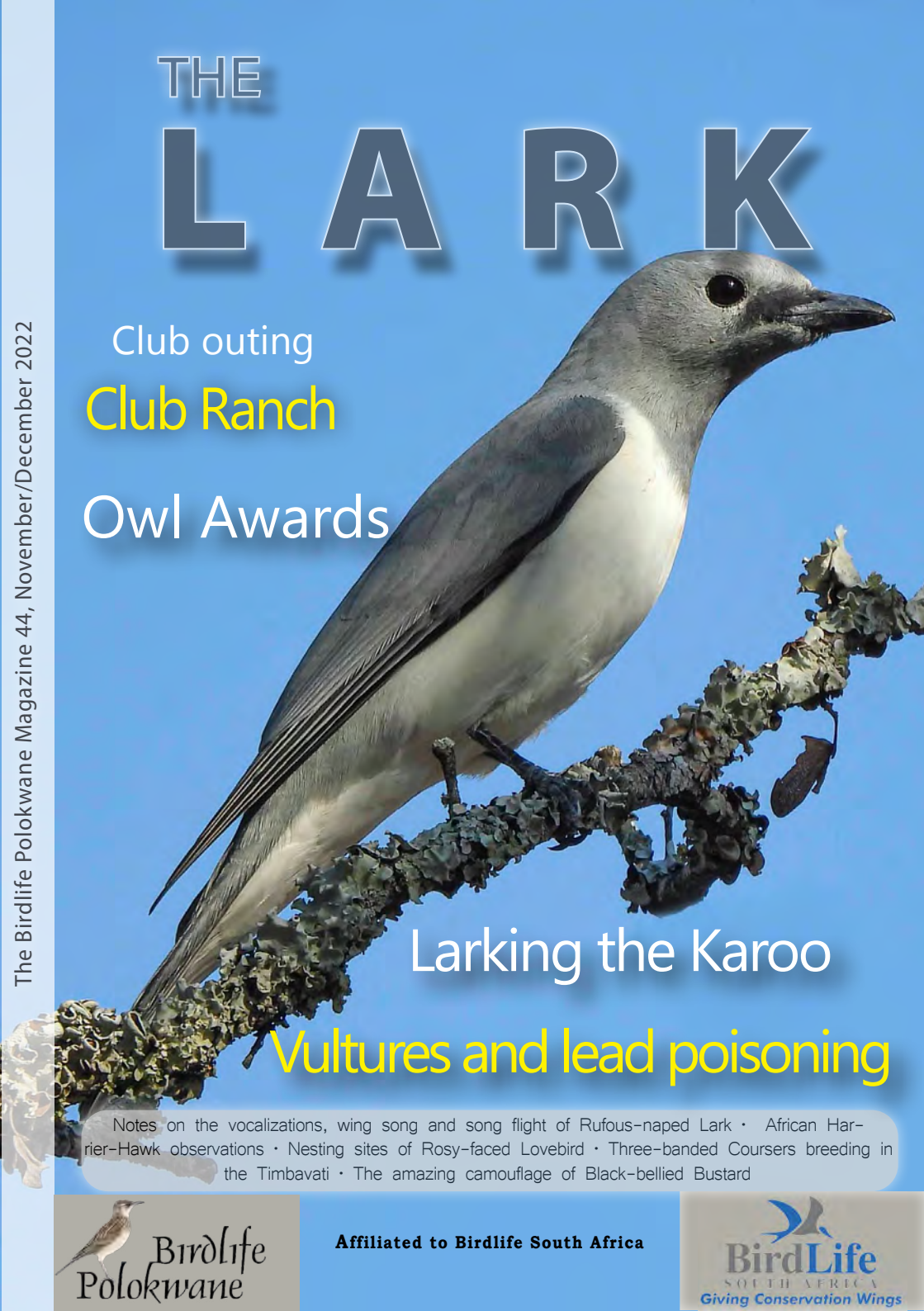
The Birdlife Polokwane Magazine 44, November/December 2022

THE LARK



Club outing

Club Ranch

Owl Awards

Larking the Karoo

Vultures and lead poisoning

Notes on the vocalizations, wing song and song flight of Rufous-naped Lark · African Harrier-Hawk observations · Nesting sites of Rosy-faced Lovebird · Three-banded Coursers breeding in the Timbavati · The amazing camouflage of Black-bellied Bustard

Birdlife Polokwane

Affiliated to Birdlife South Africa

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA Giving Conservation Wings

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

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

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

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

15 December 2022

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

Cover White-breasted Cuckooshrike
© Derek Engelbrecht.

CONTENT

The Lark 44 Nov/Dec 2022

Editorial 4

Regulars

Birds in Art 31
African Green Pigeon

Reflections 37
Let's chat about Arnot's and Accipiter Alley

Bird Briefs 53
Notes on the vocalizations, wing song and song flight of Rufous-naped Lark • African Harrier-Hawk observations • Nesting sites of Rosy-faced Lovebird • Three-banded Coursers breeding in the Timbavati • The amazing camouflage of Black-bellied Bustard

Interesting Sightings 79

Upcoming events 89

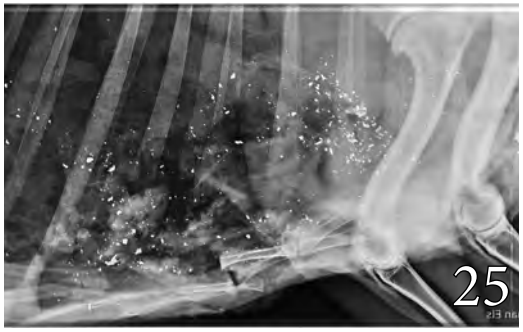
Featured

Club Ranch 5
Minkie Prinsloo *went on the club's annual outing to find some of the Limpopo Valley specials.*

Birdlife SA Owl Awards 11
Joe receives a prestigious Owl Award posthumously.

I lark the Karoo 13
Derek Engelbrecht *explains just why he likes the Karoo - it's vast, so there is plenty of space for surprises.*

Isotopes link lead poisoning in vultures to lead ammunition 25
Linda Van den Heever *reports on the results of a recently published study.*



For a lark ...

...Clowns to the left of me
Jokers to the right
Here I am stuck in the middle with you
© Bibi Linden

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

Editors' chirps

Summer is now in full swing, many of the migrants are back and birds can be seen carrying beaks full of food for their chicks. Make sure to acquaint yourselves with what to do when you find a 'lost baby bird' (see *The Lark* 43). We are also grateful for the good rain we enjoyed since the middle of November, so all bodes well for a cracking summer ahead. Keep'em peeled!

You'll notice that this issue is slightly skinnier than the previous issue. We only received a few contributions for this issue, which makes it difficult to maintain the high standard we set for our club's magazine. We call on all of our readers to look at your old photos or go to your memory bank and share with us some of the fascinating things you've seen whilst birding. What about a birding trip report? A good resolution for 2023 might be to make a contribution to *The Lark*? A massive thanks to everyone who has contributed to *The Lark* in the past and to this issue. We really appreciate it, and judging by the comments we receive after every issue, our readers really enjoy it too. Let's keep it up and showcase our birds!

In this issue, you can read two trip reports and also the results of an important study linking lead poisoning in vultures to lead-based ammunition. Our former club president and friend, Joe Grosel, received an Owl Award posthumously from Birdlife South Africa, in recognition of his contribution to the conservation of birds and the birding community. Nobody deserved this award more. As usual, our Bird Briefs section has some interesting articles about birds. Jan Fourie gives us a fascinating account of the rarely observed courtship behaviour of African Harrier- Hawk, and Alan Whyte presents the first evidence of the most southerly breeding record of the enigmatic Three-banded Courser. Thanks, gentlemen, for choosing *The Lark* as your outlet of choice to share your interesting findings with us.

We hope you enjoy this edition of *The Lark*, and as always, we look forward to receiving your contributions.

Raelene and Derek

Pel's Fishing Owl © Jody De Bruyn

Club Ranch

SEARCHING FOR THE LIMPOPO VALLEY SPECIALS

Minkie Prinsloo

One of the highlights on our club's bird outing calendar is the Club Ranch trip in September of every year. Not only does this area have many special bird species, it is also a beautiful area with lots of wildlife on the show as well.

This year nine club members joined the outing. As per usual, we departed Polokwane around 04:00, as the property is just over 200 km away, and the road there is not in the best condition. We arrived just before 6:30, starting our list with the ever-present White-browed Sparrow-Weaver. Heading towards the spot where we usually walk from, we added species like Sabota Lark, Lesser Striped Swallow, White-crested Helmetshrike, Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow, Goliath Heron, Meves's Starling, Meyer's Parrot and Ashy Flycatcher, to name a few.

Arriving at the camp, we had a quick cup of coffee and some breakfast before heading off. After adding some species around our cars, the likes of Tropical Boubou, Terrestrial Brownbul and White-browed Robin-Chat, we made our way across the river bank where we found, African Green Pigeon, White-fronted Bee-eaters nesting in the sand-

Above Walking towards the island in the drier part of the Limpopo River © Minkie Prinsloo.

Below Lilac-breasted Roller © Jody De Bruyn.

banks, African Pied Wagtail, and to our utter dismay, Indian Mynas!

This year the water level was a bit higher than usual, so we had to cross the river; some opted to jump from rock to rock, others took their shoes off and waded through, and the rest went through, shoes and all. After everybody reached the opposite bank and everyone had their shoes back on, we spread out to search for our main target, Pel's Fishing Owl. We found the owl almost immediately, and we were spoilt with excellent views of not one, but two individuals.

Above Another one of the Limpopo Valley specials, Meves's Starling © Minkie Prinsloo.

As we moved about the island, we added Grey Tit-Flycatcher, Bennett's Woodpecker, African Fish Eagle, Green Wood Hoopoe, Striated Heron, African Darter, Collared Sunbird, Giant Kingfisher, Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Red-headed Weaver. We noticed a heron, hiding away in a dense bush across the river. We tried to get a clear view, shifting a bit this way and back until we could confirm our identification; it was a White-backed Night Heron!

We made ourselves comfortable on the bank of the river to enjoy a refreshing beverage. From here, we added African Spoonbill to the list, and we also had a massive flock (20+)

Retz's Helmetshrike © Jody De Bruyn.

of White-breasted Cormorants perform a fly-by. Other birds added to our list while walking back to camp and around the camp included Marabou Stork, Jameson's Firefinch, Grey-headed Bushshrike and White-crowned Lapwing. Heading home, we added species such as African Sacred Ibis, Wood Sandpiper, Tawny Eagle and Golden-breasted Bunting.

As usual, we ended with more than 100 species of birds for the morning as well as a number of animal species such as giraffe, impala, hippo, crocodile, bushbuck, vervet monkey and scrub hare. Yet again, it was an incredible outing and thank you to all involved.

Author's email: wildlifestudio1@gmail.com

Above Water Thick-knee © Jody De Bruyn.

Below Some pals happy with their Pel's .

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA

Owl Awards 2022

Joe receives the prestigious Owl Award posthumously

Every year, Birdlife South Africa presents Owl Awards to people or organizations that have made outstanding contributions to the conservation of birds and their habitats. This year, 12 awards, two Eagle-Owl, nine Owl and one Owlet Award, were presented to deserving individuals.

At this year's event held at Birdlife South Africa's headquarters, Isdell House, on the 20th of September 2022, our friend and former president of Birdlife Polokwane, Joe Grosel, received an Owl Award posthumously. Sadly, Joe could only attend in spirit, but fortunately, his family was there to receive the award on his behalf.

Joe's immense contribution to birds and birding needs no introduction. Joe made birding fun, whether in the field or in front of a screen, where he presented innumerable courses and talks about birds and birding.

Above Joe's family with his Owl Award. From left to right: mom Lorraine, wife Lisa, sister Celeste, aunt Katica and nephew Mathieu

Joe was Birdlife Polokwane's Chairman for 14 years until he 'retired' and took, with great gusto, the position of President.

Joe served on the SABAP2 Limpopo Regional Atlas Committee and was the driving force to improve coverage in the province while he was the Regional Atlas Coordinator. We all remember those atlas bashes he organized.

No number of words can do justice to who Joe was and all the work he did for birds and birders. But he lives on in the many hearts he touched, and that is what matters.

Congratulations on your award, Joe. We all miss you.

I ♥ Lark the Karoo

Text and photos Derek Engelbrecht

Reason for absence: Recording vocalizations of Sabota Lark in the Karoo. When I completed my application for leave, I was quietly confident that my research trip would be an outstanding success. After all, Sabota Lark is one the most widespread and common larks in southern Africa. Given my time and budget constraints (I didn't bargain on diesel clipping the R25/litre mark when we wrote the proposal), I decided to focus my efforts on three regions: Keimoes, Pofadder and Brandvlei. So, on the 23d of September 2022, leaving home in Polokwane at 4 am, I braced myself for the 1 200 km drive to my first destination - Keimoes.

From experience, I know you cannot really plan your arrival time until you passed the hustle and bustle – and traffic – of Gauteng. It was smooth sailing through Gauteng, and in no time, I was beginning to see 'different' birds like Pied Starling, South African Cliff Swallow, and Long-tailed Widow. The trip list for larks also kicked off with Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark, Rufous-naped Lark and Red-capped Lark. An unexpected surprise was finding Short-clawed Lark about 30 km west of Vryburg. This bird was about 80 km west of the nearest known population and generated an Out of Range Form (ORF) on SABAP2. I made good time, and Kathu happened to appear on the horizon just as a break for lunch was due. I decided to go to the restaurant at the local golf club. I had barely placed my order when I heard a distinctive call. Anxious to see the bird, I set off in the direction of the call, and in no time, I found a small covey of Red-billed Spurfowl in the woodland adjacent to the fairway. The camelthorn woodland teemed with too many birds to mention, but it's always great to connect with Common Scimitarbill, Southern Pied Babbler and Brubru – and the lunch was great too. Off to Keimoes.

I arrived at Keimoes late in the afternoon. My plan of unpacking, having a cuppa and simply relaxing took a turn when I heard some lovebirds in a tree outside my chalet. Rosy-faced Lovebird! And

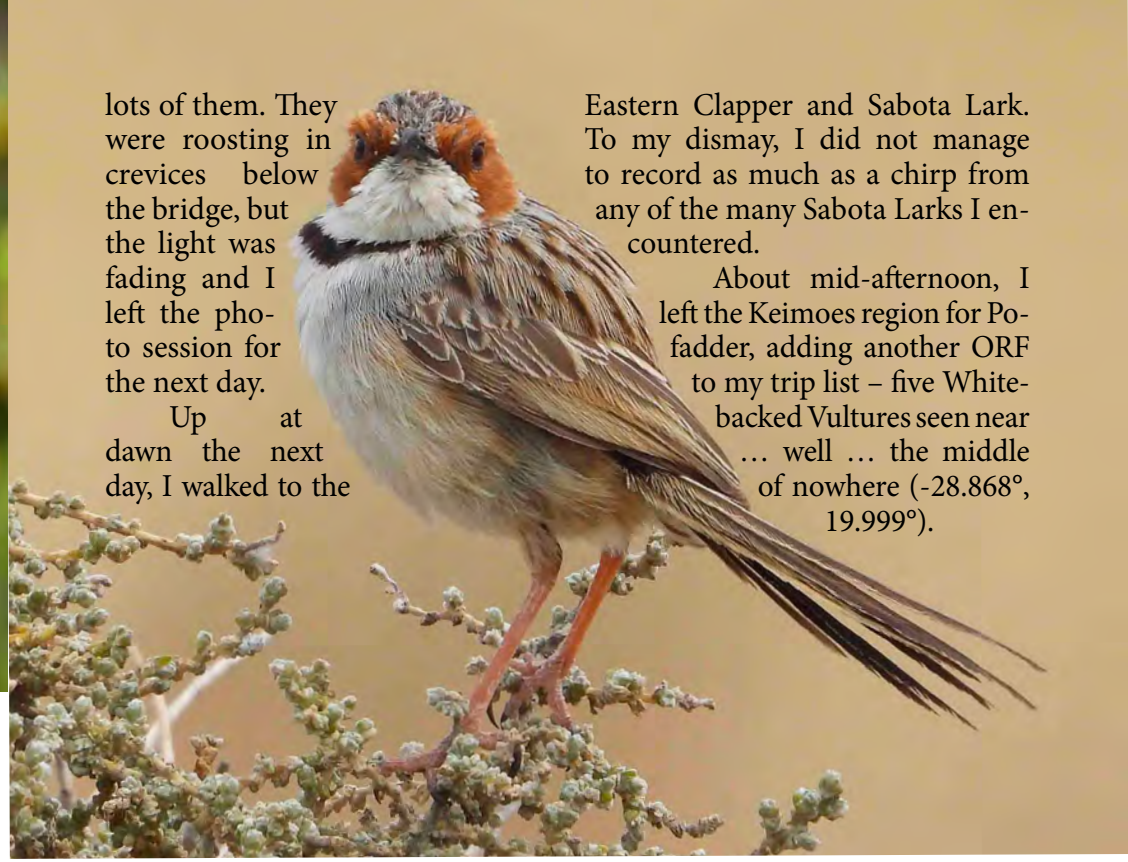
Above I had Red-billed Spurfowl for lunch in Kathu.

Left Rosy-faced Lovebirds were common along the Orange River.

lots of them. They were roosting in crevices below the bridge, but the light was fading and I left the photo session for the next day.

Up at dawn the next day, I walked to the bridge to see the sun rise over the Orange River and, appropriately, found Orange River White-eye. Other birds seen at Keimoes were Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, South African Shelduck, Sociable Weaver, Namaqua Sandgrouse, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Dusky Sunbird and White-backed Mousebird – I was in the west OK. The lovebirds were easy to find and I got some good photos before setting off for my first day of fieldwork. The Lutzputs road proved a good choice with plenty of larks: Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark, Karoo Long-billed, Spike-heeled, Stark's, Pink-billed (ORF), Fawn-coloured, Eastern Clapper and Sabota Lark. To my dismay, I did not manage to record as much as a chirp from any of the many Sabota Larks I encountered.

About mid-afternoon, I left the Keimoes region for Pofadder, adding another ORF to my trip list – five White-backed Vultures seen near … well … the middle of nowhere (-28.868°, 19.999°).



Above Rufous-eared Warbler.

I arrived at Pofadder with light to spare and did a recce on one of the back roads to find Sabota Larks for the next day's fieldwork. No problem finding plenty of Sabota Larks, but will they be singing?

I was up and at it at first light the next day, heading south of Pofadder towards Namies. While waiting for a Sabota Lark perched on a fence to burst into song, I heard a familiar call in an unfamiliar habitat – Common Buttonquail, not

ABOVE The Common Buttonquails at Pofadder generated a SABAP2 ORF, as the next closest record of the species in the SABAP2 database is near Lutzputs, 150 km to the east!

RIGHT (TOP) Stark's Lark were plentiful around Keimoes and Pofadder.

RIGHT (MIDDLE) Fawn-coloured Larks were commons, but particularly so along the Lutzputs road.

RIGHT (BOTTOM) I witnessed an aggressive territorial encounter between two groups of Spike-heeled Larks, and this individual is clearly highly charged up.

one, but at least three birds calling. I left the fence sitter to continue with his silent meditation – or whatever Sabota Larks do when they sit and do nothing – and got in position to record the buttonquails. Given that I was in the Karoo with plenty of bare ground, it wasn't too long before one showed itself. Despite the best efforts of a scolding Rufous-eared Warbler, I managed to get some good recordings and even a photo of the buttonquails. Oh, and the Sabota Lark added three contact call *tjirps* before it flew off. With growing frustration and anxiety, I set off again, diligently stopping at every single Sabota Lark (and believe me, there are many!), hoping for a recording. Other birds seen towards Namies included Pale-winged Starlings, Karoo Chat, Chat Flycatcher, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Mountain Wheatear and Black-headed Canary. Heading back later in the day, I added Jackal Buzzard, Burchell's Coucal, Karoo Korhaan, and the highlight of the trip, a Burchell's Courser! In case you were concerned, you are not to worry, Lark-like Buntings and Grey-backed Sparrow-Larks are doing just fine. There were thousands and thousands of them! Day 2, no usable recording for Sabota Lark. But as the saying goes, "We shall carry on rewardless".

I was forced to extend my stay in Pofadder by a day, hoping that a different route may lead to a change in fortunes. But not! Now panic mixed with disbelief was setting in. The Sabota Larks, one of the most vocal larks, had gone mute. What was going on? All the other larks were calling. It was time to rethink my strategy. I decided to head to

Brandvlei, much further south, hoping that the birds would be calling there.

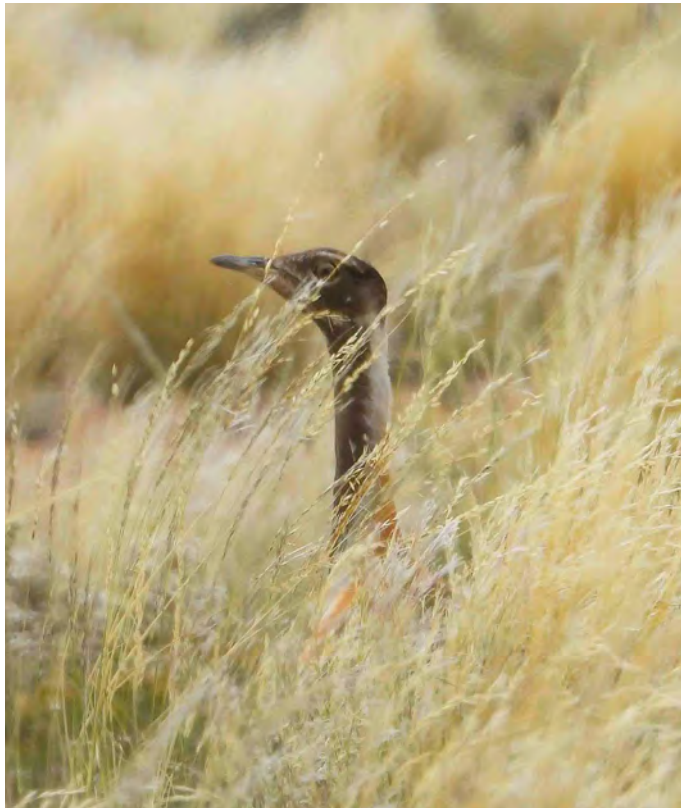
I decided to take the longer route via Keimoes and Kenhardt, rather than the Loop 10 road, notorious for slicing tyres. In Keimoes, I stopped to stock up with some supplies and to draw some cash. And it was while waiting in the queue at the ATM that I saw the most amazing and unexpected sight. Rosy-faced Lovebirds were breeding under the roof of the local bank. A fruiting mulberry tree on the pavement next to the bank attracted many different species, and lovebirds were coming and going all the time. How cool is that?

My go-to place in the Brandvlei region is Oom Bennas. No sooner had I arrived, and I set off to have another stab at getting some recordings. Lady Luck to pity on me and my fortunes changed – I found a couple of males singing. Although it wasn't extended song bouts, it was something and my spirits lifted. The afternoon drive was quite productive with both Karoo and Northern Black

BELOW Rosy-faced Lovebirds were breeding in the roof of a bank in Keimoes. The left insert shows one of the adults peering from its nest in the roof, and the right insert is a close-up of one of the adults perched on the bank's sign.

ABOVE Black-headed Canaries were encountered frequently.

RIGHT What's lurking in the long grass? One of six Ludwig's Bustards seen at Onderstedoorns.



Korhaan, Black-eared Sparrow-Lark, a friendly Yellow-bellied Eremomela and a stooping Lanner Falcon being some of the highlights. At the bridge over the Sak River, I found a small flock of European Bee-eaters seemingly inspecting holes in the riverbank (they used to breed there in the past).

The next day I worked the Van Wyksvlei and Onderste-

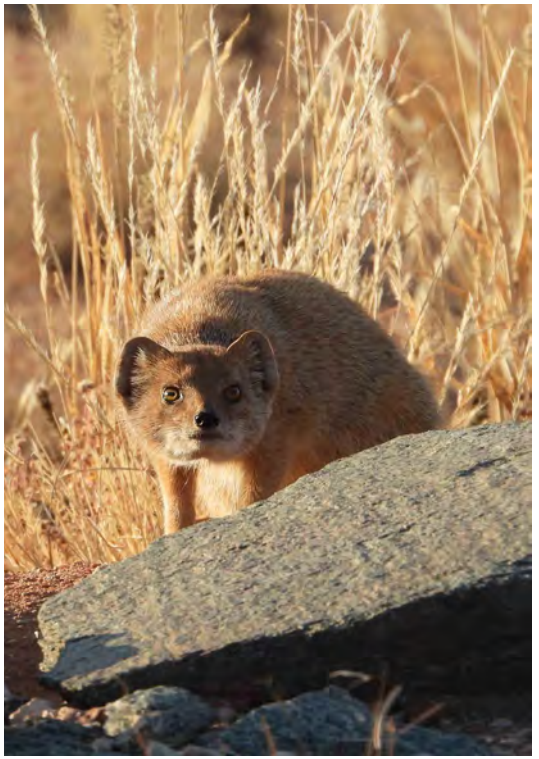
doorns roads again, picking up Common (African) Reed Warbler (SABAP2 ORF), Layard's Warbler, Namaqua Warbler and Pririt Batis, amongst others, at the Sak River bridge, while a water trough yielded Black-headed, White-throated and Yellow Canary. Other species of interest were Karoo and Sickle-winged Chat, more Black-eared and Grey-backed Sparrow-Larks and Cape Penduline-Tit. I also managed to get a few more recordings. For the afternoon session, I headed west on the Loeriesfontein road. The highlights here included Double-banded Courser, plenty of Black-eared Sparrow-Larks, and I couldn't believe my eyes when I found a pair of Black Harriers! Needless to say, the record generated and ORF. A word of caution though – the Brandvlei-Loeriesfontein road (R357) is in a bad state at the moment, very bad state! I suggest you check your medical aid benefits before you go birding on this road, as a visit to your dentist and chiropractor will be necessary afterwards. It is a good idea to speak to the locals

Above Storm clouds gathering at Onderstedoorns near Brandvlei.

Below In my opinion, the Namaqua Sandgrouse is the quintessential Karoo bird

Above An unexpected surprise was a pair of Black Harriers west of Brandvlei.

Below A nest raider of note - Yellow Mongoose.



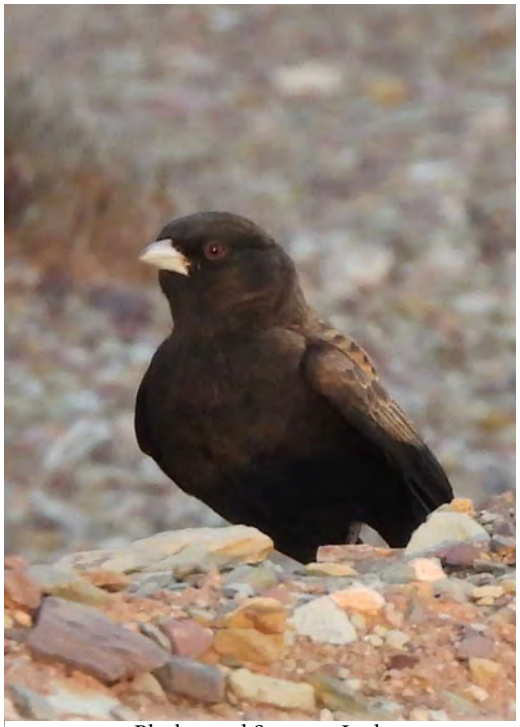
beforehand and ask about the state of the road before driving it.

My last day saw me back at Onderstedoorns where I worked the plains to get more Sabota Lark recordings. I was still battling to get extended song bout recordings, but at least they were singing, albeit in short bouts. The plains delivered goodies such as a flock of six Ludwig's Bustards, African Stonechat, and nine lark species: Eastern Clapper, Sabota, Spike-heeled, Karoo Long-billed, Red-capped, Red Lark (the plains form), Large-billed Lark, and two sparrow-larks, Grey-backed and Black-eared. No Sclater's or Stark's Larks here this time round, but I have recorded them at Oom Bennas in the past.

Satisfied that I had at least some recordings and having had some amazing sightings, including 15 lark species for the trip, it was sadly time to leave the serenity of the Karoo behind and start the 14 hour drive back.

Author's email: faunagalore@gmail.com

BELOW The object of my frustration - the Bradfield's Sabota Lark.



Black-eared Sparrow-Lark

Red Lark

Karoo Long-billed Lark

Large-billed Lark

ISOTOPES LINK LEAD POISONING IN VULTURES TO LEAD AMMUNITION

Linda Van den Heever

BirdLife South Africa, in collaboration with the universities of the Witwatersrand and Johannesburg, has published ground-breaking research linking lead poisoning in Critically Endangered White-backed Vulture chicks to lead-based ammunition.

The study, funded by the Isdell Family Foundation and the Mary Oppenheimer & Daughters Foundation, used cutting-edged research to quantify the isotopic signatures of lead found in blood samples sourced from chicks at Dronfield Nature Reserve. This reserve, which is located close to Kimberley in the Northern Cape Province, hosts one of the most

ABOVE Lead fragments in a carcass.

Above A White-backed Vulture on its nest.

important White-backed Vulture breeding colonies in South Africa. "The results of the study allowed us to exclude several potential sources of lead poisoning in the vulture chicks, including lead from mining, industrial activity, coal, air, water and soil, as well as lead that may have persisted in the environment from leaded fuel (phased out in 2006)," says Linda Van den Heever, Vulture Project Manager at BirdLife South Africa.

White-backed Vultures rely almost entirely on carrion as a source of food, which makes them particularly vulnerable to poisons in the carcasses of wild and domestic animals. In 2019, BirdLife South Africa's nationwide assessment of lead levels in Cape and White-backed Vultures revealed that, unlike other raptors and large terrestrial birds, such as bustards and cranes, over 65% of vultures suffer from lead exposure over and above what would be considered normal, background levels. Although the source of the lead poisoning has long been suspected to be lead ammunition, evidence was lacking until now.

This study, the first of its kind in Africa, provides scientific evidence that lead ammunition is the major source of lead poisoning in White-backed Vulture chicks. Since these chicks were still nest-bound at the time of sampling, the fragments of ammunition are probably embedded in the carrion fed to them by their parents. Vultures can source fragments of lead ammunition in various ways, including offal resulting from game management, hunting and culling activities, as well as carcasses (or remains thereof) put out at vulture restaurants for scavengers to dispose of.

Lead ammunition fragments significantly upon impact, dispersing countless fragments of lead through-out the carcass of an animal. This may threaten not only the welfare of scavengers such as vultures, but also of humans who may inadvertently ingest fragments of lead when eating game meat shot with lead ammunition.

"The presence of high lead levels in the nest-bound chicks of a Critically Endangered bird is concerning", says Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson, Head of Conservation at BirdLife South Africa. "In related research, which BirdLife South Africa will soon be publishing, it will be shown that chicks fledging from Dronfield suffer from anaemia and liver damage, which may compromise their ability to thrive as free-flying juveniles". This is especially critical for young birds that need to be in optimal health to deal with the myriad of anthropogenic threats they may face during their first year of life.

BirdLife South Africa urges all hunters, from the casual biltong or professional hunter to culling operators, rangers and reserve managers, including people working for our provincial reserves and national parks, to consider the potential impact of dispensing a toxic substance into the environment, and to make the switch to lead-free ammunition.

For further information, please contact:

Ms Linda van den Heever, Vulture Project Manager, BirdLife South Africa
Email: linda.vdheever@birdlife.org.za
Mobile: 082 331 3902

Acknowledgements This research was made possible through the generous support of the Isdell Family Foundation and the Mary Oppenheimer & Daughters Foundation, with vehicular support provided by the Ford Wildlife Foundation. We thank the De Beers Group for access to the White-backed Vulture breeding colony at Dronfield Nature Reserve, where the research was conducted.

Reference

Van den Heever L, Elburg MA, Iaccheri L et al. 2022. Identifying the origin of lead poisoning in white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*) chicks at an important South African breeding colony: a stable lead isotope approach. Environmental Science and Pollution Research. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11356-022-23209-z

EISH, I DIDN'T KNOW!

Carcasses or parts of carcasses **contaminated with lead from ammunition** and placed at vulture restaurants or otherwise left in the veld may **poison vultures, ground hornbills & other scavengers.**

YOU can help by using ***lead-free alternatives*** and/or by ***removing*** any potentially lead-contaminated carcasses from the veld.

Pb LEAD TASK TEAM South Africa

Regulars

Birds in Art

African Green Pigeon

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe

African Green Pigeon

In this issue, I show you a common but rather unusual bird, the African Green Pigeon *Treron calvus*. The scientific name means 'bare/naked pigeon', for the naked skin at the base of its beak. The extent of the naked skin varies, being greater in northern birds. This is a member of the pigeon and dove family, the Columbidae. It belongs to a separate subfamily, the Treroninae, along with several other mainly fruit-eating pigeon and dove species. Compared to other doves, the fruit-doves tend to be more colourful, and many have voices quite unlike the cooing of typical doves and pigeons. Green pigeons get their characteristic colour from pigments called carotenoids that they ingest with their food. The African Green Pigeon is one of only two Treronines to occur on the African continent. Others occur on islands off its shores, including one on our huge island neighbour, Madagascar. The genus *Treron* is, however, most diverse in Southeast Asia and Indonesia, many of those also being present on islands. Other fruit-doves of the Treroninae occur in Indonesia and Australasia, some of which number among the most beautifully coloured and patterned of all the world's doves and pigeons. Many are endemic to

particular islands or island groups. The ability to colonize islands over large stretches of the ocean is a universal virtue of pigeons and doves. The amazing Dodo *Raphus cucullatus* is an example of a line of pigeons that colonized the island of Mauritius and then evolved so much that they barely resembled their ancestors anymore. Another lesser known but similar large, flightless pigeon was the Solitaire *Pezophaps solitaria*, of Rodrigues Island.

The African Green Pigeon occurs over almost all of sub-Saharan Africa, being absent only from treeless grasslands, barren deserts and high mountains. They can be found in any area with large fruiting trees, including in city parks or suburban gardens. Their mainly green plumage blends so well into the foliage that they are often incredibly hard to spot, but their presence is betrayed by their strange calls. These calls are fairly complex, including melodious whistles, high-pitched growls and clicks. These calls help members of a flock to stay in contact with each other and are uttered constantly as the pigeons feed. They congregate in trees that bear fruits. They particularly prefer wild figs (Ficus species), but other fruiting trees they enjoy include jackal berries, water berries, yellowwoods, jacket plums, buffalo thorns and saffrons. They clamber along the branches using their dextrous feet to grip, sometimes dangling upside down and stretching their necks to pick fruit off a twig tip. Because of their bright colours and clambering ability, they're called 'papegaaiduiwe' ('parrot pigeons') in Afrikaans. While mostly feeding in trees, they occasionally alight on the ground to pick up fallen fruits. They sometimes feed on cultivated fruits. They also feed on buds, grass seeds, and sometimes even carrion.

African Green Pigeons are mid-sized, about 30 cm in length, with chunky bodies covered in dense, soft plumage. Over Africa, they vary somewhat and have been classified into many subspecies. The one in South Africa has a rather grey head. Other African races are more greenish or yellowish, and some, as mentioned above, have extensive bare skin from the base of the bill onto the forehead. All have purplish shoulder patches, a whitish-tipped, otherwise red, bill, bluish-white eyes, and legs that are yellowish to orange-red, with the thigh feathers looking like the bird is wearing short, bright yellow

Below Despite their size, African Green Pigeons can be incredibly hard to spot amongst the leafy trees they feed in © Derek Engelbrecht.

Above An African Green Pigeon foraging in its favourite fruiting tree, a fig tree © Derek Engelbrecht.

'pants'. They have chestnut undertail coverts and chestnut to olive-green mottling on their underparts behind the legs. They also have pale yellow edges to their dark wing feathers.

The movements of these birds are influenced by food availability. In the subtropics, such as much of South Africa, there is a long dry season and a short wet season; most growth happens during the wet season and consequently, most trees flower and fruit then. But there are some that fruiting tress into the autumn and winter as well. Any specific tree, at any rate, only bears fruit for a short time. Green pigeons sometimes fly great distances to find suitable fruiting trees. In the more tropical regions of Africa, fruit availability is more constant, and thus there's likely to be food year-round in any area; consequently, the resident birds there don't need to travel as much. Wherever they are, they aren't individually territorial; they tend to form small flocks that fly out together each day to feed, returning to roost during the evening and night in a favourite tree, but not always the same one.

Like other pigeons and doves, African Green Pigeons make flimsy platform nests from twigs. These are situated high in trees, sometimes in loose aggregations of a few nests in a relatively small area. Because of the flimsiness of the structure, eggs and even chicks often fall out, after which the parents will try again. Usually, two eggs are laid. They hatch in 13 to 14 days. The chicks are fed with a rich secretion from their parents' crop, called 'pigeon milk' or 'crop milk'. This is formed by the tissue of the crop itself, and is rich in protein, moderate in fat, and low in carbohydrates. It looks like and has the consistency of cottage cheese. The chicks initially feed on crop milk, and, later on, fruits their parents bring them. They fledge in about 12 days but mostly remain in their parents' flock.

African Green Pigeons are at present abundant, adaptable, and very widespread, and even though they are killed for food in some regions, they are not in danger of extinction.

Author e-mail: willemsvandermerwe@gmail.com

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:

DEVIANT ART

BIRD OF THE YEAR 2022

CAPE GANNET

COLONIAL LIVING

'karack-karack-karack'

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.

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.

X

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.

38 cm - 58 cm pecking distance between nests

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 viscious 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 fiesty 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.

References:
Birdlife International (2022) Species Factsheet: *Morus capensis*. *http://www.birdlife.org*
Hockey, P., Dean, W., Ryan, P. 2005. Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. 7th Edition. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA Giving Conservation Wings

HANS HOHEISEN charitable trust

Created by Leigh Wolfaardt

Reflections

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

Let's chat about Arnot's and Accipiter Alley

Chris Patton

In the last edition of *Reflections* (*The Lark* 43) I took readers along the S58 Dzundwini Hill road, but intimated that while it is a cracking little gravel road to drive on, with many avian delights, the alternative, of remaining on the tar H1-7 until the junction and its left turn towards Punda Maria along the H13 was also a route with tremendous birding possibility.

That initial stretch from the S58 turn-off to the junction is only a couple of kilometres, but generally yields some pretty interesting stuff. The road is on the western fringe of the Hlamalala Flats (named after the stream of the same name, derived from the Tsonga word for the stripe-bellied sand snake).

The habitat in this stretch is the same as that described in the Reflections article of *The Lark* 42 on the Northern Plains, and is dominated by shrub mopane and broad, grass-covered drainage lines punctuated with the odd larger tree. In summer, the wetland areas along the edge of the road are further fed by the runoff from summer rain on the tar road surface, and White-winged Widowbird and Yellow-crowned Bishop may well be seen alongside the ubiquitous roadside cornucopia of rollers, bee-eaters and shrikes that invade the Park in the summer months of the year.

This stretch is also a regular haunt of the emerging localised population of Senegal Coucal that seems to outnumber their cousins Burchell's Coucal in these Flats…

Above Hlamalala or Stripe-bellied Sand Snake © Chris Patton.

(Again, giving a shout-out to a previous *Reflections* article in *The Lark* 33, entitled The Great Kruger Coucal Conundrum).

But I do want to get readers to pay attention to one of the copses of larger trees I alluded to above, on the eastern side of the H1, only a few hundred metres south of the junction. At least one of the trees is a Leadwood, and some of my accomplished birding colleagues in the Park always told me that these trees have a long history of attracting some of the members of the falcon family; Amur Falcon, Lesser Kestrel and Eurasian Hobby are perhaps not that unusual for suitable tree vantage points in this open plains landscape, but then more excitingly Red-footed Falcon and African Hobby have also been recorded perching within its branches by some of the Park's top birders over the years… I can't vouch for either of those two Park rarities, but I have found a Dickinson's Kestrel within the branches on more than one occasion…

Even closer to the junction is a clump of bushes that usually has some Red-backed Shrike or Rattling Cisticola activity in or on it, the former only in summer… but for two consecutive Februaries around 2012, that clump hosted a Common Whitethroat returning unbelievably to such a specific lo-

Above The Falconidae magnetic leadwood near the H1/H13 junction, harbouring a Dickinson's Kestrel on closer inspection © Chris Patton.

Left Violet-eared Waxbill near H13/H1 junction © Chris Patton.

cality… I didn't get nice photos, but well-known birder Tertius Gous secured some photos of this uncommon Palaearctic migrant warbler. I've seen some other interesting and unusual Kruger birds at the H13/H1 junction, with Violet-eared Waxbill, Grey-headed Kingfisher and Thick-billed Cuckoo as three of my favourite memories.

But my main intention in reflecting on birding in this part of the Park is to write about the mopane woodlands. Turning onto the H13, the initial bit is a sort of transition zone between mopane scrubland and mopane woodland. There is even a small stretch where there is some thorn tree savanna, and it is momentarily more similar to habitats in the south of the Park. Giraffes are often found in this short stretch of just a few hundred metres before the vegetation becomes exclusively tall mopane woodland for a distance of about 10 km. It is quite remarkable that the stunted mopane shrubs that dominate the landscape between most of the Park's terrain north of the Olifants River and these tall evergreen trees of mopane woodland are one and the same species, and their height is purely dependent on the soil type they are growing on…

The tarred H13 section runs east-north-east (labelled Punda Gate Road in the map below) from the H1 central tar road (that runs right through the spine of Kruger National Park), to the fork where travellers can either drive 4 km into Punda Maria Camp, or exit the Park at Punda Maria Gate, is only 12km long. Still, it's fair to say it is not the most popular stretch of road in the Park, with some naïve people who don't appreciate its nuances. It travels through some of the best mopane woodland in the Park, but many visitors find the vegetation too dense, the animals too sparse, and often liken it to driving through a tunnel. But, as always, in birding terms looks can be deceiving...

As always rewards are there for those who put in the effort,

Below Map of the H13-1.

Above Not on the H13 itself, but this photo from nearby demonstrates the tunnel-like nature of driving through mopane woodland © Joep Stevens.

Right Giraffe in the H13's break in mopane woodland caused by the Cahora-Bassa pylons © Joep Stevens.

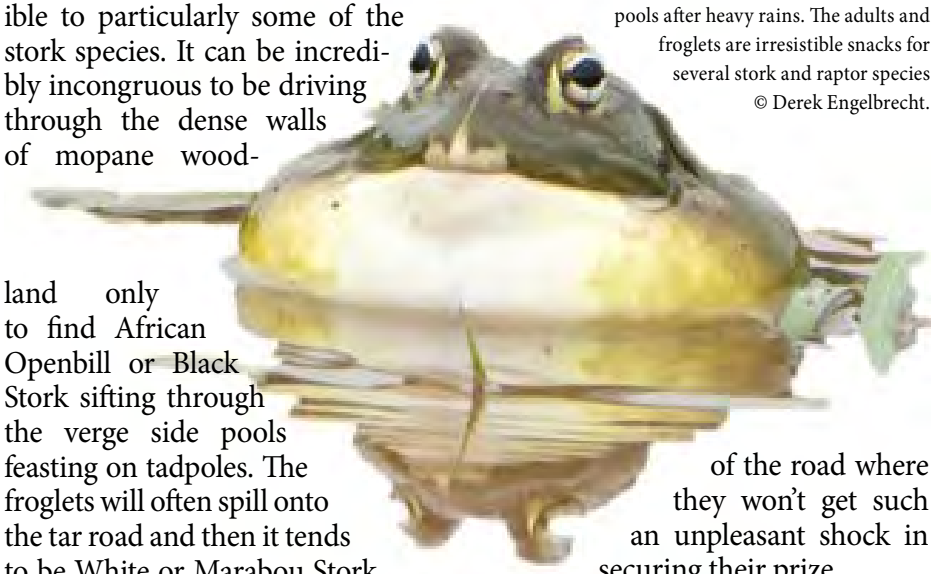
and this is one of the best places to track down the much sought-after Arnot's Chat (often referred to as Mopane Chat). For several years from about 2010, there was a nest hole known to a few of us, which meant it was more or less a guaranteed find, not too far from where the Cahora-Bassa power lines that scar through the landscape bringing power into South Africa from a dam in Mozambique on the Zambezi River. But even though that hole is no longer in use, the species, in their busy little feeding pairs or flocks, is relatively regular in showing itself anywhere along the mopane woodland section of the route.

These power lines might be an eyesore, and totally out of kilter with the wilderness feel one expects in the Park, but they do have some birding appeal because some of the Park's larger raptors use them as a daytime perch, a nocturnal roosting place, and even a nesting platform. So, it is always worth stopping as you get to the short 10 m gap in the mopane woodland created to accommodate the transmission network and the gargantuan pylons that plot their route. Scanning both east and west along both pylons and cables can turn-up various vultures and eagles, with Black-chested Snake-Eagle and Martial Eagles perhaps the two most regularly found during such scans.

Specials that might get seen along this stretch of woodland include Stierling's Wren-Warbler, both European and African Golden Oriole, and Broad-billed Roller (all but the warbler only in summer); while the dense woodland is also

Above A female Arnot's Chat, the pride of the H13 mopane woodland © Daniel Engelbrecht.

good for the Park's three francolin species. Crested, Coqui and Shelley's Francolins can all be seen, or more regularly heard, each with their own distinctive calls. And one interesting thing to look out for in these mopane woodlands in the summertime after summer rains are African Bullfrog froglets. The adult frog apparently spends most of the year buried in the sandy soil of the area, but when rain drains off the tar road forming roadside ephemeral puddles, they quickly get colonised. The now emerged adult bullfrogs make merry and lay their spawn in the puddles, which in remarkably quick time are filled with the first tadpoles, and then loads of froglets, both of which are irresistible to particularly some of the stork species. It can be incredibly incongruous to be driving through the dense walls of mopane woodland only to find African Openbill or Black Stork sifting through the verge side pools feasting on tadpoles. The froglets will often spill onto the tar road and then it tends to be White or Marabou Stork that will look almost comical trying to peck at the froglets without jarring their beaks on the hard tar road, or trying to shepherd them to the side of the road where they won't get such an unpleasant shock in securing their prize.



Below African Bullfrogs irrupt at temporary pools after heavy rains. The adults and froglets are irresistible snacks for several stork and raptor species © Derek Engelbrecht.

Below Broad-billed Roller © Derek Engelbrecht.

But chats and frogs aside, I like to call this stretch of road through the mopane woodland '***Accipiter Alley***'. This area seems to produce several of the goshawk/sparrowhawk clan, and their allies, with regular sightings of Shikra, Little Sparrowhawk, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Gabar Goshawk, Lizard Buzzard, and even Ovambo Sparrowhawk (which is generally rare in the Park. Something about the tall trees and dense cover concealing their aerial attacks on prey (mostly passerine bird species) seems to make it the ideal habitat for them.

So if you are reading this and were dismissive of the 'tunnel' through mopane woodland along the H13, I hope this article will have made it a more appealing proposition next time you travel along it. But most of you, I'm sure, know Kruger's cardinal rule… to always expect the unexpected.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT A Lizard Buzzard (© Derek Engelbrecht), juvenile Gabar Goshawks (© Chris Patton) and adult Dark Chanting Goshawk (© Derek Engelbrecht) on the H13 .

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

Birdlife Polokwane merchandise

Shopping bags	@ R30-00
Key rings/bottle opener	@ R30-00
Car license discs	@ R10-00

Contact Julia Friskin
Mobile: 0839968841

Now available at:
Pick n Pay Cycad
Woolworths Mall of the North

A Grey-headed Albatross on Marion Island © Michelle Risi

forestry, fisheries & the environment

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™

The Mouse-Free Marion Project

www.mousefreemarion.org

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings

Bird Briefs

Notes on the vocalizations, wing song and song flight of Rufous-naped Lark

Derek Engelbrecht
E-mail: faunagalore@gmail.com

Rufous-naped Lark has a widespread distribution over much of sub-Saharan Africa. Given its wide range, it is not surprising that the species exhibits considerable variation in structure, plumage colouration and vocalizations. Depending on the classification system used, Rufous-naped Lark comprises as many as 23 subspecies across its range. However, many of these subspecies don't warrant subspecific status, while other subspecies should rather be treated as separate species (Alström *in litt.*).

Across its range, there is considerable variation in the vocalizations of Rufous-naped Lark, with the song of some species hardly resembling Rufous-naped Lark song at all. Thus, there is a need to provide detailed descriptions of the vocalizations of different subspecies from across its range. The purpose of this note is to summarise my field notes of the vocalizations of Rufous-naped Lark from central and northern South Africa, representing the subspecies *Mirafra africana transvaalensis*.

Four types of vocalizations can be distinguished:

a. Song
b. Contact call
c. Alarm call
d. Nestling and fledgling begging and distress calls

Unusually for larks, all three adult vocalizations (numbers a–c above) are performed by both sexes.

In addition to these vocalizations, Rufous-naped Lark also has a wing song.

Vocalizations

Song

Three types of song can be distinguished: territorial (advertising) song, heterospecific vocal mimicry and warbling song. In this study, both sexes were recorded performing all three song types. According to Dean (2005), the territorial song is performed throughout the year. Although song has been recorded in almost all months of the year, the territorial song is rarely performed outside the pre-breeding and main breeding season, i.e., from about September to March/April in southern Africa (pers. obs.).

Above A male Rufous-naped Lark in the typical singing posture: the head angled upward, neck tucked in and the crown feathers raised to create a crest © Daniel Engelbrecht.

Using the definitions of Catchpole and Slater (2006) to describe the units of vocalizations, the territorial song is a rather simple and stereotypical whistle comprised of 2–3 elements (Figs. 1a–c), albeit with a lot of individual variation. One individual incorporated a brief series of pulses in the second of two syllables (Fig. 1b).

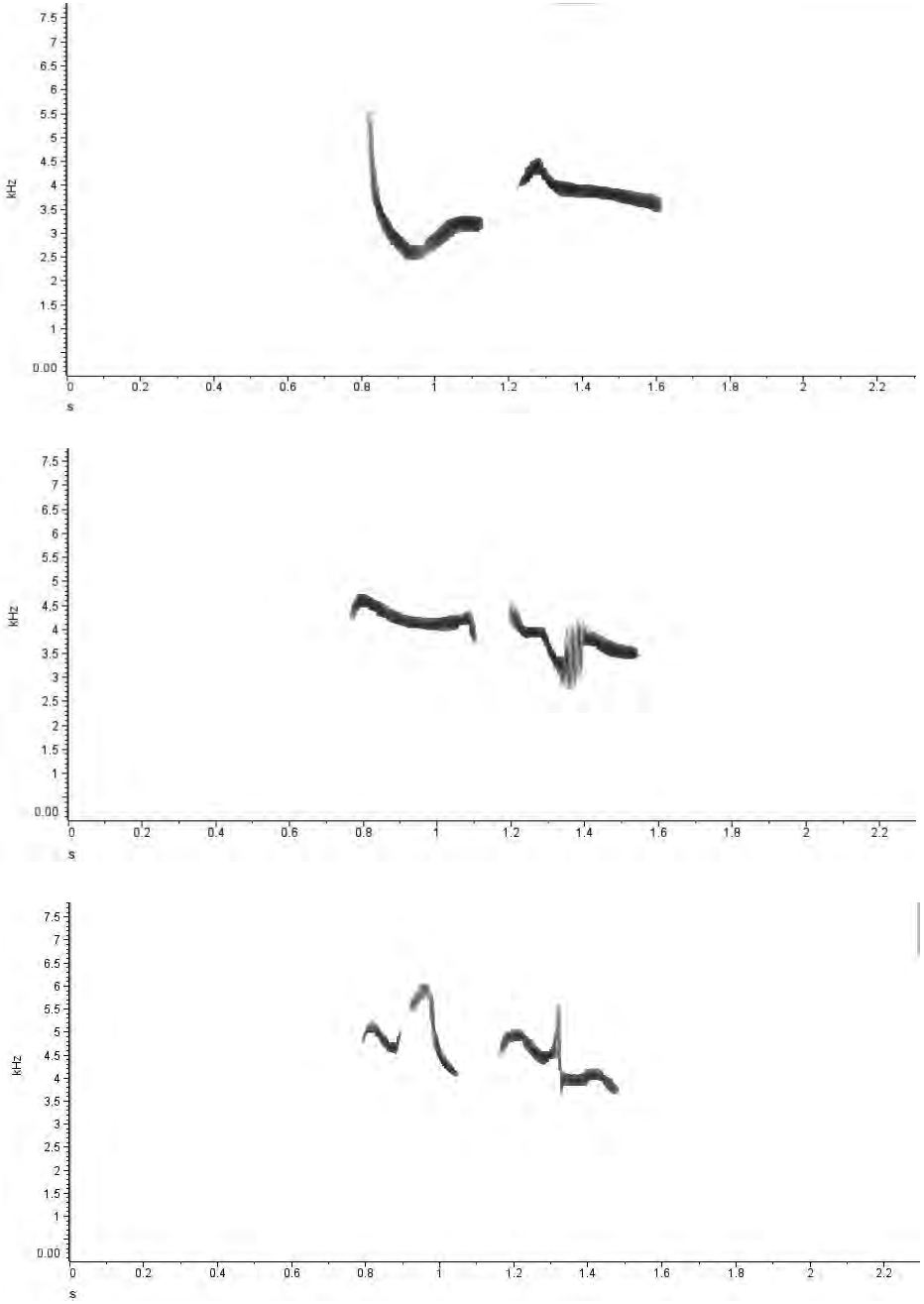


Fig. 1. Examples of song phrases with two (a and b) and three elements. One individual (b) incorporated a series of pulsed elements in the second note, but this is indiscernible to the human ear.

Two-element song phrases were more common in my sample of recordings representing the territorial songs of 39 individuals. Only four individuals (8%) incorporated 3-element phrases in their songs. The mean duration of 2-element song phrases was 0.73 ± 0.11 s (range: 0.55–1.01, n = 200 phrases), and for 3-element phrases was 0.85 ± 0.09 s (range: 0.70–0.93, n = 10 phrases). The elements were either simple whistles, increasing or decreasing in frequency, or complex whistles exhibiting frequency modulation (see Fig. 1c), giving a musical tone to the song. In most instances, the first element was shorter and less complex than the subsequent element/s, but occasionally they were equal, or the subsequent element was slightly longer. The frequency of song phrases ranged between 2334.8 and 6846.1 Hz, with the average frequency range of a song phrase being 2191.48 ± 308.02 Hz (range: 1575.12–3704.24; n = 212 territorial song phrases).

Phrases were repeated at constant intervals at an average of about 4.13 seconds between successive phrases. An individual would switch to a different song phrase regularly. Sometimes, the subsequent phrase involved only a minor change in an element or phrase from the preceding song phrase. Some of these changes were indiscernible to the human ear but clearly visible on a spectrogram. The number of times any particular phrase was repeated ranged from 1 to 75 (mean = 27.6 repetitions per song phrases type; for complete song phrase bouts only, i.e. excluding song phrases at the beginning and end of a recording which may not have been complete). The maximum number of unique song phrases recorded for an individual was six (see Fig. 2). This was in a recording that lasted 5 minutes and 43 seconds and comprised 99 individual song phrases. The song phrase repertoire of an individual is not known.

Although Rufous-naped Lark is known to perform heterospecific vocal mimicry, it only does so occasionally. Heterospecific vocal mimicry was recorded by birds on the ground, when perched or, more commonly, during the song flight of males. A range of species are mimicked: Pink-billed Lark, Short-clawed Lark, Desert Cisticola, Chestnut-vented Warbler, Black-chested Prinia, Three-banded Plover and Crowned Lapwing have all been recorded on the Polokwane Plateau. At Botsalano in the North West Province, I noted Orange River Francolin, Anteating Chat, Cloud and Desert Cisticola, Cape Longclaw, Black-chested

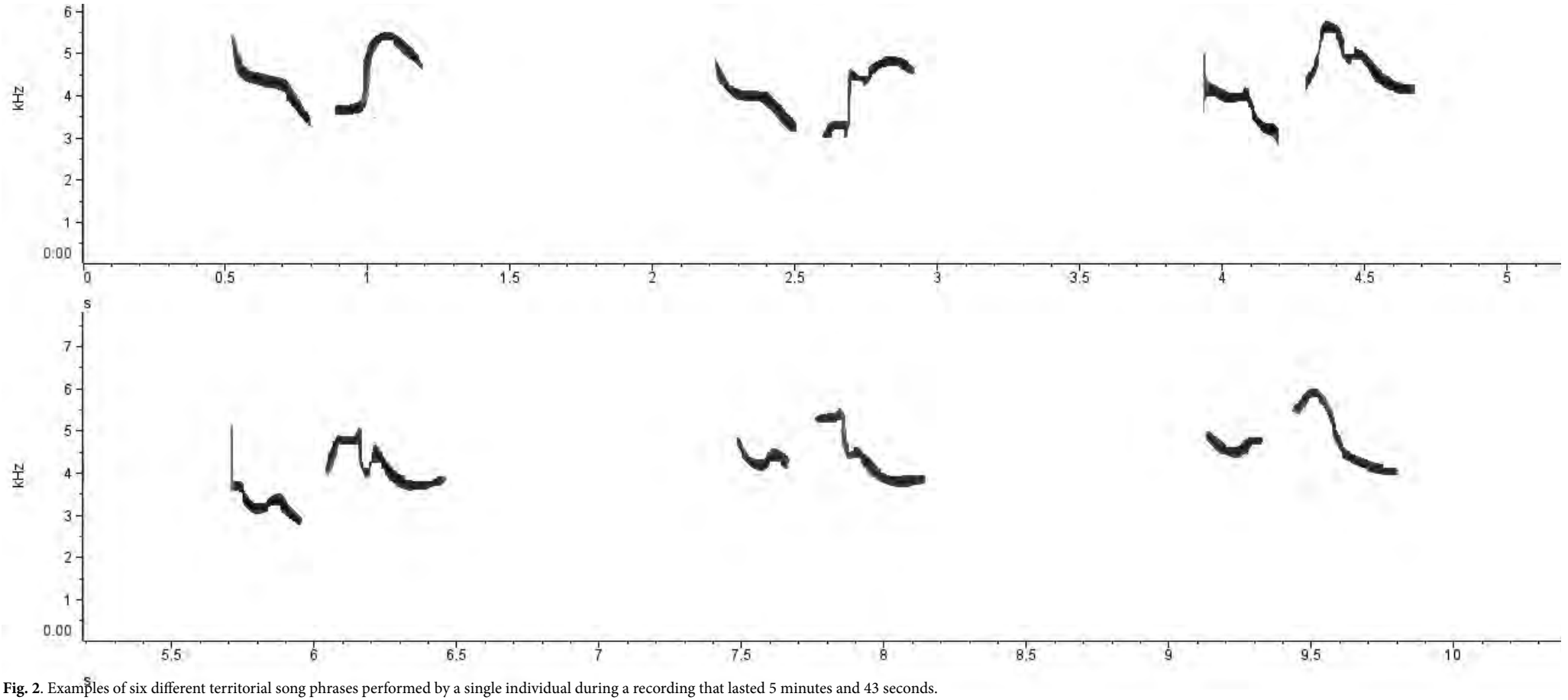


Fig. 2. Examples of six different territorial song phrases performed by a single individual during a recording that lasted 5 minutes and 43 seconds.

Prinia, Southern Masked Weaver, and White-browed Sparrow-Weaver. The female recorded singing on the nest included territorial song phrases, the warbling song, heterospecific mimicry and the contact call (see video at ML500736261). Species mimicked by the female included Desert Cisticola, European Bee-eater, Chestnut-vented Warbler and Red-faced Mousebird, amongst others.

The warbling song comprises a complex warble of whistles and pulsed elements varying in duration and frequency (See video ML500736261 and sound recording ML500746901). Given its complexity, it is presumably an alternative expression of song, perhaps indicating fitness or strengthening the pair bond. As mentioned above, an incubating female performed the chattering song from the nest during an incubation on-bout. On another occasion, a male performed the territorial song before flying some 40 m and briefly chattering before landing (Fig. 3) and continuing with the territorial song after perching.

Contact call

The contact call is a short (mean = 0.38 ± 0.10 s; range: 0.19–0.54; n = 60 contact calls) piercing whistle comprised of a single element which may either be of a constant frequency or increasing in frequency (Fig. 4; ML500773101; ML500774091). The frequency range for this type of call is between 2476.7 and 4550.9 Hz (n = 60 contact calls).

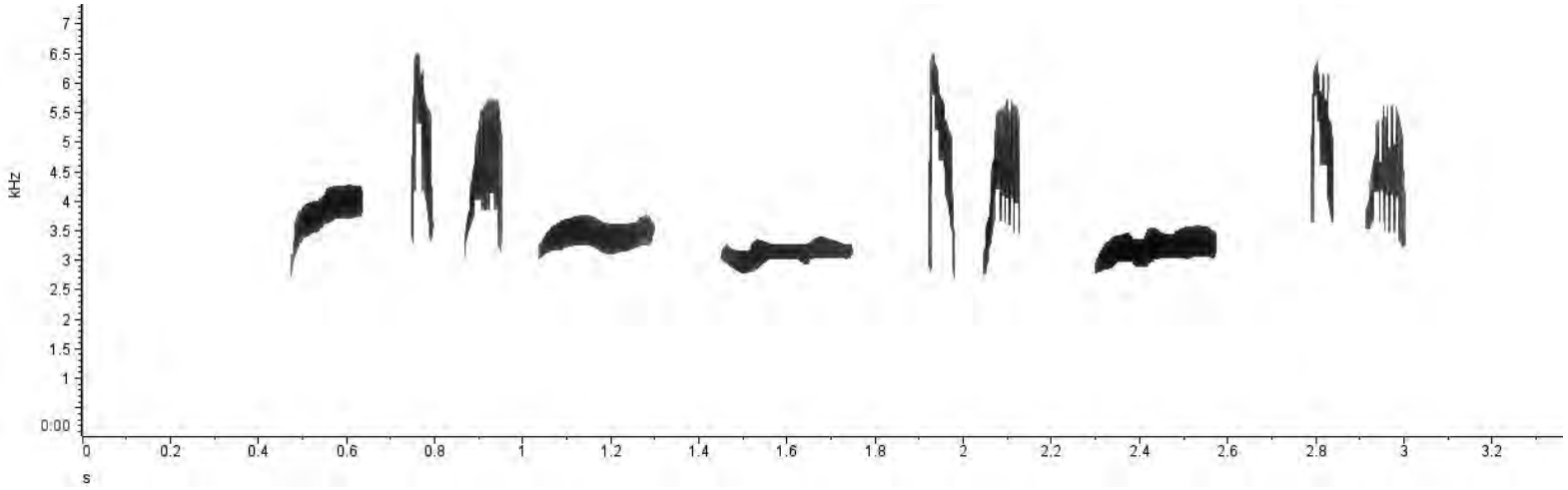


Fig. 3. A spectrogram of the warbling song of Rufous-naped Lark. Note the mixture of whistles and trills varying in duration and frequency.

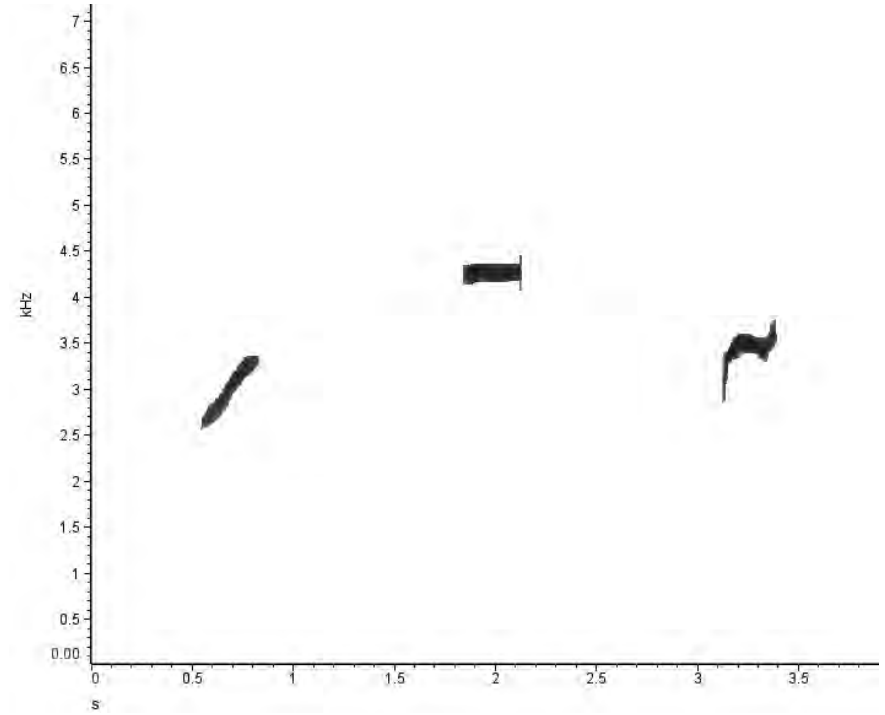


Fig. 4. Examples of different contact calls of Rufous-naped Lark.

Contact calls were recorded from an individual (sex unknown) on the ground, but it is not known if the bird was foraging or if there was a nest in the vicinity. On another occasion, I observed two birds calling the contact call together: a perched male was singing the territorial song while another bird (presumably its mate) on the ground was calling the contact call. A short while later, the male also started calling the contact call. Both birds called the contact call for a while before the male switched back to singing the territorial song. In this case, the contact call of the male had a higher frequency compared to the presumed female.

Contact calls are often interspersed with territorial song bouts, and on at least three occasions, it preceded a song flight. Contact calls have also been recorded after dark.

Alarm call

The alarm call was heard when a bird was flushed from a nest and was a repetitive *kwirt-kwirt-kwirt* type of call.

Nestling and fledgling begging and distress calls

Nestling begging calls are soft peep sounds typical of nestlings. Nestling distress calls are harsh *peeessh* sounds but are indistinguishable from the distress calls of the nestlings of other lark species.

Wing song

A non-vocal fluttering sound frequently accompanies the territorial song (Fig. 5; see videos ML500742981 and ML500739311). The individual flaps range from two to seven and are repeated, on average, after every six song phrases (range: 4.12–8.40 flaps). One bird had a double burst of flaps: the first burst comprised three flaps, then a very brief pause before the second burst of six flaps followed.

The wing song resembles a very short version of the aerial song displays of Eastern Clap-

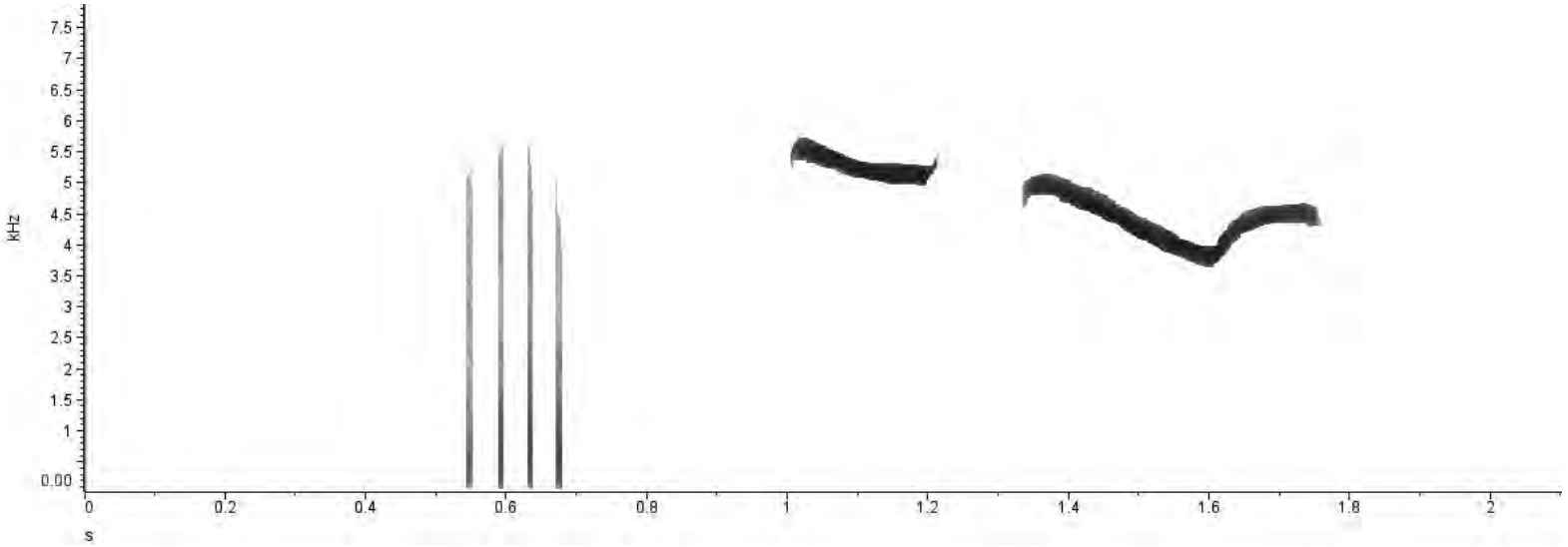


Fig. 5. A spectrogram of a 4-element wing song display of a Rufous-naped Lark, followed by a 2-element territorial song phrase.

per, Cape Clapper and Flappet Lark. I deliberately steered clear from calling it a clapping sound as I am not convinced the sound is, as commonly suggested, created by the wings touching below (and as some suggest above, too) the body. In my opinion, the 'clapping' rate is too fast to explain the wings touching during a downstroke, an upstroke without contact at the peak amplitude, followed by a downstroke where contact is once again made. Despite trawling the internet for images of displaying Rufous-naped, Cape Clapper, Eastern Clapper and Flappet Lark, I have never seen a photo suggesting that the two wing tips actually touch, or even get close to one another. Although I don't have the tools at my disposal to establish if percussion is indeed the origin of the sound, it's my opinion that a mechanism such as aeroelastic fluttering may be at play. Aeroelastic fluttering is the mechanism behind the *phrrrp* sound produced by African Broadbill, as well as sounds created by hummingbirds and snipes. It occurs when airflow over a feather causes it to vibrate at certain frequencies (Clark et al. 2016). The gap between successive flaps of Rufous-naped Lark, the two clapper larks and Flappet Lark is only marginally slower than the gap of African Broadbill (Table 1).

Table 1. The average duration between successive flaps in the wing song of four species employing wing song in their displays: Rufous-naped Lark, Eastern Clapper Lark, Cape Clapper Lark and African Broadbill.

Species	Mean ± SD	Range
Rufous-naped Lark	0.033 ± 0.003	0.025–0.040
Eastern Clapper Lark	0.057 ± 0.003	0.050–0.062
Cape Clapper Lark		
Beginning of wing flapping sequence	0.075 ± 0.007	0.067–0.088
End of wing flapping sequence	0.029 ± 0.02	0.024–0.032
African Broadbill	0.018 ±(0.018	0.013–0.022

Unlike Eastern Clapper Lark, where flapping and song overlap towards the end of the flapping flight, there is a short lag period of ~0.2–0.3 s between the end of the wing song and the start of a territorial song phrase in Rufous-naped Lark. During the wing song display, the male typically rises between 1 and 2 cm from its perch (pers. obs.), but 5 cm (Dean and Keith 1992) and an incredible 80 cm (Ryan et al. 2022) have been reported.

Song flight

Details of the song flight in the literature are scant. According to Dean and Keith (1992), the male ascends in an upward spiral while singing, then glides down on outstretched wings. Ryan et al. (2022) simply describe it as a short aerial display during which it sings a more complex song which includes mimicry.

Song flights are not common, and I have only observed a handful in many years of observations. The song flight is often preceded by a few contact calls and, on one occasion, some heterospecific mimicry. The song flight starts with a male ascending slowly and with a butterfly-like flight along a steep angle of ~45° to 60° to a height of between 15 and 25 m. The ascending bird may or may not warble or mimic the calls of other spe-

cies. All the ascending flights I observed (n = 6) were straight and not in a spiral formation, as reported by Dean and Keith (1992). Once the bird reaches its apex song flight height, it circles in relatively large but irregular circles while mimicking the calls of other species, occasionally interspersed with phrases of the territorial song. The descent is either direct or in a large spiral at about a 45° angle, with the wings outstretched, almost as if parachuting. One male in the Polokwane Game Reserve also performed a poor rendition of the wing song during the song flight. Although it was audible, it sounded like an out-of-sync Eastern Clapper Lark. Most song flights I observed were short (< 1 min), the longest being just under 2 minutes.

From the above, it is clear that the vocal repertoire of Rufous-naped Lark is much more extensive and complex than the stereotypical *tseep-tseerioo* usually described in the literature. This note was an attempt to provide a summary of my data and to highlight some aspects that may be fruitful avenues for future studies. I encourage sound recorders to upload their recordings to platforms such as the Macauly Library or Xeno-canto so that we can appreciate the full extent of this underrated lark's vocal repertoire. And for my Christmas wish list, someone with the tools to help solve the flapping mystery.

References

Catchpole CK, Slater PJB. 2008. Bird song. Biological themes and variations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clark CJ, Kirschel ANG, Hadjioannou L, Prum RO. 2016. *Smithornis* broadbills produce loud wing song by aeroelastic flutter of medial primary wing feathers. Journal of Experimental Biology 219(7): 1069–1075. doi: https://doi.org/10.1242/jeb.131664.

Dean WRJ, Keith S. 1992. *Mirafra Africana* Smith. Rufous-naped Lark. In: Keith S, Urban EK, Fry CH (eds), The Birds of Africa. Volume IV. London: Academic Press. pp. 22–24.

Dean WRJ. 2005. Rufous-naped Lark *Mirafra africana.* In: Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (eds), Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. 7th Edn. Cape Town: The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund. pp. 862–863.

Ryan PJ, Del Hoyo J, Collar N, Boesman PFD, Kirwan GM. 2022. Rufous-naped Lark (*Mirafra africana*), version 1.1. In: Keeney BK (ed), Birds of the World. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.runlar1.01.1.

Opposite A male Rufous-naped Lark rising about 2 cm during a wing song display
© Derek Engelbrecht.

African Harrier-Hawk observations

Text and Photos Jan Fourie
E-mail: jan.fourie.tours@gmail.com

The African Harrier-Hawk is the largest grey hawk in the region. A prominent feature of the bird is its naked, yellow facial skin (hence the Afrikaans name of Kaalwangvalk, translated as 'naked cheek falcon'. The yellow skin, however, flushes orange to reddish during social interaction, especially during the breeding season.

These birds have a catholic diet, eating eggs and nestlings of other birds (ranging from waxbills to herons) by raiding their nests, small mammals, reptiles, frogs and insects.

African Harrier-Hawks are monogamous breeders, and their nest is a large platform of sticks in a tall tree or on a cliff face. Both sexes construct the nest. Two nests may be built simultaneously in two different sites.

The photographic record herewith is of my observations of a pair of these while constructing a nest in September 2022. We watched them collecting and carrying sticks to the nesting site over quite some distance. Both the bill and feet were employed to carry nesting material.

Left One of the pair of African Harrier-Hawks.

Nesting material was either carried in the beak (Top) or the feet (Bottom).

Above During copulation, the pair's faces flush a bright red during copulation.

Above One of the pair with a nuptial gift.

Courtship is also quite an affair. The male feeds the female during courtship, and copulation occurs before or after courtship feeding, as reported by Smeenk and Smeenk-Enserink (1983).

According to Thurow (1981), copulation occurs on or near the nest, but I observed them mating at two different places about a hundred meters from the nesting site. As reported by Thurow (1981), we also noticed the male presenting the female with a sprig of green leaves after copulation.

We witnessed copulation on several occasions, but it is known to continue throughout the incubation and early nestling period. It is believed that regular copulation reinforces the pair bond.

We watched these activities for about three weeks, and all of a sudden, it was all quiet and the birds were gone. We suspect that this was a case of two nests being built in two different sites and that they chose the other site to continue breeding.

References

Smeenk C, Smeenk-Enserink N. 1983. Observations on the Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides typus* in Nigeria, with comparative notes on the Neotropical Crane Hawk *Geranospiza caerulescens*. Ardea 71:133–143.

Thurow TL, Black HL. 1981. Ecology and behaviour of the Gymnogene. Ostrich 52:25–35.

Nesting sites of Rosy-faced Lovebird

Text and Photos Derek Engelbrecht
E-mail: faunagalore@gmail.com

There is something about Rosy-faced Lovebirds that just makes them seem out of place. The parched landscapes it inhabits are dominated by birds dressed in shades of brown, grey and perhaps some rufous. Not the lovebirds. With their peach-pink faces, bright green body plumage and azure blue rumps, most people would rather associate them with lush tropical forests. But that is not the only reason they seem out of place. Their nesting sites are somewhat unusual too. Natural nests are usually placed in rock crevices or chambers of colonial nesting weavers such as Sociable Weaver, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver and Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver (Rowan 1983; Tarboton 2011). They also readily take to man-made structures, e.g. crevices under the eaves of buildings or under bridges, windmills, electrical and telecommunication infrastructure and nest boxes (Simmons 1997; Ndithia 2007; Tarboton 2011).

Below Rosy-faced Lovebirds feeding on the seeds of invasive *Prosopis* (mesquite) at Keimoes.

On a recent visit to the Keimoes region in the Northern Cape Province, South Africa, between 22 and 25 September 2022, I encountered good numbers of Rosy-faced Lovebirds in and around the town. Many birds were actively breeding, returning to nests time and again. At a nest under the eaves of a building in the town of Keimoes, I was able to hear the begging calls of nestlings. There were also many juveniles accompanying adult birds, but I am uncertain if these were recently fledged juveniles or juveniles from the end of summer breeding peak in February to April 2022. Nevertheless, given an incubation period of 23 days and a nestling period of 42–44 days (Ndithia et al. 2007), this suggests breeding at some of the nests I observed must have commenced in August, perhaps even as early as July. Depending on how old the begging nestlings or juveniles were. Although the peak egg-laying months for Rosy-faced Lovebird is towards the end of summer (February to April (Rowan 1983;

Below Rosy-faced Lovebirds were nesting in the expansion joints below the bridges spanning the Orange River.

Above Rosy-faced Lovebird nests in Keimoes in September 2022. Left Under the eaves of a building in the CBD; Middle and right Two nests of Little Swift used by Rosy-faced Lovebirds. Nestling begging calls could be heard from the nest in the middle.

Ndithia 2007), Rowan (1983) cites an October record, but my observations suggest egg-laying commenced in August to September, perhaps as early as July.

Nests were found under a bridge, a crack in a wall, on a narrow ledge below a gutter and under the eaves of buildings. A few birds were breeding in the nests of Little Swifts placed under the eaves of a building. This is an interesting record as it seems to be the first record of Rosy-faced Lovebirds using the nest of another bird species other than weavers. True to the gregarious nature of Rosy-faced Lovebirds, however, Little Swifts are also colonial breeders. So, the close proximity of Little Swift nests must be to the liking of the lovebirds. The lovebirds did not have it all their way, though, as while I was watching the birds breeding in the Little Swift nests, some White-rumped Swifts also attempted to reach the nests, eliciting an aggressive response from the lovebirds. White-rumped Swifts are known to usurp the nests of swifts and swallows for their own use. Unfortunately, I had to leave Keimoes, so whether or not the White-rumped Swifts succeeded in ousting the lovebirds is unknown.

References

Ndithia H, Perrin MR, Waltert M. 2007. Breeding biology and nest site characteristics of the Rosy-faced Lovebird *Agapornis roseicollis* in Namibia. Ostrich 78(1): 13–20.

Rowan MK. 1983. The Doves, Parrots, Louries and Cuckoos of Southern Africa. David Philip: Cape Town.

Simmons RE. 1997. Rosy-faced Lovebird *Agapornis roseicollis*. In: Harrison JA, Allan DG, Underhill LG, Herremans M, Tree AJ, Parker V, Brown CJ (eds). The Atlas of Southern African Birds. Vol. 1: Non-passerines. BirdLife South Africa: Johannesburg.

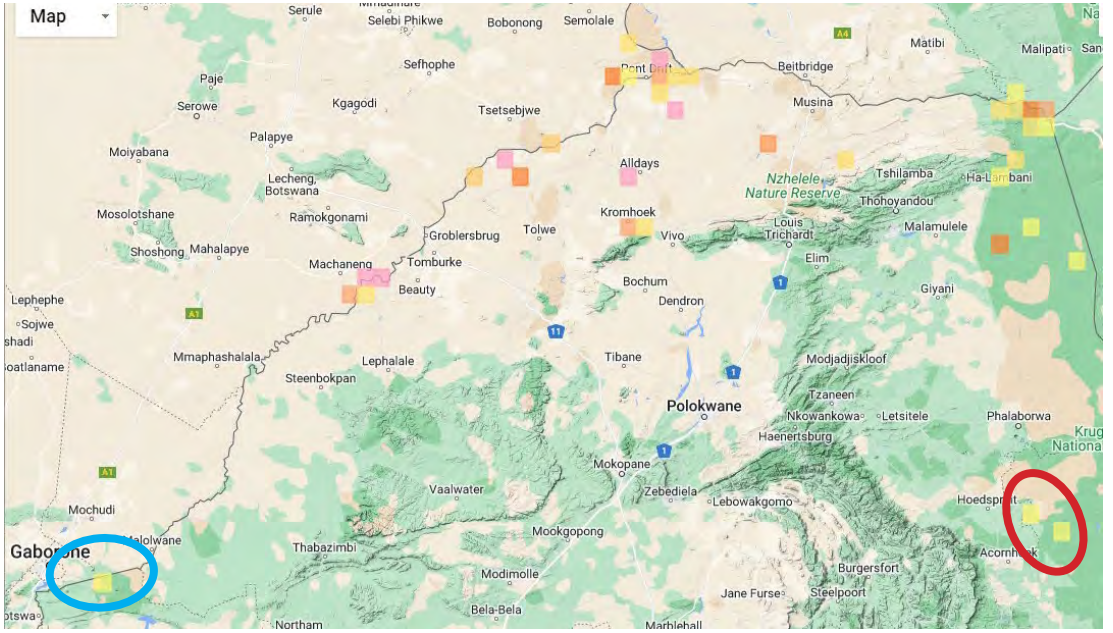
Tarboton W. 2011. Roberts Nests and Eggs of Southern African Birds. Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund: Cape Town.

Three-banded Coursers breeding in the Timbavati

Alan Whyte
E-mail: alan@springfieldfarm.co.za

Our family was spending the weekend of the 17th and 18th of September 2022 at our game farm in the Timbavati. We bumped into our neighbour, who told us that the pair of Three-banded Coursers he had spotted on our farm previously was still in the exact spot where he had seen them several weeks ago (see Sonnenberg 2022). He also said they had two small chicks with them.

We followed his directions and found the birds easily and exactly in the place he said they would be, sheltering under a magic gwarrie bush! We searched



Below A SABAP2 map of the known distribution of Three-banded Courser in South Africa as on the 29th of October 2022. The red ellipse encloses the Timbavati records, and the blue ellipse encloses the record from the Madikwe region (map courtesy of SABAP2).

Above The two adult Three-banded Coursers with their well-grown chick (to the right) in the Timbavati © Valerie Whyte.

in the grass and gwarrie bushes for a while but, sadly, could only find one chick, and we suspect the pair had lost the other one.

These Three-banded Coursers are a considerable distance (> 200 km) away from the nearest known 'stronghold' in the northern Kruger National Park (Derek Engelbrecht, pers. comm.). Although they are generally sparsely distributed, most South African records are from the extreme north of the Limpopo Province, generally north of 23°S. Although not the southernmost record of the species (there is an intriguing record from the Madikwe region in March 2021), this is certainly the most southerly breeding record of the species.

Reference

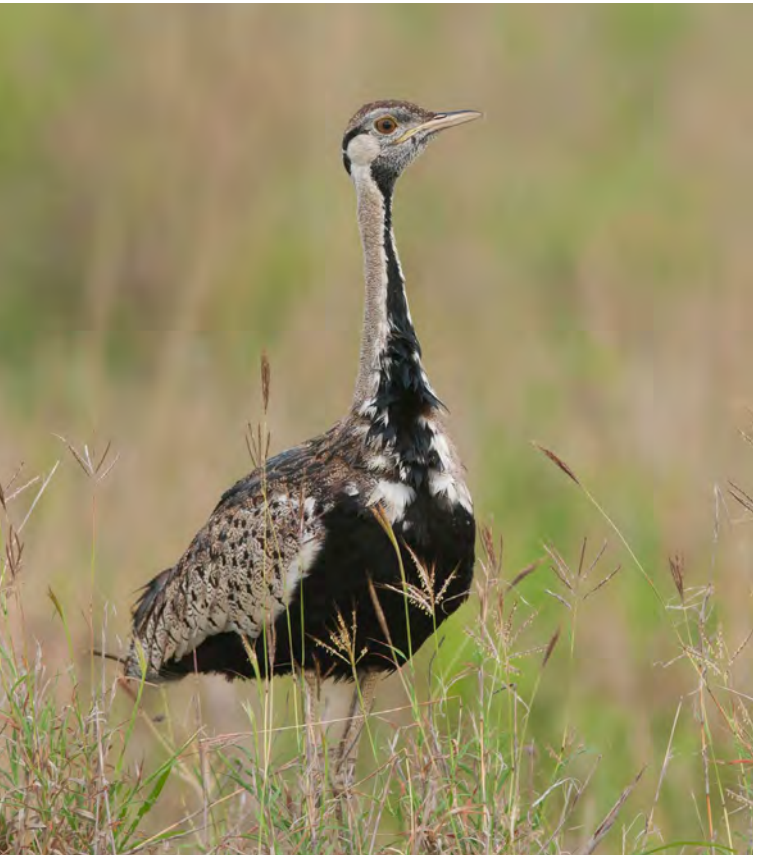
Sonnenberg W. 2022. Three-banded Coursers in the Timbavati. The Lark 42: 55–56.

The amazing camouflage of Black-bellied Bustard

Text and Photos Derek Engelbrecht
E-mail: faunagalore@gmail.com

The interesting note about the black throat patches of korhaans in a recent issue of *The Lark* (Chittenden 2022), reminded me of some of the encounters I had with one of my favourite bustards, Black-bellied Bustard. Let's, for a moment, forget about the comical cork-popping call, which is the source of much ridicule of the species. Black-bellied Bustard possesses an air of grace and elegance with its long legs, and in the case of the males, its black 'tie' that extends from its throat to the underparts. It's a beautiful bird.

However, as striking as the males are, they virtually disappear in thin air if you don't keep a close eye on them while walking through the tall, dense grass they inhabit. As for females, well, they just disappear. The accompanying photos show a Black-bellied Bustard walking in tall grass. The resemblance to one of the spotted cats is uncanny.



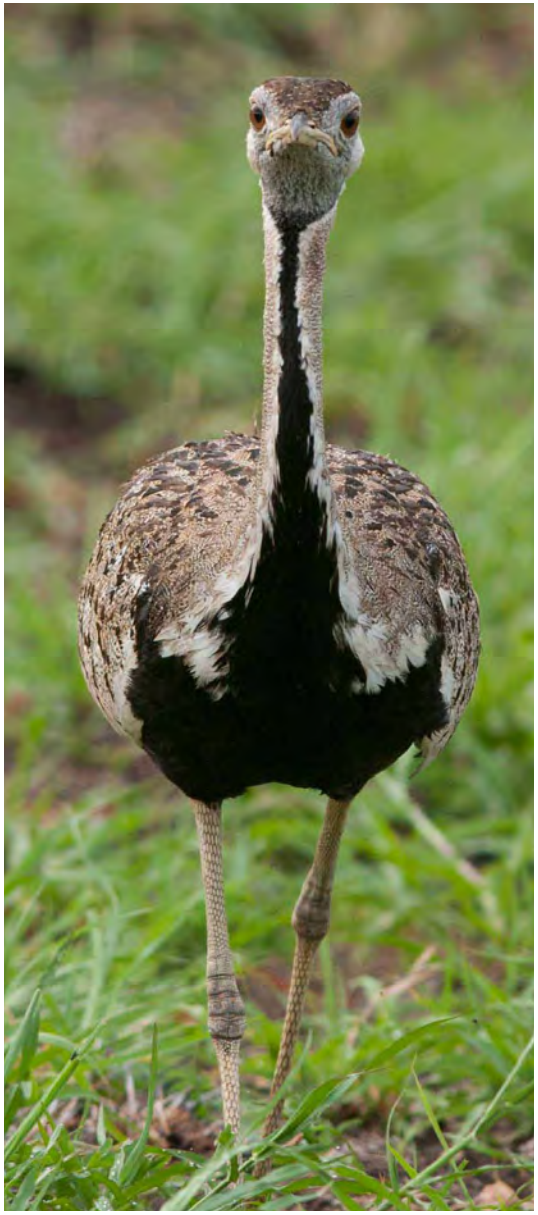
Reference

Chittenden H. 2022. Korhaans - the all-important black throat patch. The Lark 42: 57–56.

Left A male Black-bellied Bustard scanning its surroundings.

It's sometimes hard to imagine that their plumage affords them such superb camouflage in the open, tall grassy areas they inhabit.
Above A male crossing open terrain.

Top A male performing its cork-popping call.



Comparing a view from the front and one from the back, one can begin to appreciate how well Black-bellied Bustards can blend into their environment. When it sees a threat, it will either stand motionless or crouch low to the ground. Once it is in the crouched position, it can be very difficult to see. The black patch on the hind neck may also help to confuse potential predators, as most predators will attempt to strike from behind.

In the dry, long grass, one can truly appreciate what excellent camouflage their plumage affords them. In these images, the dorsal plumage bears a striking resemblance to the coat of a spotted cat, such as a leopard or serval. Even the black hind neck patch resembles the pattern on the back of the ears of leopards and serval.

POLOKWANE 100 KM

... and a bit beyond

Interesting sightings

16 August 2022 - 15 October 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 Skimmer - 26 August 2022. A pair seen at Letaba Estates (Johan Botma).

European Bee-eater - 1 October 2022. Several flying over Soetdorings (Minkie Prinsloo).

European Roller - 6 September 2022. Returning migrant: a single bird seen on outskirts of Bendor (Daniel Engelbrecht).

Klaas's Cuckoo - 3 September 2022. Returning migrant heard in Dorp, Polokwane (Julia Friskin).

African Skimmer © Daniel Engelbrecht

Great Spotted Cuckoo - 28 September 2022. Returning migrant seen at Soetdorings (Leonie Kellerman).

Levaillant's Cuckoo - 16 September 2022. Returning migrant: seen at Soetdorings (Minkie Prinsloo).

Mourning Collared Dove - 20 August 2022. A single bird seen in a garden on a farm at Meanderthal north of De Loskop (Derek Engelbrecht).

Red-chested Cuckoo - 1 October 2022. One heard calling at Soetdorings (Leonie Kellerman).

Red-throated Wryneck - 1 October 2022. One seen at Roodepoort smallholdings (Rupert Harris).

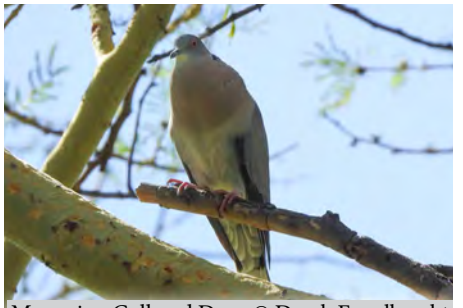
Secretarybird - 20 August 2022. A pair seen on the Soetdorings Road (Derek Engelbrecht).

Swallow-tailed Bee-eater - 19 August 2022. A flock of nine birds roosting together at Lajuma (Bibi Linden); 25 August 2022. Several seen outside Tzaneen (Hannes Swanepoel).

Thick-billed Cuckoo - 16 October 2022. One calling at farm Uitzoek near Tzaneen (Pierre Homan).

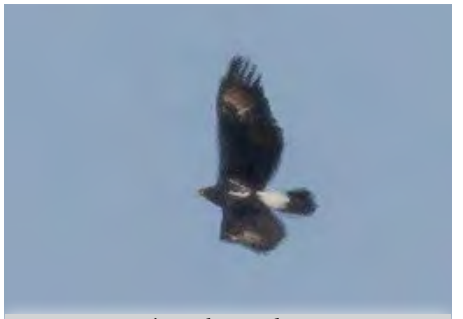
Verreaux's Eagle - 24 September 2022. An adult seen at Bewaarkloof (Jody de Bruyn).

Verreaux's Eagle-Owl - 20 August 2022. A pair breeding in a garden on a farm at Meanderthal north of De Loskop - a first record for the Polokwane 100K (Derek Engelbrecht); 26 August 2022. An adult seen in a garden at Tweefontein, Polokwane (Leonie Kellerman).



Mourning Collared Dove © Derek Engelbrecht

Secretarybird © Derek Engelbrecht



Verreaux's Eagle © Jody De Bruyn

Verreaux's Eagle-Owl © Derek Engelbrecht

Wahlberg's Eagle - 25 August 2022. A single bird regularly seen in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht); 1 September 2022. A pair seen in Eduan Park, one bird being the same individual regularly seen in Welgelegen since the 25th of August 2022 (Derek Engelbrecht).

Yellow-billed Kite - 19 August 2022. A returning migrant flying low over Welgelegen, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).


Wahlberg's Eagle © Derek Engelbrecht


Yellow-billed Kite © Derek Engelbrecht

Passerines

African Reed Warbler - 21 September 2022. A returning migrant at Padda Park, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).

Southern White-crowned Shrike - 16 August 2022. A pair seen on the Soetdorings Road near the Soetdorings Country Club (Leonie Kellerman).

Violet-backed Starling - 16 September 2022. Returning migrant seen at Sapekoe Estate (Dalena Mostert).

White-breasted Cuckooshrike - 15 September 2022. One seen at farm Uitzoek (Pierre Homan).

Willow Warbler - 6 October 2022. At least two seen and singing in Welgelegen, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).

Wire-tailed Swallow - 13 September 2022. A single bird seen in open field opposite gold course and rugby club (Derek Engelbrecht).


African Reed Warbler © Derek Engelbrecht


Willow Warbler © Derek Engelbrecht

Best of the Rest
Limpopo Province

Non-passerines

Caspian Plover - 5 September 2022. Three birds seen in the Tihongonyeni area, Kruger National Park (Duncan McKenzie).

Dickinson's kestrel - 9 September 2022. One seen at the waterhole at Punda Maria Rest Camp, Kruger National Park (André Strydom).

Greater Kestrel - 18 July 2022. A single bird seen in the Tihongonyeni area, Kruger National Park (Duncan McKenzie).

Great White Pelican - 17 August 2022. Thirteen birds seen at Engelhardt Dam, Kruger National Park (Richard Arnestad); 3 October 2022. Twenty-two birds flying over the Limpopo River in the Makuleke Concession, Kruger National Park (Marc Cronje).

Grey-headed Gull - 15 October 2022. Seen at Rooibosrand Dam, Kruger National Park (Marc Cronje).

Long-crested Eagle - 4 September 2022. One seen on the northwestern end of the Mahonie loop at Punda Maria, Kruger National Park (Daniel Engelbrecht).

Osprey - 21 September 2022. A single bird seen at Sable Dam near Phalaborwa Gate, Kruger National Park (Jeremy Brown).

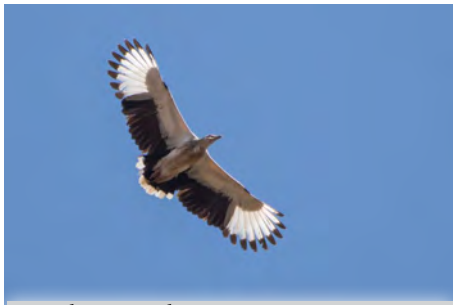

Caspian Plover © Duncan McKenzie


Dickinson's Kestrel © André Strydom


Great White Pelican © Richard Arnestad


Long-crested Eagle © Daniel Engelbrecht

Palm-nut Vulture - 3 September 2022. One seen at Pafuri (Duncan McKenzie).
Pectoral Sandpiper - 7 September 2022. A single bird at Rooibosrand Dam, Kruger National Park (Jeremy Brown); 15 October 2022. Still present at Rooibosrand Dam, Kruger National Park (Marc Cronje).
South African Shelduck - 5 September 2022. A pair seen at Maroela Dam, Atherstone Nature Reserve (Joseph Heymans).


Palm-nut Vulture © Duncan McKenzie


South African Shelduck © Joseph Heymans

Passerines

Eastern Long-billed Lark - 23 August 2022. Several seen at Kwaggavoetpad Nature Reserve near Groblersdal (Pieter Verster).
Eastern Nicator - 20 August 2022. One seen downstream of the Balulele weir in the Kruger National Park (John Luyt).
Melodious Lark - 21 August 2022. Very common at Kwaggavoetpad Nature Reserve (Pieter Verster).
Red-headed Finch - 20 August 2022. Seen at Mooiplaas Picnic Site in the Kruger National Park (John Luyt).
Scaly-feathered Weaver - 3 October 2022. Seen in Makuleke Concession, Kruger National Park (Marc Cronje).


Eastern Long-billed Lark © Jody De Bruyn


Eastern Nicator © John Luyt

CAPE GANNET

WHAT IS GUANO?

Guano is a mixture of seabird **excrement**, seabird carcasses and eggshells. Over thousands of years, this highly prized nitrogen and phosphorous-rich material accumulated on islands where seabirds such as gannets, penguins and cormorants breed. In **arid** parts of the world, such as the coasts of Peru and southern Africa, it was not washed away with the rain, building a layer of guano up to **40 meters** deep.

ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE

The use of guano as a powerful **fertiliser** in **agriculture** has been recorded as far back as the **Inca Empire**. The Andean people collected it off the coast of Peru (in South America) for well over 1500 years, perhaps even as far back as 5000 years. In fact, the word "guano" originates from the Andean indigenous language (Quechua) word, 'huano' which means 'dung to fertilize'.

Interesting numbers

In **1845**, at the height of the Guano Rush:

- **450** ships lay anchored off Namibia's Ichaboe Island.
- About **6000** men harvested guano.
- The guano on Ichaboe Island was **23 meters** deep.
- A total of **1.8 million tons** of guano were removed from southern African islands.

THE GREAT GUANO RUSH

During his travels in South America (1799-1804), the great naturalist Alexander von Humboldt discovered the use of guano in farming practices. He sent a sample to France and its value was revealed to the wider world. In 1840, Justus von Liebig, an organic chemist and pioneer in plant science, discovered that when **nitrogen** was added to soil, it doubled or even tripled agricultural crop **yields**. These discoveries led to a frenzied rush to find guano, with its rich source of **nitrates**. Prospectors sailed the world to find this valuable fertiliser, calling it **White Gold.** It was so valuable that outbreaks of violence and even wars between nations were fought over guano.

Over the course of only two years in the 1840s, thousands of workers harvested millions of tons of guano from seabird islands off the coast of southern Africa. This led to rapid declines in the **populations** of these birds and the destruction of their breeding **habitats**. Because guano was so valuable, the Cape Colony government finally established the Guano Islands Division to manage and control the harvesting. Even though guano continued to be harvested outside of the seabirds' **annual** breeding season, the guano industry eventually collapsed.

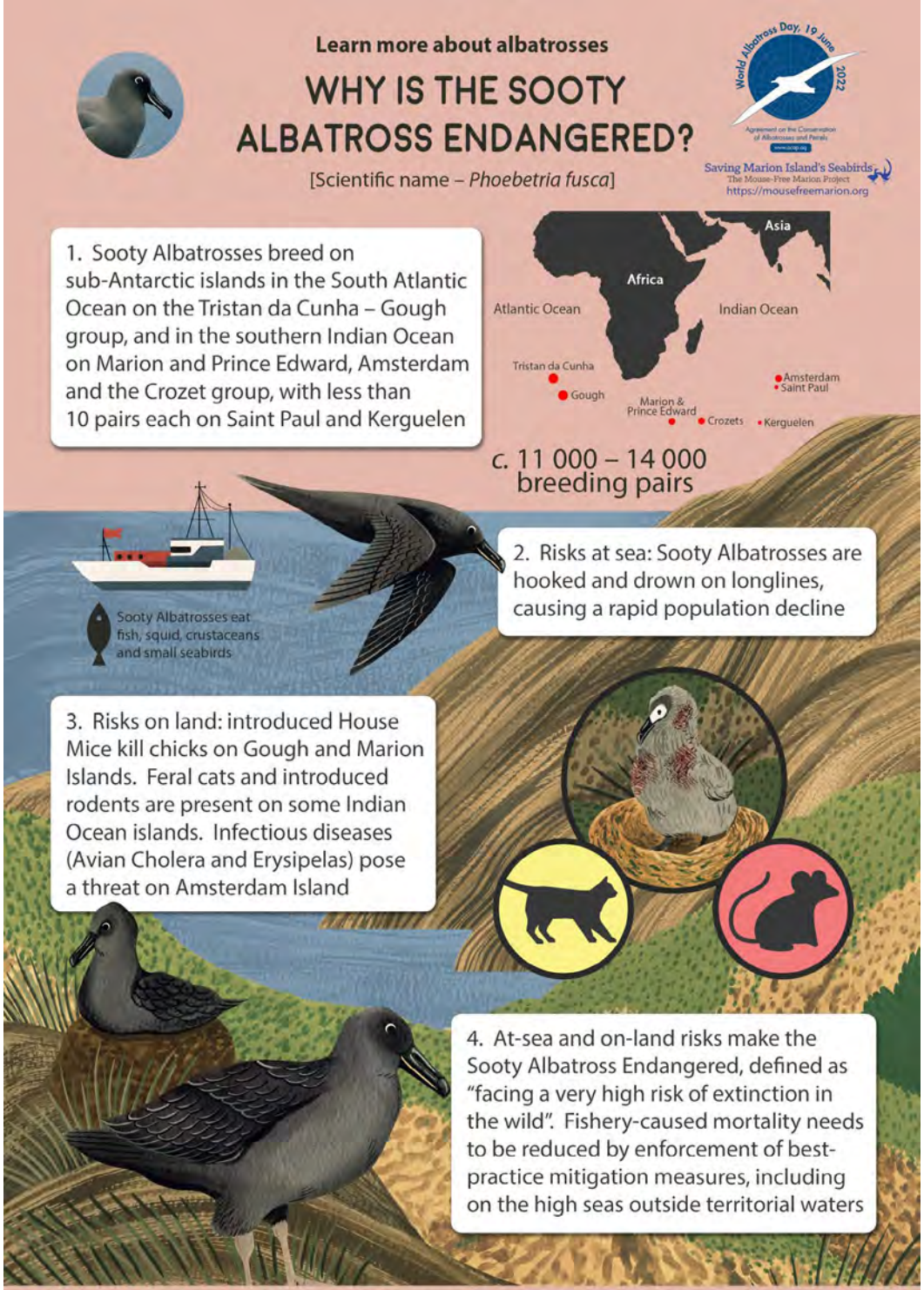
GUANO TODAY

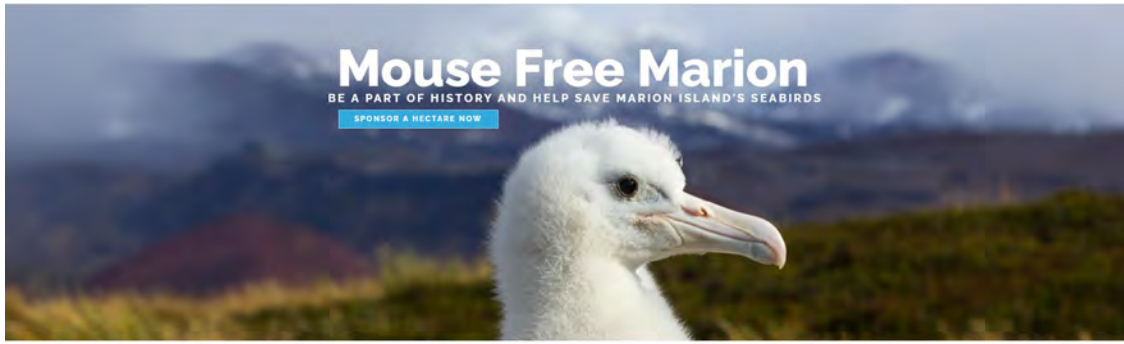
In southern Africa, guano harvesting continued until 1986, with the last stored guano sold in 1990. Thanks to modern, cheaper, **synthetically** produced chemical fertilisers, organic guano is no longer in demand as a fertiliser. Imported guano, mostly from Peru, is sometimes used in **organic farming**, but it is expensive and no longer used on a large scale.

References:
Ryan, P., Dyer, B., (2022), Clear and present dangers, *African Birdlife*, Jan/Feb 2022: 50-51
Yeld, J.,(2013), Beyond the Great Guano Rush, *Weekend Argus*, 13 January 2013
https://footstepstogoodhope.blogspot.com/2018/01/white-gold-there-is-afrikaans-saying.html
https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/the-guano-wars-how-the-world-almost-went-to-blows-over-crap-d68482983514

BirdLife South Africa Giving Conservation Wings
HANS HOHEISEN charitable trust
Created by Leigh Wolfaardt


Let's
share our
beautiful
country!
Welcome





BirdLife South Africa · environmental affairs · FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology

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.

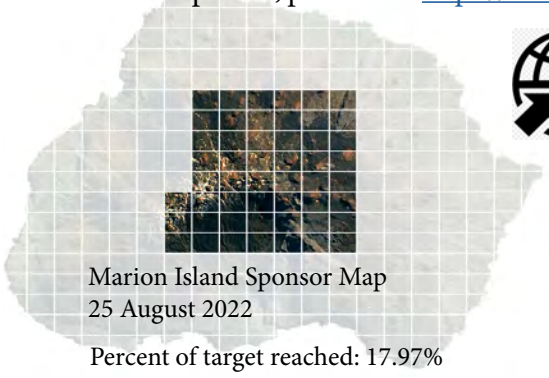
The bait required to cover the island alone will cost upwards of R30 million. To help raise the necessary funds, please would you consider sponsoring one or more hectares of land on Marion Island.

At R1000 (US$56), 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.

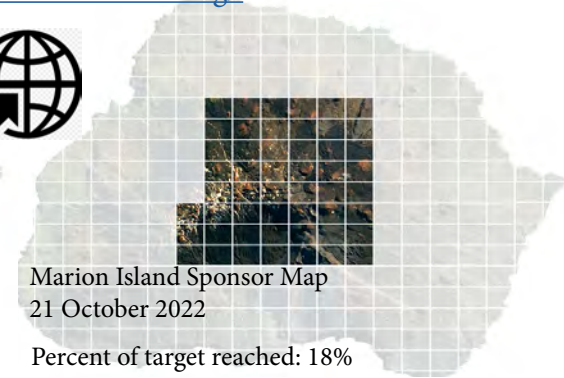
Be a part of history, and sponsor one (or more) hectares of this beautiful oceanic gem.

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



Marion Island Sponsor Map
25 August 2022

Percent of target reached: 17.97%
Sponsored Hectares: 5393 ha
Sponsors: 1748



Marion Island Sponsor Map
21 October 2022

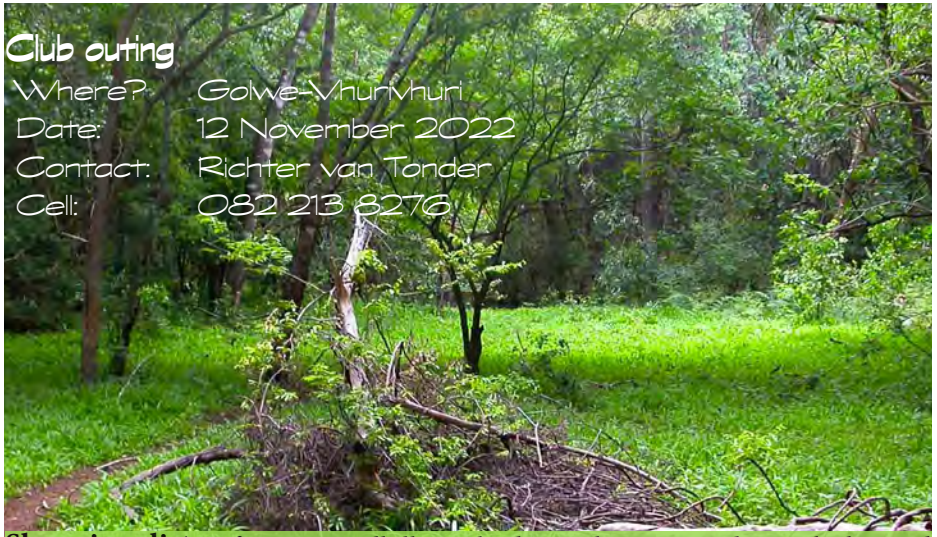
Percent of target reached: 18%
Sponsored Hectares: 5444 ha
Sponsors: 1760

UPCOMING EVENTS

Birdlife Polokwane year-end function
Date: 23 November 2022
Time: 18:30
Venue: Capricorn Racing Club

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting and AGM
Date: 7 February 2023
Time: 18:30
Venue: To be announced

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 7 March 2023
Time: 18:30
Venue: To be announced



Shopping list: African Broadbill, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Pink-throated Twinspot, Black Sparrowhawk, African Wood Owl, Grey Waxbill,

38th Birding BIG day

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings

3 December 2022

BirdLasser
Spot. Plot. Play a part.

More information
If anything is unclear or you need more information, please contact bbd@birdlife.org.za or visit https://www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2022/

Flock™

The BirdLife South Africa Expedition to Eastern Tropical waters

the Mozambique Channel 2023

After the previous three very successful Flocks at Sea (2013, 2017 and 2022), we will be heading to the tropical waters of the Mozambique Channel in November/December 2023.
Flock to the Mozambique Channel will provide an opportunity to see tropical species, such as tropicbirds, boobies and frigatebirds.
The MSC Splendida will depart from and return to Durban on this 5-night voyage.
BirdLife South Africa will make further announcements, including the dates of the voyage, in the near future, and bookings will probably open towards the end of 2022.

Cinderella's page

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

Thick-billed Weaver (female) © Jody De Bruyn