

THE LARK

The Birdlife Polokwane Magazine 42, July/August 2022

Club outings
**Woodbush
&
Mockford**
Vulture Restaurant

Penguins released
at De Hoop

Vocal mimicry in Arnot's Chat • Pale Chanting Goshawk diet • Red-billed Quelea eating flower petals • Three-banded Coursers in the Timbavati • The throat patch of korhaans • Northern Black Korhaan nests • Ovambo Sparrowhawk kill! • White-backed Vulture resighting • Why vultures don't get sick from eating rotten flesh


Birdlife
Polokwane

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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 AUGUST 2022

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

COVER Red-billed Oxpecker on Impala
© Derek Engelbrecht

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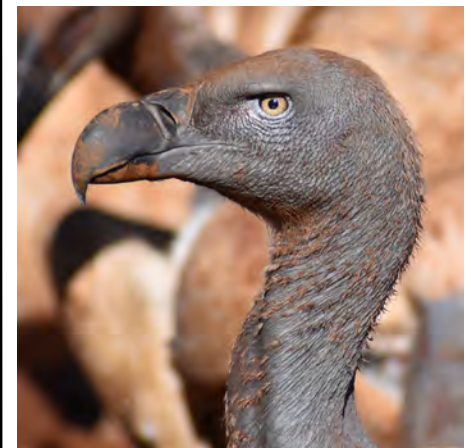
Woodbush en omgewing 5

Richter Van Tonder het 'n klubuitstappie na Woodbush en omgewing gelei, en hy deel met ons wat hulle gesien het.



Mockford Farms 11

The annual outing to the Mockford Vulture Restaurant is a popular fixture on the club's calendar. **Minkie Prinsloo** reports back.



De Hoop Penguins 19

Press release by Birdlife South Africa.



For a lark ...



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Editors' chirps

In recent months, we heard a lot about 'the perfect storm' of events on the world stage, disrupting supply chains and causing general social and economic distress across much of the globe. It seems we also didn't escape the 'storm': the coldest winter in Polokwane in years, loadshedding, and fuel price hikes means many of us decided to retreat and sit it out, with birding taking a back-seat. If you are one of those, why don't you use the time to go through some old photos and find us something interesting you would like to share with the world. We'd love to include it in upcoming issues of *The Lark*. If you braved the cold and went birding, you would have been treated with an epic influx of Capped Wheatears into our region. Quite a few of us also went to twitch the latest addition to the southern African bird list - a Wood Warbler overwintering in Phalaborwa. Never underestimate a cold winter's day!

This issue contains a menagerie of interesting articles, including two reports of recent club outings and a real feel-good story about Birdlife SA's attempt to establish a penguin colony at the aptly named De Hoop. Our ever-popular Bird Briefs section features notes about Arnot's Chat, Three-banded Courser, Ovambo Sparrowhawk, korhaans, vultures, and some unusual dietary records. As always, a hearty welcome to our first-time contributors, Willie Sonnenberg and Anthony Paton. 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 last weeks of winter - our next issue is the spring issue, and some of the returning migrants will have arrived already.

Enjoy the reading.

Raelene and Derek



Die legendariese

Woodbush en omgewing

Richter van Tonder

Een van die bekendste plekke in Suid Afrika om bergwoud spesies te soek, is die welbekende Forest Drive in die Magoebaskloof omgewing, Limpopo Provinsie. Ons is gelukkig dat hierdie stukkie natuurskoon nog behoue is.

Dis alreeds die tyd van die jaar wanneer meeste van die trekvoëls weg is. So, die plan met hierdie uitstappie was om die unieke spesies wat hier agterbly, te kry.

Baie voëlkykers kom soek die spesiale goed soos Swart-oogboslaksman (Black-fronted Bushshrike) en Oranjelyster (Orange Ground Thrush), maar daar is soveel meer om te sien. Ons was ongeveer 12 lede van Birdlife



Polokwane wat omtrent so 7 uur by Forest Drive aan gekom het. Drie nuwe lede en ook nuut tot die stokperdjie was saam gewees. Hulle was Mpho Mboweni, Leon en Quintin Koetse. Welkom aan hulle.

Die weer was mooi en daar was darem geen mistigheid nie. Ons eerste spesie vir die dag

LINKS Elke sport het maar sy beserings, in die geval stywe nekke van voëlskyk in die woud. Ons groepie op die Woodbush Forest Drive
© Julia Friskin.

ONDER Een van die sterre van die dag - 'n Transvaalse Dwerg Verkleurmannetjie
© Richter van Tonder.



was die Woudpapegaai (Cape Parrot) wat hard, hoog bo in bloekombome geskree het. Maar ons kon hulle ongelukkig net nie te siene kry nie. Ons het toe 'n rustige plekkie in die natuurlike woud gekry om koffie te geniet, en terwyl ons daar gestaan het het daar oral om ons spesies deurbeweeg. Ons kon Kaapse Bosbontrokkies (Cape Batis), Bandkeelkleinantjies (Bat-throated Apalis), Geelstreepboskruipers (Yellow-streaked Greenbul), Bloukuifvlieëvangter (Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher),

Bo Die Bloukatakeroe (Grey Cuckooshrike) kan maar moeilik wees om te siene te kry, en die geluk was aan ons kant
© Jody De Bruyn.

Klein-rooibandsuikerbekkie (Southern Double-collared Sunbird) en 'n ratse Lawaaimakerjanfrederik (Chorister Robin-Chat) aftik. Verder af op Forest Drive het ons op 'n Transvaalse Dwerg Verkleurmannetjie (Wolkberg Dwarf Chameleon) afgekom. Almal kon hiedie outjie mooi van naby af beskou met



LINKS Die Woudkanarie (Forest Canary) was maar baie sku © Jody De Bruyn.

die hulp van Willie Van der Merwe.

Die woud was nog baie dig as gevolg van die goeie (en laat) reën dié seisoen. So, die meeste spesies was gehoor eerder as gesien, maar dis maar boskyk vir jou. Ander spesies wat ook gewaar was was Gryskopspeg (Olive Woodpecker), Witkoljanfrederik (White-starred Robin), Geelkeelsanger (Yellow-throated Wood-



Jackal Buzzard © Jody De Bruyn



land Warbler), Gewone Wille (Sombre Greenbul) en Ruigte Sanger (Barrat's Warbler).

Hierna het ons met 'n agterpad terug beweeg na Stanford Lake toe. Oppad soontoe het ons Swartsaagvlerkswael (Black Saw-wing), Langkuifarend (Long-crested Eagle) en Rooiborsjakkalvoël (Jackal Buzzard) kon opspoor naby die vlei by Bramasole. Spesies wat hier mooi vertoon het was Gewone Bontrokkie (African Stone Chat), Drakensberglangstertjie (Drakensberg Prinia), Rooibeklyster (Kurrichane Thrush), Gewone Janfrederik (Cape Robin-Chat) en Vleitinktinkie (Levaillant's Cisticola).

Verder met hierdie pad aan het ons weer gestop by riete in 'n groot vlei area by Stanford Lake. Hier was almal in hulle skik om 'n Geelsanger (African Yellow Warbler) te sien wat baie mooi vir ons vertoon het en ook gesing het. Ander spesies hier was onder andere 'n Kaapse Flap (Yellow Bishop), Goudwewer (Holub's Golden Weaver), Swarteend (African Black Duck), Rooireier (Purple Heron) en Bontkwikkie (African Pied Wagtail), wat toe ook die laaste spesies vir die uitstappie was.

Die totale lys vir pentad was 61 spesies. Dankie aan elkeen wat dit kon bywoon.

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Drakensberg Prinia © Jody De Bruyn

Birdlife Polokwane's

MOCKFORD FARMS

club outing

Minkie Prinsloo



As the sun peeked from behind the eastern hills, it saw eight members of Birdlife Polokwane heading south to Mockford Farms. As we stopped just outside the farm's gate to scan the surroundings, the temperature was at -1°C . Luckily for us, this didn't scare the birds away. Our initial scan produced the resident Long-crested Eagle, Grey Go-away-bird, Helmeted Guineafowl, Arrow-marked Babbler, Southern Fiscal and Natal Spur-fowl.

The plan for the morning was to drive around the farm and find a sunny spot for some coffee before heading to one of the dams



ABOVE A very cold Black-throated Canary making the most of the early morning sun © Richter Van Tonder.



LEFT African Wattled Lapwing were encountered in the open fields © Elize Mostert.

and then to the vulture hide. While looking for the right coffee spot, we listed Marabou Stork, Black-headed Heron, Red-billed Teal, Crowned Lapwing, Golden-breasted Bunting and the first Cape Vulture for the day.

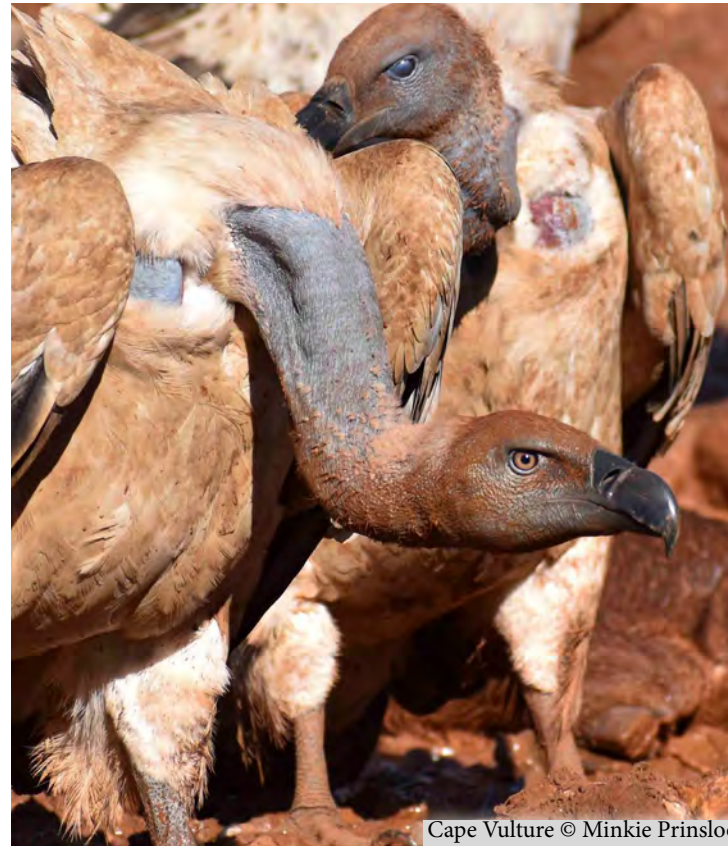


We found our coffee spot, quickly scanned the area and enjoyed our coffee. Here we found Amethyst Sunbird, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Bearded

ABOVE Cape Teal are tough birds to find on the Polokwane Plateau, but the Mockford Farms is arguably the most reliable spot in the area © Elize Mostert.



Hooded Vulture © Richter Van Tonder



Cape Vulture © Minkie Prinsloo



Lappet-faced Vulture © Minkie Prinsloo

Woodpecker, Black-headed Oriole, Kurrichane Thrush, Cape White-eye and Fork-tailed Drongo. Heading from there to the dam, we added African Wattled Lapwing, Yellow-fronted Canary, Black-throated Canary, Burchell's Coucal, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Namaqua Dove and Magpie Shrike.

Upon arrival at the dam, we were surprised by a Shikra. The dam also produced Cape Teal, Black Crane, Three-banded Plover, Common Moorhen, Quailfinch, White-faced Whistling Duck and a quick flyby of a Black Heron. From here, we headed to the 'main event',

the Mockford Vulture Restaurant, where the carcasses were already placed for the birds.

As soon as we got out of our vehicles, we could hear the feeding frenzy going on in front of the hide,

so we grabbed our coffee baskets and headed into the hide. A fantastic sight greeted us; only a couple of metres from where we were seated, the vultures had their feast. It was difficult to decide where to look; there were vultures everywhere, mostly Cape and White-backed Vulture, but there were also

many Marabou Storks and a couple of Hooded and Lappet-faced Vultures. Some other birds around the feeding site included Marico Flycatcher, Acacia Pied Barbet and Cape Sparrow.

They entertained us for more than an hour, fighting over the food, screaming at one another, chasing each other off, and flying overhead. We scanned every tree and incoming vulture, hoping to see the Palm-nut Vulture that often hangs around, but it was not here this time. But the other vultures more than made up for its absence.

From the hide, we headed to a few more dams before heading



home. On our way out, we added Gabar Goshawk, Little Grebe, Yellow-billed Duck, Jameson's Firefinch, White-throated Robin-Chat, Cut-throat Finch, Pearl Spotted Owllet and Lesser Honeyguide, bringing our tally for the morning

up to 108 species. Not too bad for a cold winter's morning.

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ABOVE It is always a thrill to see these magnificent birds such as this Lappet-faced Vulture at close range © Richter Van Tonder.

BIRD OF THE YEAR 2022

CAPE GANNET

COLONIAL LIVING



A CROWDED HOUSE

Cape Gannets breed in densely crowded colonies on flat or gently sloping open ground on 6 islands offshore of Namibia and South Africa. The shortage of suitable habitats that are free from land predators and close enough to their preferred foraging areas results in densely packed island colonies with tens of thousands of gannets on nests. You can get up close to a gannet colony at **Lambert's Bay** on the West Coast of South Africa.

'karak-karak-karak'

FUN FACT

When returning to its nest, a gannet makes a special 'landing call', which is recognized by its **mate**. In all the pandemonium and noise of thousands of gannets, it can recognise its mate's distinctive reply. This helps it pinpoint its own nest. It then lands, helicopter-like, directly at its own nest, which prevents unnecessary squabbling with the pair's difficult neighbours.



MATES FOR LIFE

Cape Gannets are **monogamous**, breeding with only one **mate** during their lifetime. They return each year to the same island colony and reunite to breed with that same mate.

Their mud and **guano** nests are built on the ground, and have a cup-shaped hollow into which only one egg (rarely two) is laid. The single, bluish-white egg is **incubated** under the large, webbed feet of the parents. This helps to maintain it at a constant temperature and keep it safe from predators.

Both adults look after the chick, taking turns to forage for food at sea. When they return to the nest, they **regurgitate** their nutritious fishy meal to feed their ravenous chick.

The fully feathered, mottled chocolate-brown and white **juvenile** finally **fledges** after about 3 months, leaving the safety of the crowded colony. The **fledgling** goes to sea to forage for prey, spending between two to three years at sea before returning to the colony to breed.

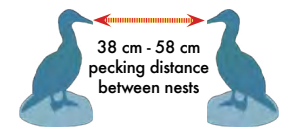


MAINTAINING THE SPARK

To strengthen the bond between a breeding pair of gannets, they often perform elaborate **courtship** rituals. One such ritual is called '**fencing**' and involves pointing their beaks skywards, while crossing their slender necks, rubbing their long bills against one another as if sharpening swords.

what's that SMELL?

You will smell a colony of gannets before you see one. Colonies are noisy, smelly and crowded neighbourhoods, thanks to white **guano**-splattered rocks, muddy puddles, and regurgitated fish.



KEEPING THE PEACE

Gannets are fiercely **territorial**, defending their nest site from intruders by a variety of gestures such as bowing, beak pointing, head shaking and even vicious pecking using their surprisingly sharp and powerful beaks. To maintain order and harmony in the tightly packed colony, each nest is cleverly spaced just beyond the **pecking range** of the feisty neighbours.

Because of their long wings, gannets need a long runway or elevated rock from which to take off. In the crowded colony they must run the gauntlet of sharp beaks to get to the desired launching area. They perform a '**sky-pointing**' gesture, stretching their necks upwards and pointing their beaks in the air to keep the peace with their neighbours as they pass quickly through the colony. The dramatic black gular stripe, running down the front of the throat, accentuates this recognised gesture of non-aggression in a potentially volatile gannet colony.



OVER 100 AFRICAN PENGUINS RELEASED

at De Hoop Nature Reserve
during the past two years



African Penguin © Derek Engelbrecht

In an attempt to re-establish an African Penguin colony at the De Hoop Nature Reserve, South Africa, BirdLife South Africa, CapeNature and SANCCOB have released over 100 juvenile penguins at the reserve over the past two years.

African Penguin numbers have declined by over 60% in the last 30 years, mainly due to a lack of food. In response, BirdLife South Afri-

ca partnered with CapeNature and SANCCOB to create a new breeding colony for African Penguins in an area of high fish abundance. The chosen site, at the De Hoop Nature Reserve, was the location of a short-lived penguin colony in the early 2000s which was abandoned due to predation by caracal. Since 2018, a predator-proof fence has been installed to make the site safe for penguins to breed. The first phase of the

project involved the use of life-like penguin decoys and a speaker playing penguin calls to trick penguins into thinking a colony already existed there.

After two years of attempting to attract the penguins naturally, the next step was to release juvenile penguins at the site. “We released the first group of 30 penguins in June 2021. It was a very exciting day and was an important step in the pro-





A nesting African Penguin © Derek Engelbrecht

gression of the project,” says Christina Hagen, the Pamela Isdell Fellow of Penguin Conservation at BirdLife South Africa, the project leader.

The released penguins come from existing colonies, mostly from CapeNature’s Stony Point Nature Reserve at Betty’s Bay. They were abandoned by their parents as eggs or chicks and subsequently hand reared by SANCCOB, a world-leader in seabird rehabilitation. “We need to release young penguins as they still need to choose a breeding colony. Once a penguin breeds somewhere, they are unlikely to move to a different colony, so the key is to get the young penguins to imprint on the De Hoop site,” says Dr David Roberts, Clinical Veterinarian at SANCCOB.

Since the first release, five other groups of penguins have been released, 148 birds in total. The last three groups have been released after spending the night in a pen on the beach to familiarise them with the area. Once released, they leave the colony site and are expected to spend the next few years at sea, learning how to fend for themselves, and prospecting at different colonies.

It was during the last release that an exciting discovery was made. After the penguins had been released, David Roberts came back from his vantage point where he’d watched the birds going to sea and found an adult penguin under a boulder. On

further inspection, it looked like an adult that may have recently moulted (replaced all of its feathers). After looking around the area cautiously, the team found two more adult penguins showing no signs of moulting. “I almost couldn’t believe my eyes and had to make sure they weren’t decoys! This is such a positive moment for the project. While we don’t know if the penguins will stay and breed, it is a very encouraging sign,” says Hagen. The penguins will be monitored carefully from a distance so as not to disturb them during this sensitive prospecting period.

“We are very encouraged by the presence of adult penguins at the De Hoop Nature Reserve colony site. While it is still early days, it provides hope that the project will be successful.” – Dr Razeena Omar Cape Nature’s Chief Executive Officer.

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Regulars

Birds in Art

Great Crested Grebe

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe

In this issue, we feature a very decorative birdy, a Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*. The scientific name means 'crested vent-foot' (alluding to its feet set far back on its body). Grebes are fascinating birds, highly adapted to their diving lifestyle. In South Africa, the Great Crested Grebe isn't very common, but I've been lucky to have seen it fairly well in the Turfloop Nature Re-

serve. These birds are about chicken-sized, reaching 51 cm in length and a weight of 1.5 kg.

Flamingo relatives

Genetic and morphological studies have discovered an amazing relationship



Great Crested Grebe

between grebes and flamingos. Aside from both inhabiting water bodies, they look extremely different in every aspect of their build. Flamingos most resemble birds like cranes, storks and herons, while grebes most resemble the loons or divers of the north. But indeed, flamingos and grebes are more closely related to each other than to the birds that resemble them in form and lifestyle. This again shows how malleable the bodies and lives of birds (not to mention all other things) are through evolution. In this case, it has been operating for a very long time. It is possible that the shared ancestor of grebes and flamingos was alive even back when the non-avian dinosaurs still ruled, the Late Cretaceous. But the oldest true grebe fossils we have found, date to the Oligocene Period, between about 39 and 23 million years ago. Taxonomists propose a group called the Mirandornithes ('miraculous birds') to include the flamingos and the grebes.

Amazing Displays

Grebes are interesting because both males and females grow beautiful decorative head plumage during breeding, and the Great Crested Grebe is one of the most elaborate. Its breeding head plumage includes big, fluffy, reddish-brown cheeks and a dark crest that separates into horn-like tips. Outside the breeding season, the grebes have whitish

faces with dark caps and no lengthened cheek or crown feathers.

The courtship displays of the Great Crested Grebe strengthen the couple's bonds. But displays are also used by birds when first setting out to find a mate to breed with. The displays usually start at the onset of the breeding season. The male and female typically live separately when not breeding, so the display helps them, when finding each other as the new season starts, to recognise each other and quickly re-establish the close bond between them. The first element of this display is the 'discovery ceremony'. One bird swims towards the other under the water, then rises dramatically in what is called the 'ghost penguin display'. On seeing its mate, the other bird draws its head in and spreads its wings in the 'cat display', showing the white feathers of its inner wings. They may also swim rapidly towards each other, then rise high breast to breast, wagging their heads from side to side to show their cheeks. Or both birds act nonchalant, exaggeratedly preening their feathers. They may grab pieces of aquatic vegetation and present them to each other, symbolising nest material, in what is called the weed ceremony. The final part of the display sees the birds rapidly pattering over the water side by side, stretching their necks forward, in what is called the retreat ceremony.



Then they mate, the male jumping on the female's back and nibbling at her head plumage. This happens on the nest, which is a big pile of floating vegetation anchored either to plants at the water edge or below the surface.

Both sexes construct the nest platform, and the female lays two to five eggs on it. Both sexes incubate. When leaving the nest, the parents will cover the eggs with vegetation to hide them when there is a threat or disturbance. The chicks hatch

open-eyed and covered in down. They have striped plumage, which conceals them well if they need to hide within reeds or grass at the waterside. They can already swim but will sometimes stay in the nest while their parents are away. Alter-

ABOVE The double-tufted crest of a Great Crested Grebe resembles horns. The elongated ear coverts create the distinctive neck ruff of the species © Derek Engelbrecht.

natively, they ride on the backs of their swimming parents. The male and female divide the brood between them, each time accompanying the same chicks. These gradually learn to dive and catch their prey, which varies from fish and tadpoles to various of aquatic invertebrates.

The Great Crested Grebe is remarkably widely distributed. It occurs throughout the more high-lying and temperate parts of Africa. It is present throughout most of Europe and Asia, the ones of the more northern regions migrating southward to escape the cold winters. They also occur in the moister parts of Australia and New Zealand's South Island. They inhabit a variety of water bodies and are sometimes seen on the coast. In

South Africa, they can be seen as an indicator of water quality, as they will avoid turbid water or water carrying a large load of organic material or algae.

Great Crested Grebes have historically suffered under humans. In the 19th century, their head plumes were used for women's hats, while their dense body feathers were called 'grebe fur' and used for women's capes and muffs. This led to the species almost becoming extinct in Britain, and declining in Europe. After the collapse of the millinery trade, the grebes made a good recovery. Presently, the species is abundant and widespread enough not to be considered a species of conservation concern.

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View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



SOUTHERN GROUND-HORNBILLS

ON YOUR PROPERTY?

DO

- **Do** report any sightings with GPS coordinates.
- **Do** share any information and photo's.
- **Do** report and protect natural nests.
- **Do** cover all windows when left unattended for long periods.
- **Do** chase birds away from homesteads.
- **Do** report any sick or injured ground-hornbill to us so we can attempt to rehabilitate it as each and every one is precious.

DON'T

- **Don't** feed the birds.
- **Don't** use lead ammunition when hunting or remove all offal from the veld as lead is a neurotoxin
- **Don't** use pesticides in any other way than what is on the label.
- **Don't** disturb their nest site.
- **Don't** touch any dead ground-hornbill before you have made contact with us as it may be poisoned and as such a risk to you.



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Reflections

REFLECTIONS

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

Babalala and Boyela Bounty: Kruger's Northern Plains

Chris Patton

So many Kruger-holics are dismissive of the Northern Plains of the Park between Shingwedzi and Punda Maria Rest Camps. They argue the thornveld savannah of the southern half of the Park is more to their taste. Also, in many of their erroneous opinions, the thornveld savannah to the south is richer in game and a more attractive landscape than the drier rolling Northern Plains with their grass-covered drainage lines. The landscape is dominated by shrub mopane and is particularly rich in elephant, buffalo, kudu, impala and zebra ... lion and hyena are the dominant predators, but this is also the domain of rarer antelope species like eland, Sharpe's grysbok, Lichtenstein's hartebeest, roan antelope and tsessebe, while rarer

carnivores like serval, side-striped jackal, cheetah and wild dog should be looked out for.

To be fair, mopane-veld can have a certain sameness to it. Particularly, driving through it in a vehicle can sometimes become a bit blurry, but dismiss its attractions at your peril. There is arguably more to see on the Northern Plains than further south, and all sorts of birding attractions will be found with a little application. For best results, these Northern Plains should be driven through early in the morning when the grass is still wet from overnight dew.

So many of us visiting the Park's Far North will instead (and perhaps understandably) focus on the drives around 'Punda' or 'Shing', or make the trek up to the Pafuri area. If the



length of your stay in these northern camps allows it, or if you are staying at Sirheni Bushveld Camp, try and spend some early morning hours in the Northern Plains, particularly in the short stretch between Babalala Picnic Site and Boyela Waterhole.

Little and Large

The Northern Plains are a great place to see the Park's largest birds... and some of its smallest. They are one of the prime places in the Park to reliably find Common Ostrich, for which Kruger, alongside Kgalagadi, supposedly have the only pure, untainted populations of the southern race of Common Ostrich. It is said that many of the ostriches in the rest of the country are from stock influ-

ABOVE The Northern Plains are a haven for Kruger's biggest flying bird. Flocks of Kori's sometimes gather in open areas after good rain © Derek Engelbrecht.

enced by the ostrich ranching industry, where the larger North African subspecies were introduced into the population, as it reputedly has better feather, meat and leather quality. And while the Common Ostrich is the biggest of all, plenty of other large birds frequent the Northern Plains... The world's heaviest flying bird, the Kori Bustard, is regularly seen, as is the Park's other resident bustard, the Black-bellied.... It is not uncommon, particularly in the



LEFT A Black-bellied Bustard with neck extended, about to start its comical call that will end in that characteristic pop
© Derek Engelbrecht.

early mornings, to encounter males of this species uttering their champagne cork popping impression, where they contort their bodies and make that enchanting sound...

Other large birds on show will include Secretary-birds, and Southern Ground Hornbills, while the Park's largest eagle, the Martial, is another one to watch out for.

On the tiny front, Zitting and Desert Cisticola, and Quail Finch are all frequently encountered. Still, they are so small and, in some cases displaying so aerially that hearing their calls helps detect them easier than sight...

LEFT A somewhat unusual perched shot of one of the Park's aerial type cisticolas – a Zitting Cisticola
© Chris Patton.



For flocks sakes

One prevalent feature of the Northern Plains of Kruger is the large flocks of the almost locust-like species, the Red-billed Quelea and the murmurations of African Wattled Starlings... These are most impressive in the early mornings and evenings, as the birds depart or return from

a day's foraging from their roosting places, but nevertheless can be seen in less dramatic flocks throughout the day...

BELOW A 'swarm' of non-breeding plumage Red-billed Quelea
© Scott Chalmers.



Having a lark

Another bird seen in smaller flocks (than the quelea and starlings) in the Northern Plains is the Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark. These birds will easily be found feeding on the roadside verge of the main tar road.



Uncharacteristically colourful for a lark, a male Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark (LEFT) is a common roadside species along the H1, while exclusively in the summertime, Dusky Larks (BELOW) are a little harder to find © Derek Engelbrecht.

Like most birds, they have an annoying habit of taking flight as a vehicle approaches, which is a pity because, unlike most larks, the males are genuinely stunning. I wouldn't say the Northern Plains are Lark heaven, certainly not like other grasslands or Karoo parts of the country, but by Kruger standards, there are a few larks to look for in this area... Dusky Lark for one in the summertime, Red-capped Lark, and as a nomadic invader after good rains, large numbers of Monotonous Lark with their resonant refrain will invade the Plains.



Summer loving

All year round, characteristic birds of the whole of Kruger, particularly the Northern Plains, include Magpie Shrikes and Lilac-breasted Rollers. Still, in summer, they get overrun in numbers by their migratory cousins, the Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes and the European Roller.

But, from mid-December until about late March every

year, the Park gets invaded by the stunning Southern Carmine Bee-eaters, that apparently breed in Botswana's Delta region and then move to the Mpumalanga and the Limpopo Lowveld.

Curiously, they always seem to arrive in the south of the Park a day or two before the north, filling the Park up from the bottom... but it is in the Northern Plains where their numbers will be the greatest.

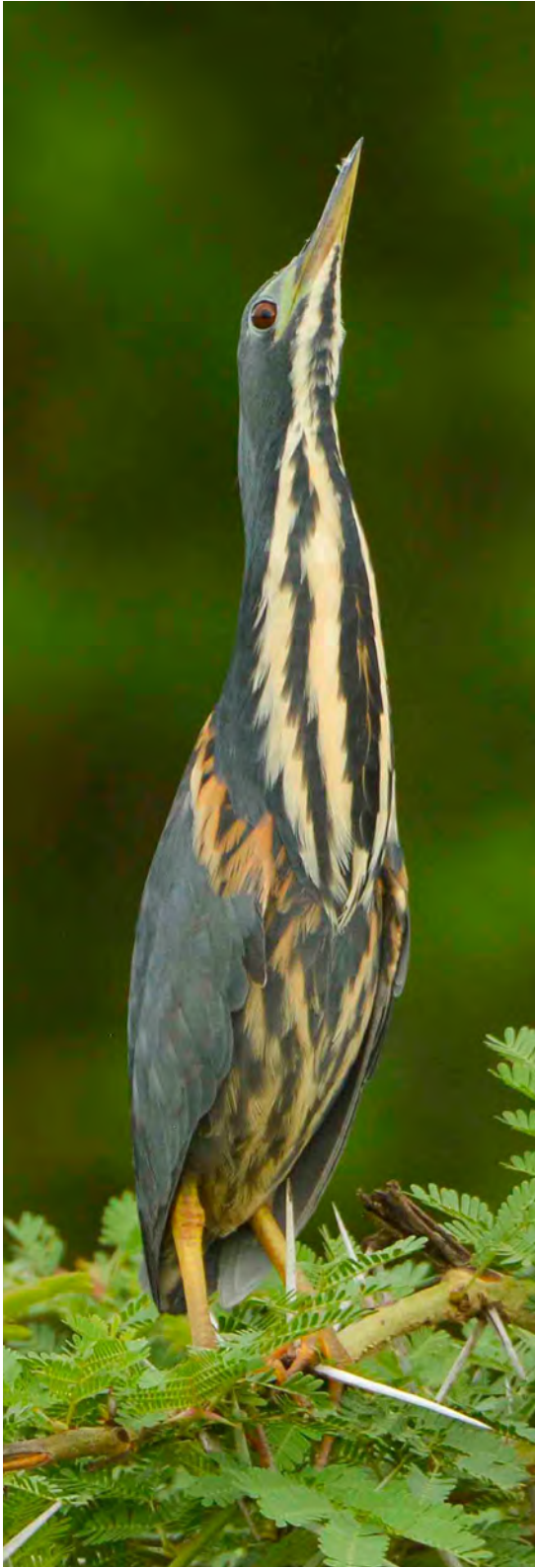


ABOVE Who needs lights and decorations when the exquisite Southern Carmine Bee-eaters arrive annually in the Northern Plains just in time for Christmas? © Daniel Engelbrecht.

Rain means rewards

Now, the movements of many migratory birds mentioned above are undoubtedly influenced by rainfall and its effect on veld conditions and insect eruptions. Species like Harlequin Quail and Kurichane Buttonquail will suddenly and mysteriously arrive in good numbers. Still, one of the best fea-

tures of the seasonal summer rains is the ephemeral pans that punctuate the veld, many of which are roadside, perhaps influenced by



runoff from both the tar and gravel road surfaces. These need to be carefully explored... White-winged Widowbirds will be obvious, but then there will be the skulkers like Dwarf Bittern and Greater Painted-Snipe, both of which will be present in good numbers but not always easy to see.

Babalala

Because traffic is generally sparser in the Far North than in the south of the Park, there is only the one designated get out point between Punda Maria and Shin-gwedzi... Babalala.

Babalala is the Park's second most northerly picnic site, located on the main tar road arterial (the H1), just over 40 km from the Punda Maria Gate. The name is Tsonga and was of a person who formerly lived there in earlier times. It is at the H1/S56 junction, with that gravel road one of the access roads to Sirheni Bushveld Camp.

At first glance, Babalala looks quaint but almost bland compared to some of the Park's other picnic sites, as it is not on the banks of a river or dam, nor on a hillside or other point of elevation... There is, however an impressive copse of

LEFT Dwarf Bittern will arrive in good numbers and love the numerous ephemeral pans that decent rain creates © Daniel Engelbrecht.

giant trees (from memory, including Natal Mahogany, Sycamore Fig and Leadwood) rising like skyscrapers above the surrounding plains and overlooking a thatched cemented platform where travelers gather to eat or cook on the gas skottels for hire.

The trees are always filled with squadrons of chattering birds, Greater Blue-eared and Cape Starlings, Southern Red-billed Hornbills, and Red-billed Buffalo Weavers are the most raucous and raiding of the species. Without too much difficulty, African Green Pigeon and Brown-headed Parrots will also be seen, plus a variety of other typical Kruger woodland birds not so apparent out on the mopane shrubland plains. One interesting migrant that returned to the same Babalala copse for at least 3 years around 2010 was a rather vocal and generally obliging Icterine Warbler.

But although Babalala looks fairly bland and unremarkable (apart from the copse of mighty trees), it is, in fact, located next to the Dungile Creek, and there is a hidden wetland cum vlei area there that attracts some remarkable stuff. Various crakes, Black Coucal, and, with bizarre regu-

TOP TO BOTTOM Some of the rowdier residents of Babalala... Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver, Greater Blue-eared Starling, and Southern Red-billed Hornbill © Derek Engelbrecht.





ABOVE This Montagu's Harrier was sifting through some ageing elephant dung roadside on the H1 close to Babalala © Chris Patton.

larity, pelicans are often seen in the area, particularly in wet years. Also, but exclusively in summer, both migrant harriers (Pallid and Montagu's) are reliably found in the area.

Boyela

Boyela is a borehole and water trough, 5 km further south on the H1 than Babalala. It is named after an adjacent creek, which is also a Tsonga one and a derivation of Murhi wo yila, meaning 'the tree that is forbidden (taboo)'.

Another Sirheni Camp access gravel road (the S57) begins on the

western side of the tarred H1 opposite the Boyela water hole. A few thorn trees and some lala palms break the monotony of the mopane-veld and surround the little gravel cul-de-sac pull-over, where vehicles can leave the tar road to get closer to the trough.

Readers are referred to my article on the colonization of Northern Kruger of Senegal Coucal in *The Lark* 33 (January 2021), where



ABOVE A Yellow-billed Oxpecker convention at Boyela © Chris Patton.

I shared photos of an adult and juvenile Senegal Coucal at Boyela from January 2014, and commented that this is the most southerly site in the Park where I personally have recorded that species.

The drinking trough is literally just that and looks somewhat artificial. Yet, it has a penchant to turn up something dramatic. A Red Phalarope bizarrely made it its temporary home for a day about a decade ago. It is also fairly regularly frequented by Caspian Plovers. It may also pay dividends to scan the tall, dead trees rising above the mopane scrub as Dickinson's

Kestrel has been seen here a few times - especially to the east of the H1. Not quite as remarkable, but a quality bird nonetheless is a Great Spotted Cuckoo, and I have seen that species here on more than one occasion.

On the north side of the borehole and trough is a depression that fills up with water after good rain... I have seen Red-billed Teal here, quite a rare bird in the Park. The pan becomes a favourite wal-

lowing spot for buffalo, which means oxpeckers. In recent years the Yellow-billed has become the dominant oxpecker on buffalo herds in this section of the Park.

But as bird lovers, the time and energy we spend in the field looking for our feathered quarry often have some incredible fringe benefits, so I'd like to take the liberty of ending this recollection with my favourite Boyela sighting, which wasn't actually of a bird! On an early morning drive from Punda Maria to Shingwedzi in January 2014, a pair of serval were sparring in the road metres from the Boye-

la turn-off... I will never know if they were rival males, adolescent kittens honing their skills, or even an amorous pair (lions and leopard mating comes with regular shows of seeming extreme aggression between the couple), but it was a memorable sighting that filled me with adrenalin and will forever fill me with anticipation when visiting the area...

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


BELOW A pair of sparring serval at Boyela – a collateral benefit for rising early to go birding
© Chris Patton.



BIRD OF THE YEAR 2022


THE CAPE GANNET

A SUPREME DIVING BIRD




SHARP-EYED

In order to see long distances while searching for shoals of fish, these supreme hunters of the sea have **binocular vision**. Their eyes are situated forward on their heads allowing them to see far ahead to pinpoint their prey and judge distances accurately as they dive.




CRASH TEST DUMMIES

Cape Gannets are **social foragers**, hunting during the day in large, conspicuous groups. When diving, they sometimes collide with one another in their frenzy to catch fleeing fish.



FUN FACT

The Cape Gannet can drop out of the sky just like a jet fighter pilot, plummeting towards the sea at speeds of up to 100 km/h! A human diver would do some serious damage at that speed.




ADAPTED TO DIVE

How does the gannet prevent injury when diving at high speed?

A reinforced skull and specially adapted neck muscles help absorb impact with the water.

Gannets have special **air sacs** under the skin of the head, neck, and chest, which act like bubble-wrap, helping to cushion their entry into the water.


By tucking in their wings, and extending their long necks when diving, their **streamlined, missile-shaped** bodies help minimise the impact with the water.



UNDERWATER HUNTERS

Excellent underwater **predators**, Cape Gannets use their powerful, partly folded wings and large, webbed feet to swim quickly underwater in pursuit of fish.


To avoid being robbed of their meal by fellow gannets, they usually eat it on the way back up to the surface.



FIZZING BULLETS


The gannet's streamlined body helps it maintain **momentum** under water by reducing drag. They are propelled up to 10 m under the water, with a stream of air bubbles trailing behind, just like fizzing bullets.

To prevent water shooting up their nostrils during high speed plunges, their nostrils are concealed by a covering of hard tissue.



CRAZY DIVING

Plunge dive from heights of up to 30 m



UNDERWATER SWIMMING

Dive up to 10 m underwater

Swim to depths of up to 20 m



A Sooty Albatross inspects a field biologist on Marion Island © Michelle Risi



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BIRD BRIEFS

Vocal mimicry in Arnot's Chat

Derek and Daniel Engelbrecht

E-mail: faunagalore@gmail.com

The enigmatic Arnot's Chat is highly sought after by birders. And for a good reason. Although fairly widespread in relatively dry, open, mature mopane, miombo and *Vachellia* woodland in southern and eastern Africa, pairs or

groups are usually widely spaced, even within optimal habitat, and the species is nowhere common. Fortunately, they are generally

BELOW A pair of Arnot's Chat singing in open woodland at Mahela in the Limpopo Province's Lowveld
© Daniel Engelbrecht.



quite vocal and knowing their vocal repertoire is a valuable aid in finding this species.

Arnot's Chat has a rich and varied repertoire, including a song (both sexes) and various other calls, but the context in which many of these calls are produced is unknown (Kirwan et al. 2021). In common with many chats, vocal mimicry has been reported in Arnot's Chat. However, unlike some of the other chats, notably Mocking Cliff Chat, with over 30 species recorded being mimicked (Dean 2005), the list of species mimicked by Arnot's Chat is relatively short - seven species only (Barbour 1972). These species are African Grey Hornbill, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Chinspot Batis, Willow Warbler, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow. Here we report vocal mimicry in Arnot's Chats from the Letsitele-Gravelotte area in the Limpopo Province's Lowveld.

Between September 2021 and May 2022, we have recorded 40 species being mimicked by seven groups of Arnot's Chat (Table 1). The list is undoubtedly longer as the birds improvise and sometimes incorporate only single elements of another species, which can easily be missed when analysing calls. The rapid delivery of these elements and the fact that two birds sometimes call simultaneously further complicate identi-

fying the calls of the species being mimicked.

Each individual (or perhaps group) seems to have a limited repertoire of mimicked species, but we have not attempted to analyse it at this stage. Nevertheless, this could explain why Barbour (1972) only recorded seven species being mimicked by Arnot's Chat at his study site in western Zimbabwe because he only observed the breeding behaviour of a single group.

The species mimicked in our study area include 40 bird species and one mammal - the tree squirrel. The tree squirrel was only recorded in the repertoire of a single male. A few species feature prominently in the mimicking repertoire of most groups: European Bee-eater, Black-headed Oriole, Fork-tailed Drongo, Greater Blue-eared Starling, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Black-backed Puffback, Southern Black Tit, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow and Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow. Some more unusual calls included Bearded and Cardinal Woodpecker, Double-banded Sandgrouse, Greater Honeyguide, White-faced Whistling Duck, White-crested Helmetshrike, Red-billed Oxpecker and White-breasted Cuckooshrike, the latter not a particularly vocal species.

Most birds mimicked have been recorded in the study area, but two species are of particular interest as we have not yet record-

Table 1. Species mimicked by Arnot's Chat in the Letsitele-Gravelotte region of the Limpopo Province, South Africa. *The only mammal species recorded.

Family	Common name	Scientific name
Alcedinidae	Brown-hooded Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>
Anatidae	White-faced Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>
Bucerotidae	African Grey Hornbill	<i>Lophoceros nasutus</i>
Charadriidae	Crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>
	Blacksmith Lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>
Coliidae	Red-faced Mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>
Cuculidae	Diederik Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx caprius</i>
	Jacobin Cuckoo	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>
	Thick-billed Cuckoo	<i>Pachycoccyx audeberti</i>
Indicatoridae	Greater Honeyguide	<i>Indicator indicator</i>
Meropidae	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
	Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops pusillus</i>
	Swallow-tailed Bee-eater	<i>Merops hirundineus</i>
Picidae	Bearded Woodpecker	<i>Chloropicus namaquus</i>
	Cardinal Woodpecker	<i>Dendropicos fuscescens</i>
Pteroclididae	Double-banded Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles bicinctus</i>
Buphagidae	Red-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus erythrorhynchus</i>
Campephagidae	White-breasted Cuckooshrike	<i>Cebilepyris pectoralis</i>
Cisticolidae	Green-capped Eremomela	<i>Eremomela scotops</i>
	Rattling Cisticola	<i>Cisticola chiniana</i>
Dicruridae	Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>

ed them in the study area, nor are there SABAP2 records for these pentads.

The Thick-billed Cuckoo is regularly mimicked by one bird/group. This species has a distinctive call but is otherwise remarkably unobtrusive, and its reporting rate in the region is generally less than 20%. The two closest pentads

in which Thick-billed Cuckoo has been recorded are approximately 10 and 20 km from the study site.

The biggest surprise was Swallow-tailed Bee-eater being mimicked by one individual/group on several occasions (Fig 1; also listen to Derek Engelbrecht, XC736744. Accessible at www.xeno-canto.org/736744).

Table 1 continued.

Family	Common name	Scientific name
Estrildidae	Jameson's Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta rhodopareia</i>
Hirundinidae	Lesser Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis abyssinnica</i>
Macrosphenidae	Long-billed Crombec	<i>Sylvietta rufescens</i>
Malaconotidae	Black-backed Puffback	<i>Dryoscopus cubla</i>
	Brown-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra australis</i>
Nectariniidae	Scarlet-chested Sunbird	<i>Chalcomitra senegalensis</i>
Oriolidae	Black-headed Oriole	<i>Oriolus larvatus</i>
Paridae	Southern Black tit	<i>Melaniparus niger</i>
Passeridae	Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>
	Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow	<i>Gymnoris supercilialis</i>
Phylloscopidae	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Platysteiridae	Chin-spot Batis	<i>Batis molitor</i>
Vangidae	White-crested Helmetshrike	<i>Prionops plumatus</i>
Pycnonotidae	Dark-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus tricolor</i>
Sturnidae	Greater Blue-eared Starling	<i>Lamprolornis chalybaeus</i>
	Violet-backed Starling	<i>Cinnyricinclus leucogaster</i>
Turdidae	Ground-scraper Thrush	<i>Turdus litsitsirupa</i>
	Kurri-chane Thrush	<i>Turdus libonyana</i>
Zosteropidae	Cape White-eye	<i>Zosterops virens</i>
Sciuridae*	Tree Squirrel	<i>Paraxerus cepapi</i>

Although Barbour's (1972) list of species mimicked by Arnot's Chat included Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, his study site was situated in dry *Vachellia-Baikiaea* woodlands on Kalahari sand in western Zimbabwe, the typical habitat of the species. Swallow-tailed Bee-eater exhibits local movements from the arid and semi-arid west towards the

more mesic east in the dry season, mainly from May to October. Most of these local movement records are from the extreme north of the Kruger National Park, i.e., from Punda Maria to the Makuleke Concession, and the foothills of the escarpment in the Limpopo Province, where they tend to be found on the edges of plantations and clearings. Swallow-tailed

Bee-eater is extremely rare in the central Lowveld of the Limpopo Province. There is only a single record of Swallow-tailed Bee-eater from the central Lowveld region of the Limpopo Province during SABAP2, i.e., 2007 to the present. This sighting was reported by John Luyt on the 1st of May 2020, approximately 15 km from the study site.

The question begs: where did this bird/group learn the call of the Swallow-tailed Bee-eater? Is it a case of cultural transmission? Or did it learn the call from Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters visiting the central Lowveld, perhaps even the study site? Did this bird disperse from an area where Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters usually occur?

There is a lot to learn about Arnot's Chat, and we hope to unravel some of the mysteries of this fascinating species in the future. □

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Flower power: Red-billed Quelea eating flower petals

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

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Red-billed Quelea is perhaps best known for causing significant damage to crops such as wheat, oats, sorghum, manna, millet and rice. It is mainly granivorous, feeding on the seeds of grasses and cereals, either on the ground or on the plant. Seeds aside, invertebrates constitute about 10% of the diet of Red-billed Queleas (Craig 2020).

On the 25th of December 2021, my attention was drawn to some Red-billed Quelea activity in raisin bushes *Grewia flava* near the Platjan Border Post in the Limpopo River valley. It was clear they were feeding on

something, but it was only when I looked at the photos I took that I noticed they were feeding on the flower petals of the raisin bushes. Although Red-billed Quelea have been recorded tearing flowers apart to get to nectar (Dowsett-Lemaire and Dowsett 2014), there does not seem to be any records of the species actually consuming flowers. □

Acknowledgements My appreciation to world ploceid expert, Dieter Oschadleus, for providing me with information about the diet of the species.

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LEFT A male Red-billed Quelea feeding on the flower petals of a raisin bush.

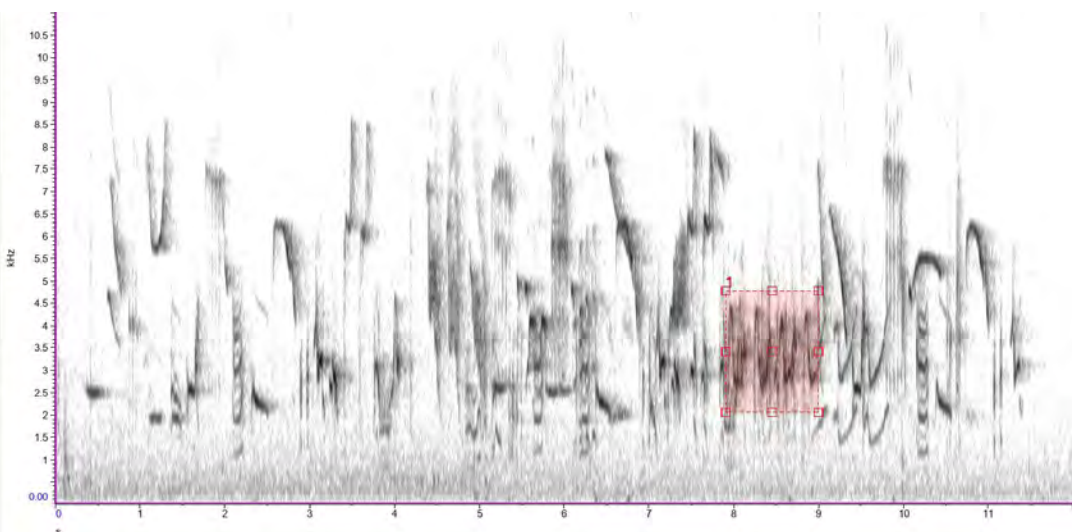


Fig 1. Sonogram of a section of a mimicking sequence of Arnot's Chat showing mimicry of the call of Swallow-tailed Bee-eater (highlighted in red). The call can be heard at www.xeno-canto.org/736744

Pale Chanting Goshawk predation on a blind snake species

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

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Pale Chanting Goshawk's (PCG) diet includes a range of small mammals, small birds, reptiles, frogs and a great diversity of invertebrates (Malan and Crowe 1996). Their prey range in size from ants and termites to Cape hare and korhaans. In the Little Karoo, small mammals contributed the most significant proportion of biomass, followed by birds, reptiles and invertebrates. Reptiles form a relatively small component of the diet of PCG in

the Little Karoo (Malan and Crowe 1996). Reptiles recorded in the diet of this population include hatchling tortoises, Karoo sand snake, mole snake, lizards (*Cordylus* sp.) and skinks (*Trachylepis* sp.).

On the 9th of February 2022, while birding along the Bylsteel road north of Polokwane, I encountered an adult PCG that had just caught a

BELOW The Pale Chanting Goshawk manoeuvring the blind snake before swallowing it.



ABOVE A closer view of the blind snake.

small snake and was swallowing it. It took about a minute for the bird to dispatch the snake, and during that time, I took some photos to identify the snake. The images revealed the snake was a blind snake, probably a Bibron's Blind Snake *Afrotyphlops bibronii*. Blind snakes are usually fossorial but occasionally forage on the surface, especially after good rains. As such, blind snakes would constitute a somewhat unusual dietary record for birds (but see Engelbrecht) and represents an extension of the known dietary records for PCG. □

Acknowledgements Thanks to Ruan Stander for assisting with identifying the prey item.

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Three-banded Coursers in the Timbavati

Willie Sonnenberg

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My neighbour, Ziggi Hugo, manager and guide from Phelwana Game Farm, messaged me late on 29th April 2022 to say he'd seen and photographed a Three-banded Courser on the farm, Thornybush (Doringbos), in the Timbavati (Pen-

tad: 2420_3110). According to Ziggy, he saw the birds in the same general area in July 2021 but couldn't

BELOW The sought-after Three-banded Courser seen at Thornybush in the Timbavati
© Ziggi Hugo.



ABOVE The pair enjoying the late-afternoon sun in the Timbavati
© Willie Sonnenberg.

manage a photograph at the time. What made this sighting particularly interesting was there was a pair of birds!

I'd always associated these beautiful birds with mopane veld and never seen them as far south as the Timbavati. Their distribution is mainly in the far northern Kruger National Park, i.e., the Pafuri region, and the Limpopo River valley, but a few records exist from the Shingwedzi region. According to Derek Engelbrecht (in litt.), there is an old record of a bird seen in the Timbavati by Alastair Kilpin on 27th November 2010.

The next day I was scouting around the area that Ziggi had directed me to. Ten minutes later, huddled together in the short grass in a clump of magic gwarrie, I found two stunning Three-banded Coursers. I watched and photographed them for at least two hours, and neither of them showed the slightest concern for my presence. □

Korhaans - the all-important black throat patch

Hugh Chittenden

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This note deals with one of the most interesting aspects of Korhaan biology: their habit of using throat feathers in display, especially while calling. The 'black' Korhaans are better known for their aerial cruises while calling and are not included here. The throat patches of the four species included in this note are usually inconspicuous and not very noticeable in the field until they start calling or displaying. Then the throat feathers are raised, becoming conspicuous and noticeable even from a considerable distance away.

BELOW An inconspicuous male Karoo Korhaan at home in its preferred habitat, the Karoo shrublands © Hugh Chittenden.



Karoo Korhaan

Karoo Korhaan is the most cryptically plumaged within the southern African re-

gion. Yet, it has a most striking and conspicuous black throat patch (when extended), which it uses to great effect.



ABOVE With heads lifted high and throat feathers puffed out, these birds stand out well when calling in the Karoo shrublands. The female (in the foreground) has a less expansive black throat patch and a more conspicuous white border below. Males sometimes call alone, but duetting is more common in territorial maintenance
© Hugh Chittenden.



ABOVE A female calling. On a still day, the far-carrying frog-like call of this species can be picked up kilometres away. When one pair calls, other nearby birds answer in an echoing fashion in the surrounding hills! © Hugh Chittenden.

Blue Korhaan
 Skulking and secretive, Blue Korhaan is easily the most co-

lourful of the four species covered in this note.



ABOVE The male is preparing to answer the territorial call of birds in the distance
 © Hugh Chittenden.

RIGHT A female Blue Korhaan © Hugh Chittenden.





ABOVE The protruding throat of a calling male Blue Korhaan © Hugh Chittenden.

Rüppell's Korhaan

Rüppell's Korhaan occupy arid and semi-desert habitats, so they rely on their cryptic plumage to blend into the surroundings for camouflage.



Male (RIGHT) and female (BELOW) Rüppell's Korhaans © Hugh Chittenden.





Two different Rüppell's Korhaan males calling .

Rüppell's Korhaan
© Derek and Wendy Coley



Rüppell's Korhaan © Graham McGill



ABOVE A male Rüppell's Korhaan, neck and throat fully extended to achieve maximum volume! © Derek and Wendy Coley.

White-bellied Korhaan

This inconspicuous species of tall, dense grassland is more often heard

than seen. Fortunately, White-bellied Korhaans are quite vocal, which can help track a group down. □



ABOVE Typical dense, tall grassland habitat occupied by White-bellied Korhaan © Hugh Chittenden.



ABOVE Male (LEFT) White-bellied Korhaan calling and female (RIGHT) responding to call, with throat feathers extended © Derek and Wendy Coley.



RIGHT A male Blue Korhaan prominently displaying his head wear! © Derek and Wendy Coley.



Acknowledgments Derek and Wendy Coley, and Graham McGill are thanked for contributing their excellent photographs.

Observations at two Northern Black Korhaan nests

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

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The interesting article about the nesting of Southern Black Korhaan in the previous issue of *The Lark* (Hoenders and Rose 2022) reminded me of two Northern Black Korhaan nests I monitored some years ago.

Both nests were found in the Polokwane Game Reserve. The

nests were located in very open, *Vachellia* savannah, characterised by a few small shrubs and trees with heights and canopy diameters generally less than 2 m. The nests were

BELOW A Northern Black Korhaan disturbed from her nest would slink of quietly and unobtrusive, but never venture too far from the nest.



found within 150 m of a regular display arena (a lek).

Nest 1 was found on 11 November 2004. This nest contained a single egg. The egg mass was recorded (to the nearest 0.1 g), and the maximum length and width meas-

ABOVE The two Northern Black Korhaan nests found in the Polokwane Game Reserve. Note the difference in the amount of cover in the early (A) and late season (B).



A



B

ABOVE Northern Black Korhaan nests are simply shallow scrapes in the ground. A = nest 1, and B = nest 2.



ABOVE The two eggs from nest 2.

ured to the nearest 0.1 mm were also recorded. The second nest, containing two eggs, was found on 3 February 2005. Egg size data were also recorded for these two eggs. This nest was under observation for 18 days before hatching. The egg size data are summarised in Table 1. It is unknown if the egg of nest 1 was fresh, but the eggs at nest 2 were older than

three days when the eggs' mass was recorded. The size of the eggs compared well with published data on egg sizes of the species: a mean of 49.7 x 39.9 mm (Tarboton 2011).

To limit disturbance at the nest, the nests were visited on alternate

Table 1. Mass and dimensions of three Northern Black Korhaans eggs found in the Polokwane Game Reserve.

Nest - egg #	Mass (g)	Length (mm)	Width (mm)
1 - 1	39.95	49.0	42.0
2 - 1	47.03	48.6	41.0
2 - 2	44.71	52.0	41.0
Means	43.9	49.9	41.3

days, and the presence/absence of eggs was noted from a distance. Nest 1 was active for at least six days, but on day 8, the egg was missing. There was no obvious evidence of predation or hatching, and the breeding outcome remains unresolved.

Nest 2 was under observation for 16 days before a barely audible *peep* sound could be heard from the embryo. On day 17, the one embryo could be heard calling, but no sound emanated from the second egg. I returned late in the afternoon on the same day to see if the chick had hatched, but nothing had changed

except for a faint hairline crack in the 'noisy' egg. At 07:00 on day 18, the embryo had pipped the egg and was busy hatching. I returned 2 hours later, at which stage the chick had just hatched, and its downy plumage was still wet. At 11:00, the chick was no longer in the nest, and although I didn't see the chick, the female's behaviour strongly suggested that the chick was within 20 m of the nest. The other egg failed to hatch

BELOW The one egg was pipped at 7:00 on day 18 of observations.



ABOVE At 09:00, the chick had just hatched and was still wet.

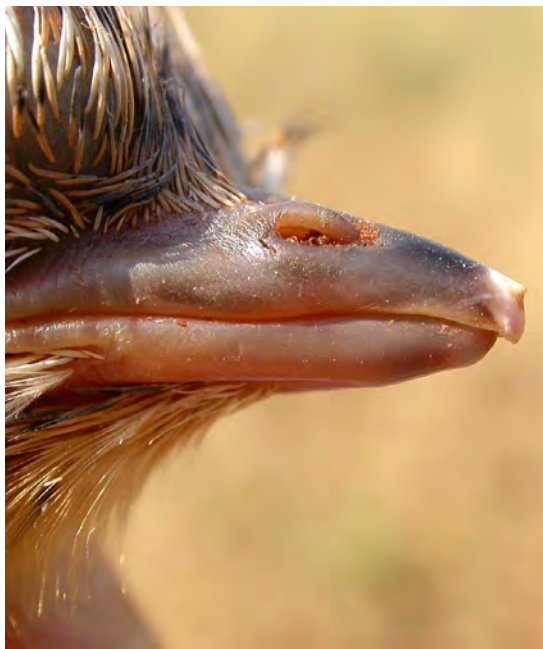
RIGHT The inside of the mouth and the tongue of a newly hatched chick is rose pink, without any tongue spots or other mouth markings.





and was left in the nest scrape when the female and the recently hatched chick vacated the nest area.

The newly hatched young was about 10 cm in length. Collar et al. (1986) described the downy young as '*Pale tan closely mottled and line with brown*'. However, their description was for Black Korhaan (this was before the Black Korhaan *Eupodotis afra* was split into Southern *Afrotis afra* and Northern Black Korhaan *Afrotis afroides*). This Northern Black Korhaan hatchling also had a mottled appearance with blotches of fawn, dark brown, black and creamy-white down. It had a distinct creamy supercilium. The legs were pinkish-grey, the bill horn-coloured and the mouth lining and tongue were rose pink. Within 45 minutes,



RIGHT The bill and egg tooth of a recently hatched Northern Black Korhaan chick.



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE The hatchling ~40 minutes after hatching.

it could keep its head up and was able to shuffle around.

Both females were extremely secretive while incubating. When I approached the nest, they would typically sit tight and only slink off quietly when I was surprisingly close to the nest. They would then run away in a low, crouched manner to escape detection - which they often did! In most instances, both returned fairly soon after I left the scene and continued with incubation. Both females were silent when leaving the nest, but on the day the chick hatched, the female slinked off silently and occasionally called a harsh *crack* distress call from a distance of approximately 30 m from the nest.

Although only a small sample of nests, these observations provide

some valuable information on the breeding biology of a secretive and relatively poorly known species. □

References

- Hoenders T, Rose S. 2022. Hatching Southern Black Korhaan egg found in a sheep pasture. *The Lark* 41: 61-63.
- Collar NJ, Goriup PD, Osborne PE. 1981. *Eupodotis afra* Black Korhaan. In Urban EK, Fry CH, Keith S. (eds). *The birds of Africa*. Vol. 2. London: Academic Press. p. 168-169.
- Tarboton W. 2011. Roberts nests and eggs of southern African birds. Cape Town: The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund.

Record speed for Ovambo Sparrowhawk kill!

TEXT AND PHOTOS Anthony Paton

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On 22 December 2021 whilst I was atlassing in Muldersdrift pentad 2600_2750, I encountered an Ovambo Sparrowhawk perched on a bare upper branch of gum tree, about 18-

20m above the ground. An incoming swift (or swallow?) was headed in a straight line aiming to pass about 2-3m below the raptor, and did not register the raptor's presence or divert its course in any way. The sparrowhawk dived out of the tree, simultaneously pivoting its legs from above to below its body and taking the incoming bird cleanly in its talons - the right talon flared at the dead centre of the victim in a perfect 'wicket-keeper catch'. The time between leaving the perch and catching the bird was less than one second, and the distance between the perch and snatching point was 2-3m. The Ovambo Sparrowhawk only opened its wings after the snatch and

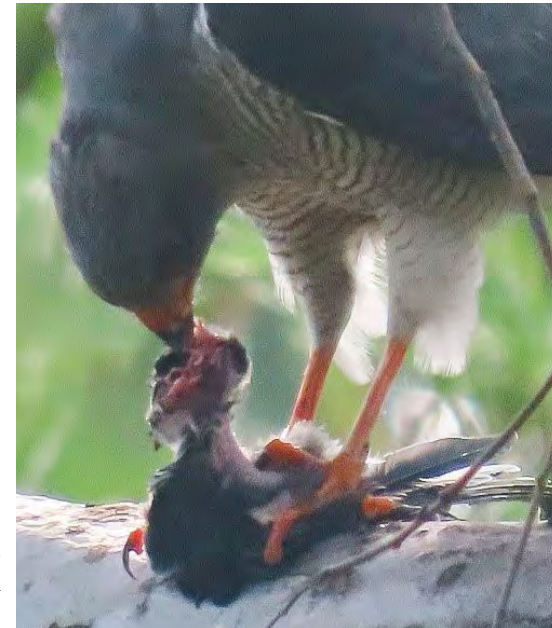


LEFT The Ovambo Sparrowhawk as it appeared a few seconds before the strike.



then, fortunately, to a lower perch and was thus relocated by the observer - allowing photographs after the event.

This is possibly one of the fastest strikes from perch to catch ever witnessed. Although this report is vague concerning the victim's identity, I managed to get some relatively low-quality images which will allow the reader to identify the food item for yourself. I'd love to hear your suggestions. □



ABOVE AND RIGHT The Ovambo Sparrowhawk plucking the victim.

White-backed Vulture resighting

Minkie Prinsloo

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TAG A375: WHITE-BACKED VULTURE

The bird was tagged as an adult by Darren Pietersen, on 24 November 2020 at Wild Riv-

BELOW White-backed Vulture A375 as photographed at the Mockford Farms Vulture Restaurant on 11 June 2022
© Minkie Prinsloo.



ABOVE Resightings of White-backed Vulture A375.

ers Private Nature Reserve, 10 km north of Hoedspruit. It was resighted on 11 June 2022 at the Mockford Farms Vulture Restaurant outside Polokwane. The straight-line distance between the tagging and resighting locality was 160.6 km and the days elapsed were 565 days (1y, 6m, 19d). Prior to this resighting, The bird was also seen at Bloubank in the Rietspruit Nature Reserve on

30 September 2021, and again at Wild Rivers Private Nature Reserve on 24 November 2021. □

Acknowledgements Thanks to Lindy Thompson, project co-ordinator for Vulture Conservation and Research, Endangered Wildlife Trust, for providing the details of the tagged bird.

Why don't vultures get sick from eating rotten flesh?

TEXT AND PHOTOS Hugh Chittenden

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ABOVE A typical feeding frenzy at a freshly killed carcass.

BELOW The smallest member of the family in southern Africa, Hooded Vulture.

Vultures are a wonderful group of birds epitomising the word 'survivors'. For them, it's a matter of feast or famine because they can't kill their prey, so they have to patiently wait for other animals to make a kill before they

can move in to feed off the leftovers.



ABOVE A juvenile White-backed Vulture arriving at a carcass.



They also play a hugely important role in cleaning up carcasses and preventing the spread of disease. Aged carcasses and rotten meat can have harmful bacteria like pathogens that cause food poisoning and even anthrax. Still, their feeding habits have forced them to cope with constant exposure to these pathogens.

Of course, the majority of their meals come from freshly killed carcasses, but carcasses soon become rotten, especially during the hot summer months.

This doesn't deter them; they seem to relish such putrid meals!

So as not to create the misleading conception that vultures tend to feed mainly on rotten meat (which isn't the case), the first part of this note deals with typical scenes where vultures home in on and feed off fresh kills. The second part deals with vultures arriving at and feeding on aged or rotten carcasses.



The largest and most dominant member of this group,
Lappet-faced Vulture



ABOVE A Lappet-faced, landing at the scene.

BELOW Show time, where size counts! Time to move in and show dominance!



ABOVE The second largest vulture in the region, a Cape Vulture - head and shoulders above the surrounding White-backed Vultures.



LEFT A mature White-backed Vulture putting a juvenile in his place! Scrapping amongst themselves is commonplace; the older and more experienced birds know how to hold position to ensure getting a share of the meal.

BELOW LEFT The robust bill of Lappet-faced Vulture makes light work of opening up tough-skinned animals.

BELOW CENTRE AND RIGHT Perhaps Lappet-headed would have been a more appropriate name for this species!





The above are typical examples of vultures feeding on fresh carcasses. But vultures also feed on old or rotten carcasses. How do they cope with rotten flesh without getting sick?

Vultures don't always have the luxury of feeding on freshly killed carcasses! During the hot summer months, carcasses tend to decompose very rapidly, meaning these birds have to contend with a meal in a state of decay.

LEFT This is where size and power count!

BELOW LEFT After action, satisfaction! A mature White-backed Vulture with its crop so full that it will fly off with difficulty!

BELOW Juveniles searching for food remains at a decaying zebra carcass.





LEFT As long as there is the possibility of some food left on the carcass, vultures will continue feeding.

BELOW LEFT Despite the decay, this White-backed Vulture seems content to scavenge small titbits from the Zebra carcass.

BELOW RIGHT As bacteria decompose a dead body, they excrete toxic chemicals that make the carcass a perilous meal for most animals.





ABOVE Vultures have impressive resistance to potentially deadly germs!

TOP We may cringe at the thought of being close to a rotten carcass, but they seem to relish such putrid meals even though they may be infected with rabies, anthrax bacteria and many other diseases that would otherwise be lethal to most scavengers.



ABOVE This juvenile White-backed Vulture seems happy to swallow beakfuls of crawling maggots!

Despite their ability to feed on decaying carcasses, vultures appear, for the most part, to live seemingly healthy lives.

So why is it that vultures don't usually get sick from eating rotten flesh that is heavily loaded with pathogens? The answer lies mainly in the fact that their systems have co-evolved with bacteria over millions of years, resulting

in an extremely tough digestive system that destroys the majority of the dangerous bacteria they ingest. Their highly acidic gastrointestinal tract is a strong filter of the microbiota ingested from decaying carcasses. □



Interesting sightings

16 April 2022 - 15 June 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

Black Heron - 11 June 2022. One seen at The Ranch Resort west of Polokwane (Richter Van Tonder).

Burchell's Sandgrouse - 1 June 2022. A small flock seen at the dam at Makotopong (Jody De Bruyn).

European Honey Buzzard - 5 May 2022. A somewhat unseasonal record of a single bird in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

Lesser Flamingo - 7 June 2022. A single bird seen at Doornbult (Charles Hardy).



European Honey Buzzard © Derek Engelbrecht

Shikra - 11 June 2022. One seen at Mockford Farms on the Birdlife Polokwane club outing (Minkie Prinsloo).

Verreaux's Eagle - 4 June 2022. One seen at Moletzie Nature Reserve north of Polokwane (Riana Odendaal).

PASSERINES

Capped Wheatear - 14 June 2022. Large numbers seen in Chebeng grasslands. Clearly a winter influx of this species (Daniel Engelbrecht).

BEST OF THE REST LIMPOPO PROVINCE

NON-PASSERINES

Bateleur - 22 April 2022. A single adult male seen near Taaiboschgroet (Mark Bullough).

Greater Kestrel - 11 June 2022. A juvenile seen at Tihongonyeni Waterhole, Kruger National Park (Keith Foster).

Rufous-bellied Heron - 23 April 2022. One seen at Vogelfontein (Warwick Tarboton).

Slaty Egret - 20 April 2022. One at Vogelfontein (Warwick Tarboton).

White-backed Night Heron - 29 April 2022. One seen on a night drive in the Entabeni Safari Conservancy, Waterberg region (Ruan Nel).

PASSERINES

Hybrid Red-headed/Cut-throat Finch - 29 May 2022. An adult male seen at a bird feeder at Bosveldsig near Modimolle (Wian Van Biljon).



Shikra © Jody De Bruyn



Rufous-bellied Heron © Warwick Tarboton



Slaty Egret © Warwick Tarboton



Hybrid Red-headed/Cut-throat Finch
© Wian Van Biljon



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/>



Marion Island Sponsor Map
15 April 2022
Percent of target reached: 17.03%
Sponsored Hectares: 5107 ha
Sponsors: 1648

Marion Island Sponsor Map
20 June 2022
Percent of target reached: 17.39%
Sponsored Hectares: 5217 ha
Sponsors: 1689

UPCOMING EVENTS



Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 05 July 2022
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting a
Date: 02 August 2022
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 06 September 2022
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Club outing

Where? Polokwane Game Reserve
Date: 9 July 2022
Contact: Richter van Tonder
Cell: 082 213 8276

Shopping list: Short-clawed Lark, Bearded Woodpecker, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Greater Honeyguide, various waxbills, Burnt-neck Eremomela, Secretarybird

Club outing

Where? Club Ranch
Date: 17 September 2022
Contact: Richter van Tonder
Cell: 082 213 8276

Shopping list: Pel's Fishing Owl, Meyer's Parrot, Meves's Starling, White-crowned Lapwing, Tropical Boubou, Saddle-billed Stork, Temminck's Courser, Kori Bustard

Club outing

Where? Witvinger
Date: 13 August 2022
Contact: Richter van Tonder
Cell: 082 213 8276

Shopping list: Flappet Lark, Freckled Nightjar, Verreaux's Eagle, Shelley's Francolin, African Cuckoo Hawk, Ashy Flycatcher, Fairy Flycatcher

BIRD OF THE YEAR 2022



Cape Gannet
Morus capensis
Regional status:
Vulnerable
Global IUCN status:
Endangered



Cinderella's page

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



Pale Flycatcher © Mike Pope