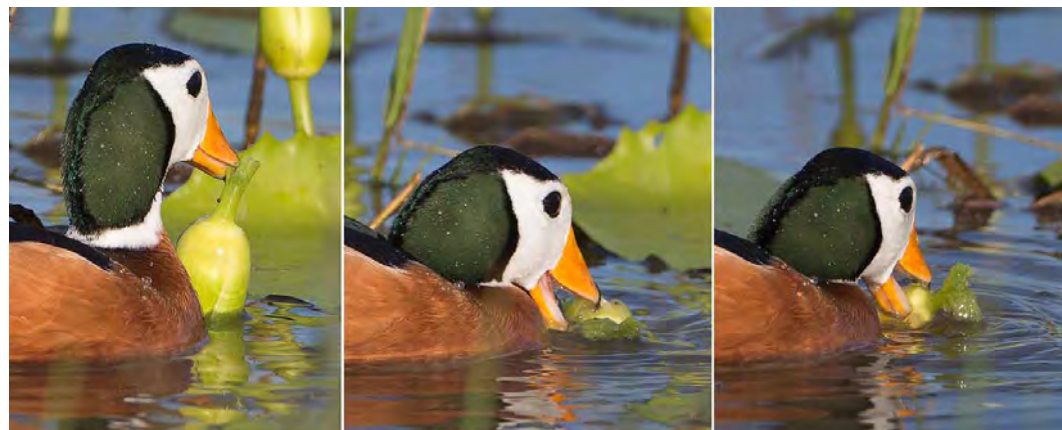
TOP A female African Pygmy Goose © Hugh Chittenden.





OPPOSITE, TOP The male finds a partially ripe fruit, dives down, and snaps the stem, surfacing with the fruiting head on which it intends to feed © Hugh Chittenden.

RIGHT The base of the flower is where the fruit (seeds) are found. These ducks have no difficulty tearing the pods open with their sharp-tipped bills to access the seeds. Feeding then takes place above water level © Hugh Chittenden.



BELOW A male (LEFT) and female (RIGHT) feeding © Hugh Chittenden.



Once the attractive blue flowers have been pollinated, the plant retracts the flower beneath the water surface (by coiling the stem) (TOP, © Pete Hancock), where the fruit (ABOVE, © Geoff Nichols) slowly develops.





ABOVE Partially ripe fruit (left) and fully ripe fruit (right). However, the geese also feed regularly on unripe, greenish coloured seeds © Geoff Nichols.

TOP Dissected Blue Water Lily flower heads showing the development of the seeds. Flower parts also sometimes make up a small percentage of their diet © Geoff Nichols.

Inflorescences of emergent ripe grasses are another important food source in ephemeral ponds. The grass seed heads are pulled down to the water surface and the seeds are stripped from the stems by dabbling in the water. These small geese may also occasionally feed on small fish and insects.



Note: The goose photos were taken in both the Kruger National Park (Hugh Chittenden) and Botswana (Pete Hancock). The dissected fruit photographs were taken in the Western Cape (Geoff Nichols).

Acknowledgements Pete Hancock is thanked for the use of his photographs.

ABOVE A sequence of photos of a female stripping grass seeds from emergent grasses in an ephemeral pool. The grass, possibly either *Panicum schinzii* or *P. simulans*, are both annual species that live in ephemeral ponds and riverine edges, and occur from the Western Cape northwards along the eastern seaboard to South Africa's northern borders © Hugh Chittenden.

A white morph Levillant's Cuckoo

Mark Fox

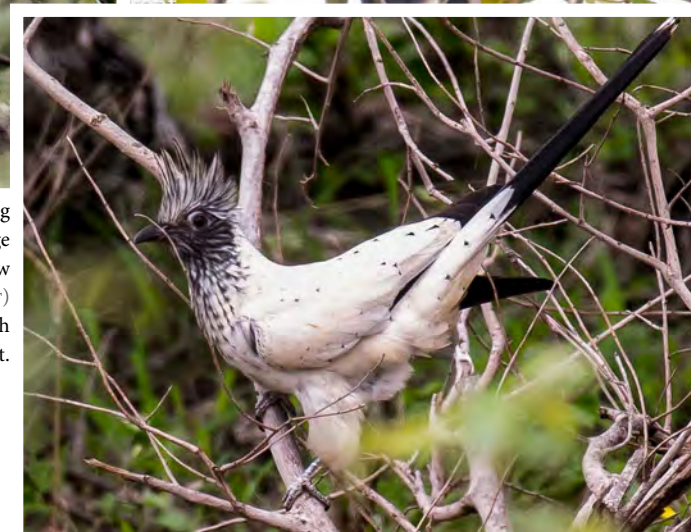
E-mail: markfox935@gmail.com

We were on a half day safari in the Kruger National Park on a lovely summer's day, 13th November 2021.

We entered at Crocodile Bridge gate, drove along the S25 and stopped at Malelane for a bathroom break. On the way from Malelane to Afsaal on the H3 just before the Matjulu Bridge I saw a white bird, took a second look and immediately knew it was a

gem sighting. The guests couldn't understand my excitement over a bird until I explained the rarity of this particular Levillant's Cuckoo. It was a white morph Levillant's Cuckoo! Although dark morph Levillant's Cuckoos are known to occur, I could find no reference in the literature to a white morph of the species.

BELOW The exceedingly rare white morph Levillant's Cuckoo © Mark Fox.



I followed the bird and snapped a few photos, my wife took a video (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA-2JILfQgDk>). As quick as the Levillant's Cuckoo was, we followed it for a few minutes, grateful that it gave us time to take some footage and photos.

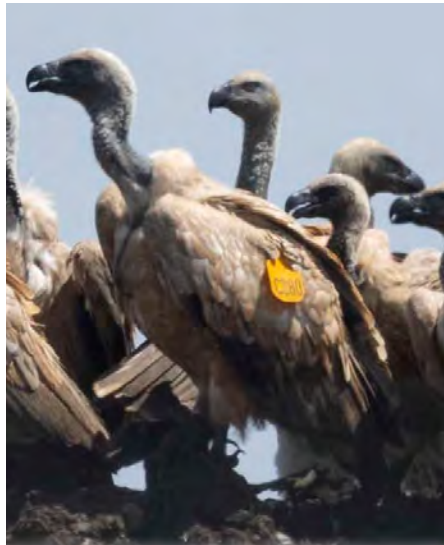
A view of the underwing (ABOVE), dorsal plumage (TOP RIGHT) and a view from the side (RIGHT)
© Foxy Crocodile Bush Retreat.

Interesting resightings
 Derek Engelbrecht
 E-mail: faunagalore@gmail.com

Details of a few interesting ringed or tagged birds resighted in recent weeks follows.

TAG C280: CAPE VULTURE

The bird was ringed as an immature bird on 7 December 2016 at Blouberg Nature Reserve by David Pretorius and photographed on 10 February 2022 at the Vencor Abattoir. The straight-line distance between the tagging and resighting locality was 90.0 km and the days elapsed were 1 892 days (5y, 2m, 4d). Reported by Derek Engelbrecht.



Cape Vulture C280 © Derek Engelbrecht

RING BB72472: LESSER HONEYGUIDE

The bird was ringed as an adult on 15 November 2021 in Welgelegen by Derek Engelbrecht and photographed on 16 March 2022 in Jan Fouries's garden in Welgelegen. The individual was identified by its unique combination of colour rings: left leg, dark green/blue. The straight-line distance between the tagging and resighting locality was 0.65 km and the days elapsed were 122 days (0y, 4m, 2d). Reported by Jan Fourie.



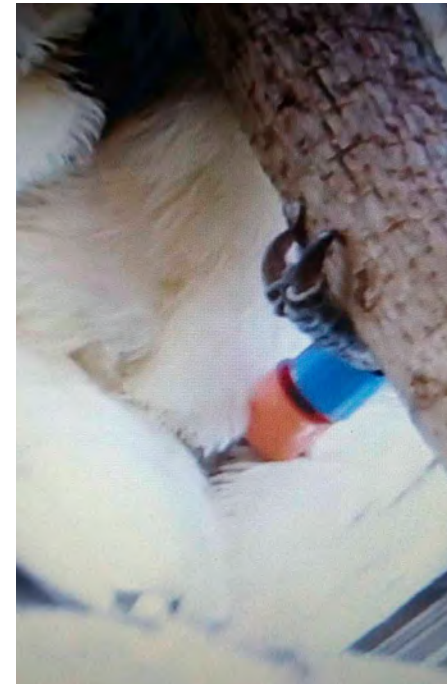
Lesser Honeyguide BB72472 © Jan Fourie

RING CV70310 GREATER HONEYGUIDE

The bird was ringed as a sub-adult male on 15 November 2021 in Welgelegen by Derek Engelbrecht and photographed on 5 March 2022 in Christine Wreyford's garden near the Polokwane Municipal Swimming Pool. The individual was identified by its unique combination of colour rings: left leg, orange/blue. The straight-line distance between the tagging and resighting locality was 2.2 km and the days elapsed were 111 days (0y, 3m, 19d). Reported by Christine Wreyford.



Greater Honeyguide CV70310 © Nicole Wreyford



ABOVE A close-up view of the colour rings which assisted with the correct identification of this individual.



ABOVE Greater Honeyguide CV70310 when it was ringed in Welgelegen on 15 November 2021 © Derek Engelbrecht.

Hatching Southern Black Korhaan egg found in a sheep pasture

Toni Hoenders and Sanjo Rose

E-mail: rosesanjo1@gmail.com

The Southern Black Korhaan *Afrotis afra* is a small bustard endemic to South Africa, restricted largely to the Western and Eastern Cape (Allan 2005; SABAP2 2022). This species typically occurs in sparse shrubby habitats such as strandveld fynbos and renosterveld. In areas such as the Overberg in the Western Cape, Southern Black Korhaan are reliant on habitat refugia scattered in between other land use activities such as farming (Allan 2005).

Despite being designated as a separate species from the Northern Black Korhaan *Afrotis afraoides* since 1994 (Crowe et al. 1992), very little is known about the breeding ecology of the Southern Black Korhaan. The species lays its eggs directly on the ground in a scrape. Little concrete evidence exists, but a key requirement is that the egg is concealed by at least some vegetation (Tarboton 2001). One record exists of a nest within tall wheat (Uys 1988). Here we present evidence of a nest in a pasture used to graze sheep. This nest was located on 8 November 2021.

A single egg was located on the ground on a farm near Swellendam in the Western Cape (GPS coordinates of nest 34°22'25.7"S 20°15'59.0"E). A very slight attempt at a scrape could be seen; the egg was positioned on the hard clay soil. A male Southern Black Korhaan was heard displaying in a patch of renosterveld, probably about 200 m away. The overall landscape was a patchwork of pasture, canola *Brassica napus* crop and renosterveld. The size of the pasture field where the egg was located was 388 691 m². On the northern boundary of the field (27 m away from the nest) was a large patch of short renosterveld 442 177 m² in size. On the southern end, the field was bordered by a road (114 m away from the egg). On the eastern and western sides were more pastures, separately fenced.

The predominant vegetation was lucerne *Medicago sativa* and alien grass (*Bromus* spp.), approximately 40 cm high. This egg was found accidentally and was in the process of hatching, so no measurements were taken. On approaching the area, the female Southern Black Korhaan flew off,



landing roughly 150 m away. We took a few photographs and left the area.

Given the lack of knowledge on the breeding ecology of the Southern Black Korhaan, it is not known how stringent the nesting requirements of this species are. Therefore, we are unsure how frequently this species lays eggs in pastures in this region. However, both Karoo Korhaan *Epidotis vigorsii* and Ludwig's Bustard *Neotis ludwigii* occasionally use cultivated pastureland as nesting habitat (Allan 2005).

ABOVE Hatching egg of a Southern Black Korhaan. Note the egg is placed on the bare soil with little evidence of any nest structure with a very slight attempt at a scrape © Sanjo Rose.

Several studies indicate that Southern Black Korhaan numbers have decreased substantially (Hofmeyer 2012, Shaw et al. 2016). The small range of the species makes it very vulnerable to threats such as habitat transformation and fragmentation by agriculture. Understanding Southern Black Korhaan breeding requirements is essential



ABOVE Location of a Southern Black Korhaan scrape and egg in a sheep pasture © Sanjo Rose.

for developing effective conservation measures for this species.

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Another leucistic Magpie Shrike from the Kruger National Park

John Luyt

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On a recent trip to the Kruger National Park, we were fortunate to photograph a leucistic Magpie Shrike. The bird was seen on the 11th of April 2022 on the H1-7 between Shingwedzi Rest Camp and the Babalala picnic site. The bird was in a group of other Magpie Shrikes.

Although rarely observed, there are a few records of leucistic Magpie Shrike. I recently heard about a leucistic Magpie Shrike in the Timbavati and Watson and Watson (1983) reported an individual from Satara in the Kruger National Park. Interestingly, there is also a record of a leucistic Magpie Shrike from the same general area in the Birds with Odd Plumages database

(Fitzpatrick Institute of African Ornithology 2022; BOP record: 145). This individual was photographed on 22 March 2014. Could this be the same individual I photographed eight years later? Or could leucism be particularly prevalent in that population?

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BELOW The leucistic Magpie Shrike photographed near Babalala in the Kruger National Park © John Luyt.



Observations at a Black-headed Oriole nest

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY Jody De Bruyn

E-mail: jmdebruyn@gmail.com



ABOVE One of the adults calling near the nest.

It's always exciting finding an active nest. On the 6th of February 2022 (Day 1 of observations), I came across an active Black-headed Oriole nest in Polokwane, and for the next 18 days, I managed to visit the site four times. Here is an account of

various observations that were noted during my visits.

Black-headed Oriole breed from September to February, with most records from October to De-



ABOVE An adult at the nest, feeding the nestlings.

cember (Fry et al. 2000), so this was quite a late nesting record for the species. It is possible that this breeding attempt may have been a repeat-brooding attempt following an earlier successful attempt by this pair, or it may have been a replacement nesting attempt following an earlier failed nesting attempt.

The nest structure, appearance and placement was as described by Tarboton (2011). The nest was almost entirely constructed of grass and other pliable vegetable matter and suspended at a fork of two smaller branches of a *Eucalyptus* tree. There were also small amounts of lichens visible

on the outer surface. The nest was situated about 9 m away from the base of the tree trunk, at some of the lowest hanging (lower canopy) outer branches of the tree. The nest was about 7 m off the ground. I had to familiarise myself with the nest's location, as it was extremely well concealed between the more delicate lead-off twigs and leafy foliage of the outer branch clumps of the tree.

My first views of activity at the nest were of an adult bird that



ABOVE The presumed male feeding a spider to the brooding female.



LEFT One of the adults delivering a large, brown caterpillar.

seemed to be feeding a nestling. I couldn't see the nestling because of the height of the nest, but it appeared that the feeding activity was successful. After a few more feeding attempts, with intervals around 8-15 minutes, the presumed female came to sit on the nest. The male bird then brought the female a spider, which she took and ate. She

brooded for around 20 mins before leaving the nest again.

Considering the incubation period of around 14-16 days (Maclan 1993), laying likely commenced around the 22nd to the

24th of January 2022. The observed feeding activity was also focused on a specific area in the nest. Most of the food items brought were various caterpillars and a single spider, which the female ate. Rudnai (1994) also noticed that most food items delivered to Black-headed Oriole nestlings were caterpillars.

On my second visit on the 13th of February (Day 8), I could see three nestlings in the nest, and both parents were actively feeding them. The visits were regular, with various food items delivered to the nestlings.

These items included various caterpillars, a few moth species, a ladybird beetle and a small unidentified seed pod. On one occasion, the adult brought a sizeable brown caterpillar that was shared between



ABOVE One of the adults delivered an unidentified seed pod.

TOP This large caterpillar was shared between two nestlings.



ABOVE The three nestlings gaping for food on Day 8. Here one of the parents delivered yet another caterpillar,

two of the nestlings. Nest sanitation was a continuous activity and seemed to be performed during every feeding visit. The faecal sacs were removed regularly.

Between feeding visits, I would wait for a movement that would prompt me that one of the adult birds had returned to the nest, but after the first few visits, I noticed that I only needed to listen out for the birds' calling. Both adults were very vocal while approaching the nest. These vocalisations ranged from the bubbling 'PLO-PLO-pleeuuw', 'pleeuuw'

and the harsh 'kheerrrrr'. Many of these calls were also made at the nest, before and after feeding, as observed by Rudnai (1994). I could also, on occasion, hear the other adult bird in the distance answering the adult at the nest.

Once, while both adult birds were away from the nest, a Little Sparrowhawk flew into the nesting tree, perching on a branch about 5 m away from the nest. It made for

a few nervous moments, but fortunately, the nest wasn't found. I presume that one of the adults saw the Little Sparrowhawk fly in. After a few moments, the adult bird started calling continuously from a relative distance away, 'plo-PLO-pleeuuw', 'plo-PLO-pleeuuw'. The Little Sparrowhawk started following the now distant sounds of calling birds. Around 15 minutes had passed before the adults returned to the nest.

During my nest observations, several raptor species were recorded near the nest: a Wahlberg's Eagle followed by a Lanner Falcon, several Amur Falcons, a Gabar Gos-

hawk, a Black Sparrowhawk and of course, the Little Sparrowhawk.

On my third visit on the 22nd of February (Day 17), I was greeted with much larger chicks; unfortunately, there were only two chicks in the nest. Feeding activity was a bit irregular, but both adults still visited the nest, vocalising, feeding, and getting rid of the faecal sacs. The faecal sac removal was an expect-

BELOW The nestlings instinctively presented their cloaca to the parents after feeding. The parents collected the faecal sacs for disposal, keeping the nest and nestlings clean.



ed reaction by both the parents and the nestlings, with the parent bird waiting for the faecal sac to appear after prey delivery. The nestling was also obliging by giving open access to the faecal sac to the parent. The nestlings were now notably more

This nesting period also corresponds to the 15-18 day period reported by Maclean (1993).

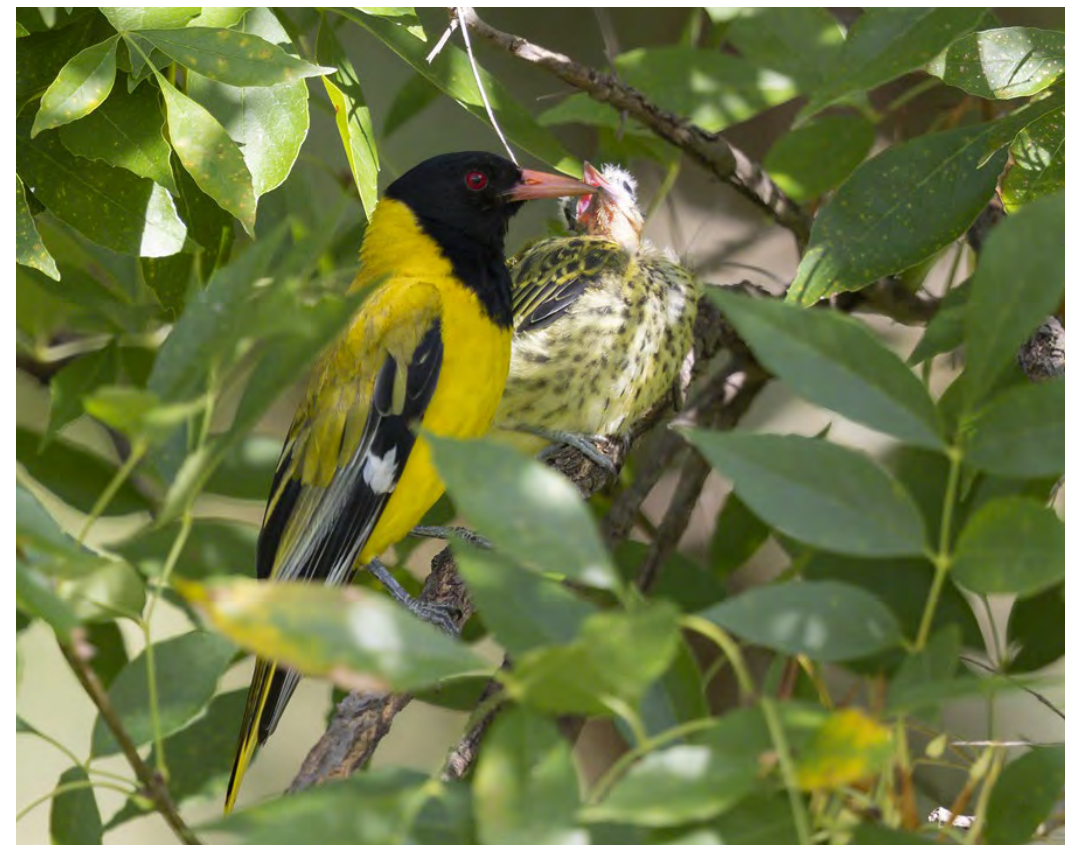
It took me a while before I located one of the fledglings in a tree about 10 m from the nest. It seemed happy in the tree and I noticed that



ABOVE One of the nestlings 'exercising' their wings the day before fledging. Although only two nestlings were observed on Day 17, it is possible that one of the brood may have fledged already.

active and every so often, one of them would flap its wings.

I decided to visit the site the next day to get better photos, as it was overcast and gloomy. On the 23rd February (Day 18), I made my final visit and found the nest empty.



ABOVE A parent feeding one of the fledglings.

the young bird was preening itself. One of the adult birds visited the fledgling and fed it. I couldn't locate its sibling, and I also noticed that only one of the adult birds was around.

I'll be revisiting the nesting site during the next breeding season to see if the birds breed near the old nest again - as reported in the literature (Tarboton 2011). It sure made for some great photographic opportunities and observations.

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Uncovering the mysterious underwing coverts of Dusky Lark

Derek Engelbrecht

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Wing-flicking behaviour is a fairly common behaviour amongst birds. It serves various functions, including self-advertising one's positions and, in several species, flushing prey. Locally, many of the chats, e.g., Familiar, Trac Trac, Sickle-winged and Karoo Chats, Ground-scraper Thrush and Dusky Lark are amongst the best-known wing-flickers.

Although I was aware of wing-flicking in Dusky Lark, I never noticed (or shall I say I was never able to take good enough photos to see it) the strange underwing coverts of Dusky Lark.

BELOW Dusky Lark lifting its wings to expose the underwing coverts and presumably flush prey
© Derek Engelbrecht.



That was until I received an email from my good friend and world lark expert extraordinaire, Paul Donald, a few years ago, asking, "What is this?" (referring to the underwing coverts, of course. not the species!). Recently, Hugh Chittenden highlighted these unusual underwing coverts (see Chittenden 2021). I

ABOVE A front view of the impressive underwing coverts of a Dusky Lark © Mark D. Anderson.

asked myself, how is it possible that nobody ever noticed such a striking feature? In retrospect, it is not something that would be noticed in museum study skins



as the wings are usually closed, and the skins are incredibly fragile.

But what creates this effect? Are these feathers stiffer than in other species? Are the feathers longer? How will we find out? Getting a bird in the hand, of course.

In December 2021, one of my bird ringing bucket list dreams was fulfilled when I trapped two Dusky Larks at Limpokwena on the Limpopo River in South Africa. I couldn't wait

to spread the wings and look at those underwing coverts.

The median and, to a lesser extent, the greater underwing coverts, particularly the most proximal ones, were longer than in any other larks I've handled. Unfortunately, both birds were

ABOVE Another frontal view of the underwing coverts of a foraging Dusky Lark, showing the wispy nature of the most proximal ones
© Hugh Chittenden.

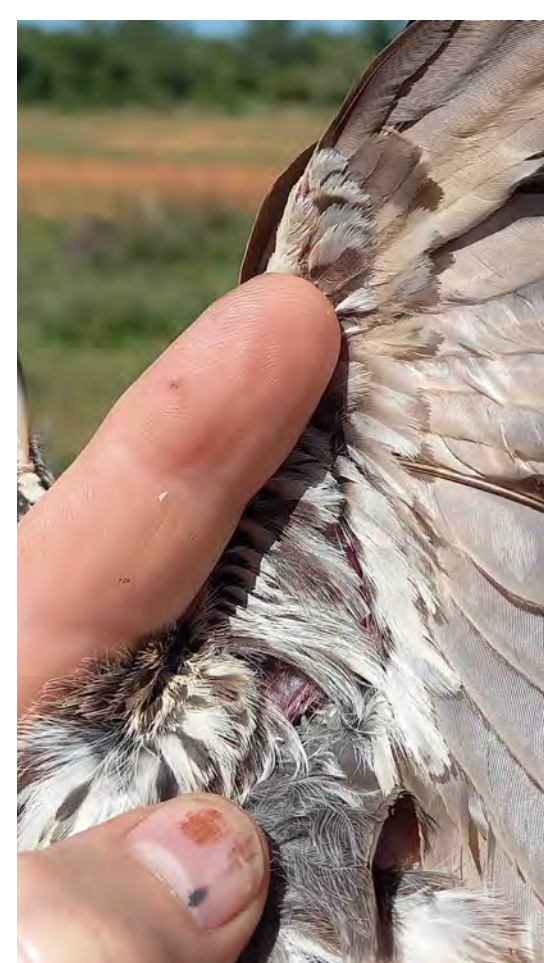


ABOVE A Dusky Lark in the hand
© Derek Engelbrecht.

RIGHT The underwing coverts of Dusky Lark. Only the most proximal lesser median coverts are visible as some were moulting
© Derek Engelbrecht.

moulting some of their outer coverts, so the overall picture is a bit messy, and I cannot offer a credible explanation for the strange appearance of Dusky Lark underwing coverts. There was nothing unusual about these





feathers: they weren't stiffer than any other feathers, but in the most proximal ones, they appeared more wispy. The strongly contrasting black(or rather dusky)-and-white patterning was striking. It may well serve a disorientation function, similar to some suggestions about why zebras have stripes. The proximal, approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of each lesser underwing covert, is dusky-coloured, and the distal part is white. The same holds

more or less for the median underwing coverts, but the dusky colouration extends much further distally on the proximal vane. Although the greater underwing coverts appear almost entirely white, they have dark bases, except the most distal primary greater underwing coverts where they are dark and probably serving a strengthening function.

To conclude, the evidence presented by the under-

wing coverts of Dusky Lark in hand doesn't show any unusual strengthening (stiffness) of these feathers. It may be that the length of these feathers causes the individual median coverts to separate by gravity when the wing is lifted, creating this striking effect. The contrasting dusky-and-white feathers enhance the overall effect, which may improve the 'flush-effect'. My hypotheses are probably too simplistic. I encourage others to

ABOVE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT Underwings of Dusky Lark, Large-billed Lark, Sabota Lark and Rufous-naped Lark © Derek Engelbrecht.

investigate this matter further or to suggest an alternative, credible explanation/s to help solve the mysterious underwing coverts of this enigmatic species.

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Bill deformities and aberrant feathers in birds

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY Jan Fourie

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Deformities and aberrations in birds are more common than generally thought. Once you start looking a little closer at birds, you will start noticing these oddities. These unusual records will be of interest to readers of *The Lark*. Details follow.



ABOVE This Laughing Dove with these unusual feathers on its neck is a regular visitor to my garden in Polokwane.

OPPOSITE TOP A cross-billed Laughing Dove, once again recorded in my garden in Polokwane. This individual is a regular visitor to my feeder and is seemingly little affected by the deformity and is in good condition.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Another cross-billed individual, this time a Spotted Thick-knee, photographed at its nest in Strand, Western Cape Province, on 6 January 2012. Once again, this individual has learnt to cope with the deformity and was in excellent condition.



What's in a name? Short-toed Rock Thrush and Short-clawed Lark

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY Derek Engelbrecht

E-mail: faunalore@gmail.com

What's in a name? So often, we use a name without sparing a thought as to the origin of the name. Let's consider two birds with 'short' in their common names: Short-toed Rock Thrush and Short-clawed Lark.

Firstly, let's distinguish between a toe and a claw. A toe is a digit, and a claw refers to a nail. So, the common name tells us Short-

BELOW A male Short-toed Rock Thrush from Kgwareng, east of Polokwane.



toed Rock Thrush must have short toes (at least notably shorter than other rock thrushes), and Short-clawed Lark tells us its claws must be sufficiently short to have caught the eyes of early taxonomists who first described the species. Let's consider each species separately.

Short-toed Rock Thrush

Initially described in 1838 by Waterhouse as *Petrocincla brevipes* (Alexander 1838), literally meaning rock (= petro) thrush (=

cincla) with short (= brevi) foot (= pes), thus Short-footed Rock Thrush. The species was later assigned to the genus *Monticola* (monti = mountain, cola = to inhabit/dweller). Although traditionally regarded as a true thrush (Turdidae, Turdinae), molecular data revealed that it is closely re-

BELOW A pair of Short-toed Rock Thrush east of Polokwane. The tail pattern resembles that of robin-chats © Willem Van der Merwe.



lated to the chat radiation in the flycatcher family (Muscicapidae, Saxicolinae) (Voelker and Spellman 2004). This placement befits its behaviour which is not unlike that of another local rock-dwelling species, the Mocking Cliff Chat, but the early taxonomists would not necessarily have had the benefit of observing the species in situ. Knowing what we know now, the genus name *Monticola* is more appropriate than *Petrocincla* as it means mountain inhabitant and makes no reference to it being a thrush. OK, so we agree it is associated with rocky terrain, and we now established it is not a thrush but a chat. Does it really have short toes though?

An extract of the relevant text of the original description by Mr G. Waterhouse in 1838 reads:

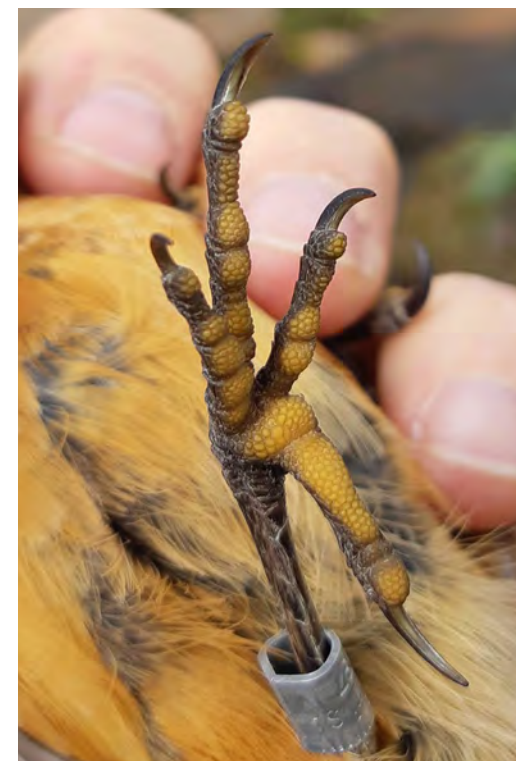
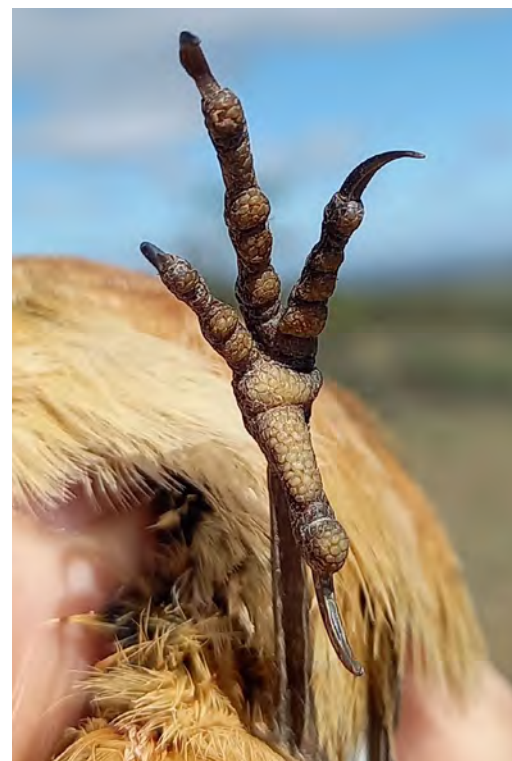
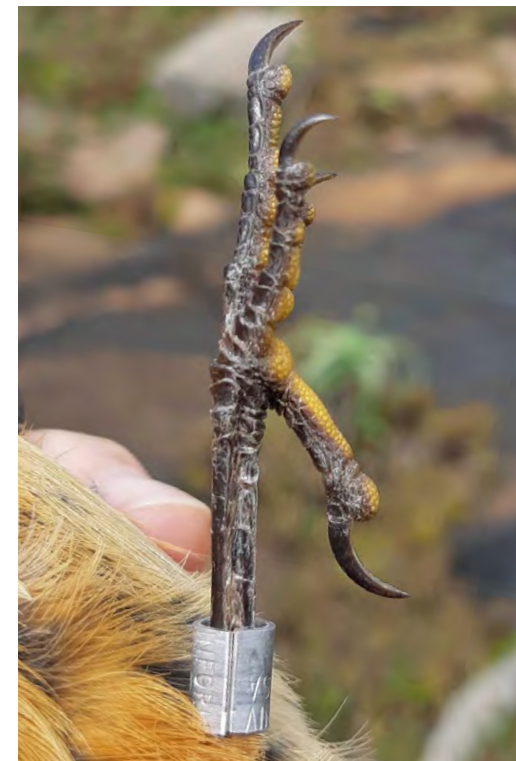
"The specific name of *brevipes* has been applied to this species, from the circumstance of the tarsi being so much shorter in proportion than in those with which it is most closely allied, I allude to the two South African species *P. perspicax* and *P. explorator*. It agrees in size with the former of these, but may at once be distinguished, not only by its short tarsi (which measure upwards of a quarter of an inch less), but in possessing a much longer beak, smaller and shorter toes, and weaker claws—the dilated portion of the central claw

is not so wide, but extends nearer to the apex of the claw. The tail is longer in proportion, ..." (Alexander 1838).

This text suggests the name *brevipes* refers to the short tarsi of the species, which indeed it has (see Figure 1 below). Recall that the tarsus refers to the tarsometatarsal bone, which forms part of the foot, not the digits or toes per se. In addition to the short tarsi, Mr Waterhouse also notes additional distinguishing features such as the longer beak, smaller and shorter toes and weaker claws compared to the Sentinel Rock Thrush he used as a reference. I have had Sentinel Rock Thrush in the hand before, and I can vouch for their long toes (hence the Afrikaans name Langtoonklijplyster, or 'Long-toed Rock Thrush') and more robust claws compared to Short-toed Rock Thrush. But actually, Sentinel Rock Thrush is the odd one out amongst local rock thrushes in terms of the tarsus length (see Figure 1). The images on the opposite page of the feet of Short-toed and Cape Rock Thrushes show the shorter toes of Short-toed compared to Cape Rock

OPPOSITE ABOVE Side profile of the foot of a Short-toed Rock Thrush (LEFT) and Cape Rock Thrush (RIGHT).

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Soles of a Short-toed Rock Thrush (LEFT) and Cape Rock Thrush (RIGHT).



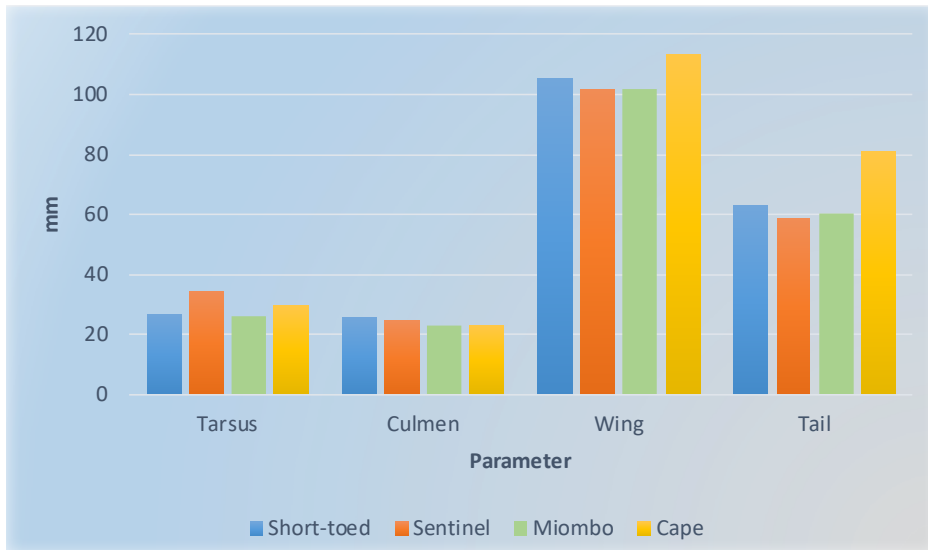
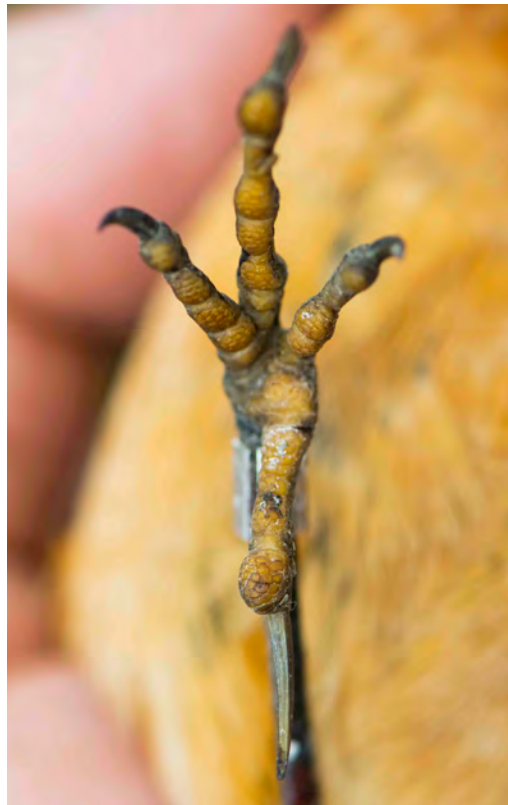


Fig 1. Means of selected biometric parameters of the four southern African rock thrush *Monticola* species (source data: Hockey et al. 2005 and personal data).

Thrush, but bear in mind that the latter is a substantially larger bird than Short-toed Rock Thrush. In short, the Short-toed Rock Thrush does indeed have marginally shorter toes than some other rock thrushes in the region, but its short footedness is arguably a more striking feature.

So, there you have it; a chat that is called a thrush, and a short-footed species which also happens to have short toes. We now know that it is actually a Short-footed Rock Chat! But what's in a name? We all know it as a Short-toed Rock Thrush.



RIGHT The foot sole of a Sentinel Rock Thrush. Note the longer toes and stronger and longer claws.

Short-clawed Lark

Sir Andrew Smith described Short-clawed Lark as *Alauda chuana*, literally meaning Tswana Lark (Smith 1836). There is some debate as to the origin of the name *chuana*. Some authors suggest it stems from a local waterhole known as Chue or Chui near Heuningvlei to the northeast of Latakoo (or Takoon, near modern-day Vryburg), an area Sir Andrew Smith visited during his expedition (Ryan 2020). Chase (1830) mentions that Chuan was an alternative name for a Tswana regional capital at the time, Kurrichane (or Kaditshwene). Cole (1991) wrote it is possible but doubtful that the specific epithet derives from the stem of (*Be*)*chuana*. Personally, I see no reason why not. I've read Sir Andrew Smith's diaries (Kirby 1939), wherein he refers to the people from that region as the Bechuana, so *chuana* is the most logical derivation to me. Without splitting hairs, the type locality of Short-clawed Lark, i.e. north of Latakoo (Takoon), is well within the land of the Tswana people.

Not long after the species became known to science, Sundevall (1850) examined two specimens (probably Wahlberg's specimens) and renamed it *Alauda breviunguis*, meaning lark with short (=brevi) claw/nail (=unguis). He wrote (in Latin) "... ungue postico brevi, arcuato." meaning hind claw short, arched. And there we have it, Short-clawed Lark, although, at this stage, it still didn't have a common name.

What followed for the next one and a half centuries was a bit of to and fro movement between no fewer than five genera, finally ending up in the genus *Certhilauda* where genetic data confirmed it should be. It appears that Shelley (1902) was the first to coin a common name for the species, calling it the Short-clawed Long-billed Lark - thank goodness that name didn't stick! But Shelley had it spot on, and it would take nearly a century before the species would be recognised as such.

BELOW Short-clawed Lark.





So, we established that Short-clawed Lark is a long-billed lark (*Certhilauda*) with short claws. But does it really have short claws? The answer is yes! - at least if you compare it with other long-billed larks. The shortness of the claw refers to the length of the hind claw relative to the hind toe. This holds for most specimens I have checked in situ, but there had been one or two exceptions where the hind claw was marginally longer than the hind toe (by 1, at most, 2 mm). The other long-billed lark species generally have hind claws that are longer than the hind toe (although sometimes only just), but I have seen one or two exceptions. However, the shape of the hind claw is more distinctive, being arched in Short-clawed Lark and straight or almost straight in the other long-billed larks.

To conclude, Short-clawed Lark does indeed have a hind claw that is shorter than the hind claws of its congeners (relative to the hind toe), and the specific epithet *chuana* pays homage to the people - the Tswana people - who have co-existed with

this species for centuries and where the species stronghold is to this day.

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OPPOSITE, TOP Two side profiles of the feet of Short-clawed Lark showing the arched shape of the hind claw and its length relative to the hind toe.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM Side profiles of the feet of a Cape Long-billed Lark (LEFT) and a Karoo Long-billed Lark (RIGHT) showing the straight hind claw and its longer length relative to the hind toe.

The lazy predator

Jody De Bruyn

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On the 14th of April 2022, while atlasing the local Polokwane pentad, I visited the Eduan Park wetland. This popular site which annually hosts Thrush Nightingale, and various other warbler species, also plays host to many bushveld species. The relatively small area is jam packed with good numbers of birds, but it has sadly become a local dumping site over the last couple of years.

With lots of bird movement, the activity was high, and I started adding birds to my atlas list. My attention was drawn to a small Sick-le Bush *Dichrostachys cinerea*, with

several birds moving about in it. On closer inspection, I noticed a snake that was neatly draped over its branches. I took a few cellphone photos and confirmed the snake's identification – a 2 m long Snouted Cobra. Fortunately the snake was very relaxed. I managed to get as close as 1.5 m from the snake and took a few more cellphone photos. Unfortunately, I didn't have my camera.

BELOW The Snouted Cobra draped over the branches of a Sickle Bush
© Jody De Bruyn.



ABOVE A closer view of the lazy predator © Jody De Bruyn.

For the next 45 minutes, I logged all the birds that visited the Sickle Bush to inspect or mob this seemingly lazy predator. In total, 12 bird species visited the bush, with a few having some really close looks at the snake. Here is the list of the species I jotted down:

A very vocal, Crimson-breasted Shrike, 2 Black-faced Waxbills, a chattering Marico Flycatcher, Rattling Cisticola, a male Cape Sparrow, 2 White-browed Sparrow-Weavers which stayed around the whole time, Kalahari Scrub Robin, some Black-throat-

ed Canary, a male Marico Sunbird followed by a male Amethyst Sunbird which seemed to be settling some dispute, a male Green-winged Pytilia, and lastly a beautiful male and female Yellow Canary.

The cobra slowly moved back down the number of branches and disappeared into the tall grasses surrounding the Sickle Bush. Out of sight, out of mind, and the order has been restored - for now.

Striking facial colour changes in breeding egrets

Hugh Chittenden

E-mail: hugh@rarebirds.co.za

If you've never seen egrets in full breeding flush before, you'll be in for a pleasant surprise!

The four snow-white South African egrets may stand out conspicuously in the field, but there is nothing especially colourful about them that

grabs the eye. That is until you see them close-up in breeding plumage. The facial skin, bill and leg colour changes are pretty spectacular! Unfortunately, these distinctive colour changes aren't retained for long, usually for only a couple of weeks at the start of breeding.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*



ABOVE AND TOP Two birds in full breeding flush - facial skin, bill and leg colours at their best (November).

LEFT There is a range of plumage and bare skin colours in Western Cattle Egret. Far left: Non-breeding (September); Centre: Breeding (November); Right: Post-breeding (March).

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*



ABOVE The orange coloured feet seem out of place if you are only used to seeing them 'in yellow'!

Intermediate Egret *Ardea intermedia*



ABOVE None of our egrets are more strikingly coloured during breeding than Intermediate Egret.



ABOVE Standard non-breeding attire!



ABOVE A non-breeding Intermediate Egret.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*



ABOVE The striking lime green facial skin of Great Egret.



ABOVE As the breeding season continues, the blue-green facial skin fades to a pale greenish-grey ...



ABOVE Soon after the start of breeding, the bright green facial skin turns to blue-green.



ABOVE ... and then the bill slowly reverts to its non-breeding yellow colour.
Left: Adult still incubating. Centre: Adult with large nestlings. Right: Post-breeding.

Acknowledgements I thank Warwick and Michele Tarboton for showing us 'their' egret/heron stomping grounds and facil-

itating photographic opportunities. Graham and Trish McGill are thanked for sharing 'their' egret breeding site with us!



Interesting sightings

16 February 2022 - 15 April 2022

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

African Pygmy Kingfisher - 22 February 2022. A young bird seen in a garden in Welgelegen, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).

Black Sparrowhawk - 22 February 2022. A bird flying at Polokwane Golf Club (Jody De Bruyn).

Double-banded Courser - 26 February 2022. A bird nesting in Chebeng grasslands (Derek Engelbrecht).

European Honey Buzzard - 15 March 2022. An immature bird seen in Welgelegen, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).



Double-banded Courser © Derek Engelbrecht

Great Spotted Cuckoo - 27 February 2022. A bird seen at the Peter Mokaba Stadium (Mark Friskin).

Greater Honeyguide - 6 March 2022. A young male seen in a garden in Welgelegen, Polokwane); 6 March 2022. An adult male seen in Chebeng grasslands (Derek Engelbrecht).

Saddle-billed Stork - 9 April 2022. One seen at Makotopong Wetlands (Richter Van Tonder).

PASSERINES

Common Waxbill - 23 February 2022. A male visiting a garden in Welgelegen, Polokwane, for a few days (Derek Engelbrecht).

River Warbler - 1 April 2022. A bird seen at De Loskop (Daniel Engelbrecht).

Thrush Nightingale - 28 March 2022. A bird seen in Eduan Park (Daniel Engelbrecht).

BEST OF THE REST LIMPOPO PROVINCE

NON-PASSERINES

African Skimmer - 6 February 2022. A single bird seen at a dam near Tshipise (Ross Hawkins). *Ed. Slightly late but worth publishing.

Ayres's Hawk-Eagle - 23 February 2022. One seen near Shimuwini, Kruger National Park (Lance Robinson).

Allen's Gallinule - 6 March 2022. One seen at Bavaria Estate, Hoedspruit (Taya Maasch).



Saddle-billed Stork © Richter Van Tonder



River Warbler © Daniel Engelbrecht



European Honey Buzzard © Derek Engelbrecht



Ayres's Hawk-Eagle © Lance Robinson

Dwarf Bittern - 6 April 2022. One seen at Diepdrift in the Waterberg (Warwick Tarboton).

Freckled Nightjar - 16 February 2022. One seen at Leokwe Camp in Mapungubwe National Park (John Randall).

Grey-headed Kingfisher - 27 March 2022. One seen on the Limpopo River at Platjan (Derek Engelbrecht); 15 April 2022. One seen at Marataba Game Reserve (Derek Engelbrecht).

Red Phalarope - 05 March 2022. One seen at Bavaria Estate outside Hoedspruit (PG Oosthuizen).

Rufous-bellied Heron - 21 February 2022. A single bird seen at Thornybush Game Reserve (André De Kock).

Slaty Egret - 5 March 2022. One seen at Vogelfontein, Nylsvley Nature Reserve (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

PASSERINES

Collared Sunbird - 27 March 2022. Several seen feeding in flowering Ana Trees on the Limpopo River near Platjan (Derek Engelbrecht).

Common Whitethroat - 21 March 2022. One seen at Olifants River North Game Reserve (Lizel Grobbelaar).

River Warbler - 27 March 2022. A bird calling from dense riparian bush on the Limpopo River near Platjan (Derek Engelbrecht).

South African Cliff Swallow - 9 April 2022. Two birds seen near Vaalwater (Martin Benadie).



Dwarf Bittern © Warwick Tarboton



Red Phalarope © Steve Benbow



Slaty Egret © Minkie Prinsloo



Common Whitethroat © Lizel Grobbelaar



Mouse Free Marion

BE A PART OF HISTORY AND HELP SAVE MARION ISLAND'S SEABIRDS

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HELP SAVE OUR SEABIRDS

BirdLife South Africa is collaborating with the Department of Environmental Affairs and the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology to rid the island of mice and restore it towards its once-pristine beauty.

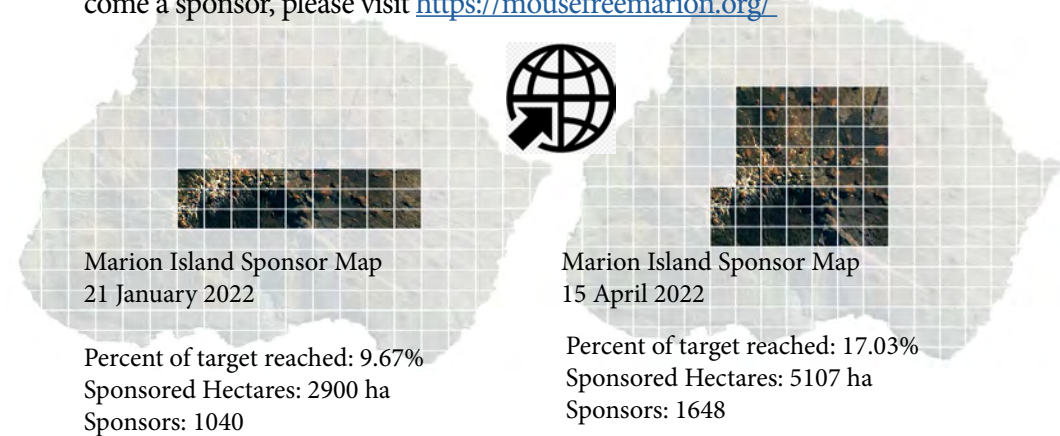
The bait required to cover the island alone will cost upwards of R30 million. To help raise the necessary funds, please would you consider sponsoring one or more hectares of land on Marion Island.

At R1000 (US\$90), 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.

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/>



UPCOMING EVENTS



Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting a

Date: 03 May 2022

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting

Date: 07 June 2022

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting

Date: 05 July 2022

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Club outing

Where? Woodbush Forest

Date: 14 May 2022

Contact: Richter van Tonder

Cell: 082 213 8276

Shopping list: Orange Ground Thrush, Narina Trogon, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Brown Scrub Robin, Cape Parrot, Barratt's Warbler, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler.

Club outing

Where? Mockfords Vulture Restaurant

Date: 11 June 2022

Contact: Richter van Tonder

Cell: 082 213 8276

Shopping list: Cape Teal, various vultures including Hooded, Lappet-faced, Cape and White-backed, Marabou Stork, Secretarybird..

Cinderella's page

Birdlife Polokwane honours the LBJs of our world which may never make it onto a cover page.



Kalahari Scrub Robin © Jody De Bruyn