

THE LARK



Birding outings
Hout River and Larkville
Moletzie - again

Roberts 8 online

Bird ringing
Wolkberg

Additions to the White-berry Bush berry-eating bird list • A fishing story: Striated Heron • Notes on Gray's Lark • African Harrier-Hawk diet • The odd man out - Common Moorhen • Growth and development of Red-headed Finch nestlings.

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

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

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

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

15 JUNE 2023

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

COVER Stierling's Wren-Warbler
© Derek Engelbrecht.

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Ready - aim - fire © Leonie Kellerman

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Editors' chirps

And that was the summer of 2022/23. Although most of the migrants have left our shores by now - there are still a few Barn Swallow stragglers around - this does not mean birding is any less exciting in winter. For one, most of the resident birds have now completed their moult, so this is the time to get some cracking photos of birds in their fresh and resplendent plumage. Winter is also the time when you should keep your eyes - and ears! - open for the unusual ... Recall the reverse migrating Wood Warbler in Phalaborwa last year and the Lesser Whitethroat at Marloth Park in 2021. Those were two BIG additions to the Southern African bird list. Closer to home, Namaqua Sandgrouse showed up in Polokwane in 2020, and it is about time that we see Fairy Flycatcher in Polokwane again - this used to be a regular winter visitor to Polokwane, so keep 'em peeled for this short-distance migrant. Of interest is another irruption of Larklike Buntings into the northern provinces, with several reports of this nomad from the Polokwane Plateau. Maybe, just maybe, some other nomads will follow ...

Although there will be no club meetings until August, several club outings are planned, so be sure to join us. These outings are excellent for improving your bird list and identification skills. You can read about Bev Miller's experience as a newbie, and take inspiration from her article on the recent club outing to the Chebeng region. Also, Richter led a club outing to Moleletzie, a real gem of a birding venue, only a stone's throw away from Polokwane. We have not featured a ringing report for several editions now, so be sure to read Derek's report on a recent ringing session in the Wolkberg.

We'll finish off with a typical editor's plea. We so often hear via the grape vine about members that had gone to some exciting birding destinations. Please share your experience with our readers. These reports not only make for good reading, but it also gives valuable intelligence to other birders planning a trip.

Once again, thanks to all our contributors to this issue, and, as always, we look forward to receiving your trip reports or interesting observations.

Raelene and Derek



green.dc.gov/bags



WELCOME TO HOUT RIVER DAM AND LARKVILLE

A NEWBIE PERSPECTIVE ON A BIRDING OUTING

TEXT Bev Miller

Saturday, the 4th of March was diarized as a Birdlife Polokwane outing to Nylsvley Nature Reserve, my second such outing since relocating to Polokwane at the beginning of January 2023. Unfortunately, this much-anticipated event had to be



ABOVE A pair of Goliath Herons at Hout River Dam was a nice surprise © Jody De Bruyn.

LEFT The charming flower of the Sicklebush © Derek Engelbrecht.



cancelled due to the heavy rainfall that the region had recently received, making many of the dirt roads at Nylsvley impassable.

But not to worry, in Polokwane we are blessed with many great birding destinations, and finding an alternative one for the outing wasn't difficult. It was replaced by an outing to Hout River Dam and 'Larkville', about 30 km west of Polokwane, also

known as the Chebeng grasslands.

Totally out of my comfort zone, I was up and out of the house before dawn on Saturday morning to meet the 'pros' at the Polokwane Golf Club for our 5:30 am departure. The plan was that I was going to travel with Derek, until Minkie suggested I jump into the 'girls' car'...

Our convoy of 5 vehicles headed out west with

the sun rising behind our backs. The car trip saw numerous observations of various swallows, doves, finches, francolins, and guineafowl along with the chorus of Rattling Cisticolas.

Arriving at the Hout River Water Treatment Plant, it was time for the obligatory 'coffee and rusks' before heading off onto the dam wall. The sky was filled with flocks of egrets, swallows, and swifts. The walk along the dam wall was filled with the dawn chorus of so many species, and we were surprised to see two Goliath Herons, posing so beautifully for us, before tak-

BELOW White-throated Swallow at Hout River Dam © Jody De Bruyn.

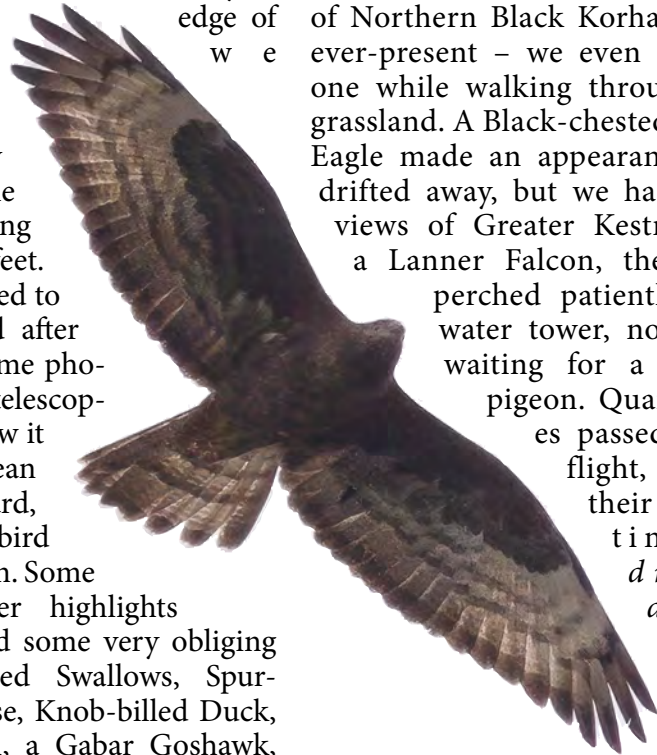


ing off in majestic flight. I am told that they are not often seen in the area. Making our way to the marshy edge of the dam, we were entertained by many, many tiny little frogs hopping around our feet. Marcia pointed to a raptor and after Jody took some photos with his 'telescopic lens', we saw it was a European Honey Buzzard, an excellent bird for that region. Some of the other highlights here included some very obliging White-throated Swallows, Spur-winged Goose, Knob-billed Duck, Little Bittern, a Gabar Goshawk, Cape Penduline Tit, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Short-clawed Lark, Orange-breasted Waxbill, and Yellow Canary.

With the sun high in the sky, it was back to the vehicles and the short drive to Larkville. On the way, some members made a quick stop to see Long-tailed Widowbird – a local rarity - displaying near a local wetland. One of our target species for the day was Tinkling Cisticola, which briefly showed but was a bit shy and only called from a distance away. We

also picked up a flock of Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark passing overhead, while the raucous call of Northern Black Korhaan was ever-present – we even flushed one while walking through the grassland. A Black-chested Snake Eagle made an appearance and drifted away, but we had great views of Greater Kestrel and a Lanner Falcon, the latter perched patiently at a water tower, no doubt waiting for a thirsty pigeon. Quailfinches passed us in flight, calling their distinctive *drink-drink-*

European Honey Buzzard © Jody De Bruyn.



drink calls, but only a few of us managed to see these tiny birds. The cisticolas and pipits were well-represented at Larkville, with Rattling, Tinkling, Desert, Zitting, and Cloud Cisticolas, and African and Buffy Pipit making it onto our trip lists. The Cloud Cisticolas were displaying well, and we got an appreciation as to why it is called a Cloud Cis-



Pin-tailed Whydah © Jody De Bruyn.



Red-backed Shrike © Jody De Bruyn.



Spike-heeled Lark © Jody De Bruyn.



ABOVE Pink-billed Lark at Chebeng © Jody De Bruyn.



LEFT It was so special to see this tiny Pink-billed Lark nestling © Derek Engelbrecht.

ticola – they really are up there. One showed briefly within view, but quickly took off to join the other males in aerial song. It's not known as Larkville for no reason, and in addition to the sparrow-larks, we were rewarded with views



ABOVE Birding the Chebeng grasslands © Derek Engelbrecht.

of Rufous-naped Lark, Short-clawed Lark, Spike-heeled Lark, and Pink-billed Lark. A moment that will be forever etched into my memory was when Derek tracked down a teeny tiny nest complete with the smallest of chicks of the Pink-billed Lark. From the oohs and aahs around me, it was very clear that we were all witnesses to a very special experience.

The morning finished with more than 120 birds observed, which I say, in my non-expert opinion, was a fabulously good morning's work.

To summarize my 'newbie' experience, I stand in awe of

the experiences that I am being blessed with during these extraordinary excursions, in this spectacular place I now call home. For now, I quietly observe, learn, and suck it all in like a sponge.

Thank you to the Polokwane Birdlife Club members for welcoming me and their willingness to share their mind-boggling knowledge.

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Return to Moletzie



Little Bee-eater © Richter Van Tonder

TEXT Richter Van Tonder

This was the third time in the last 10 months I've visited the Moletzie Nature Reserve on the outskirts of Polokwane. It is a little gem of a place, holding the potential for the discovery of many interesting birds. The reserve is only 2.4 km² in size and is situated between some local villages.

On the 1st of April 2023, seven of us made this short journey from Polokwane. It is always nice if the group is small because everyone has a chance to see all the birds. We arrived about 7:15 at the gate. Unfortunately, the reserve is not well-managed, and we were able to enter the reserve without anyone there. Usually there would be someone to let you sign in, but nobody was there this time around.

Waiting around for someone to show up, we were greeted by lots of birds singing away. After a while - and some coffee - we decided to move on towards the 'Big Rock'. This huge granite inselberg is what makes this reserve so special. To many cliff-nesting species, this dome offers suitable ledges for breeding on the otherwise relatively flat Polokwane Plateau. The stars of Moletzie is a small colony of Cape Vultures (Kransaasvoël) that breed and roost on the cliffs, and one can get quite close to them. This is also a guaran-



teed spot at the moment to see Verreaux's Eagle (Witkruisarend), which for us in Polokwane, is a special bird.

I've now become familiar with some of the regular species one would encounter every time, and these are the special ones

you'll pick up at the hill: Cape Vultures, Verreaux's Eagle, Rock Kestrel (Kransvalk), Lanner Falcon (Edelvalk), African Black

ABOVE The Moletji inselberg
© Richter Van Tonder.



ABOVE Mocking Cliff Chat (© Minkie Prinsloo) and LEFT Rock Hyrax (© Richter Van Tonder) are ever-present but delightful companions at 'The Rock'.

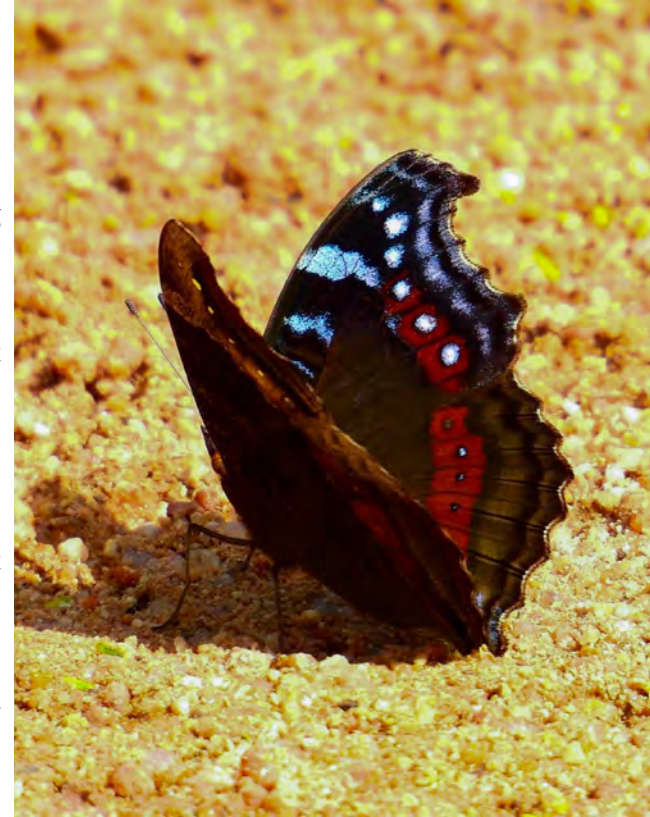
OPPOSITE TOP A male Garden Inspector © Richter Van Tonder.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM The pair of resident Verreaux's Eagles showed well © Richter Van Tonder.

Swift (Swartwindswael), Alpine Swift (Witpenswindswael), Lazy Cisticola (Luitinktinkie), Mocking Cliff Chat (Dassievoël), and Little Bee-eater (Kleinbyvreter).

We parked our cars at the base of the hill and birded on foot all around it. The Verreaux's Eagles nest on the reserve and bred here last season, no doubt because there is an abundant food supply for them ... Dassies!

We first strolled leisurely to the southern and eastern sides of the hill, picking up birds like Jameson's Firefinch (Jameson Vuurv-



BIRD of the YEAR 2023

CAPE PARROT

Poicephalus robustus



The colourful Cape Parrot, with its striking plumage of rich emerald and deep bottle greens, golden yellow and flashes of bright orange-red, is often called the 'jewel of the forest'. It is endemic to South Africa, only found in Afrotemperate mistbelt forests. There are an estimated 1,800 parrots remaining in the wild, making this beautiful bird a highly threatened species.

ABOVE Some happy birders
© Julia Friskin.

inkie), Fiscal Flycatcher (Fiskaalvlieëvanger), Southern Black Flycatcher (Swartvlieëvanger), and a whole lot more. We saw a bird party becoming nervous and suspected a raptor to be close by. Shortly afterwards, a young Gabor Goshawk (Witkruissperwer) came flying in.

We then returned to the western side of the reserve. There were a lot of interesting butterflies as well, and one of them was a male Garden Inspector (Rotsblaarvlerk) that sat down in the road for us to enjoy. The habitat on the western side of the reserve is slightly drier, and here we found birds like Kalahari Scrub-Robin (Kalahariwipstert), Crimson-breasted Shrike,

and Namaqua Dove (Namakwa-duifie).

All in all, we spent about 4 hours enjoying the reserve and what it has to offer. We recorded around 95 bird species in the morning. This destination is going to become a regular/permanent outing on our annual birding calendar.

We hope to be back here soon, and that this little gem of a place remains open and free from human interference.

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WOLKBERG BIRD RINGING

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

Ringing in the Wolkberg offers the opportunity to get hands-on experience with some of the highland species in our region. Our planned ringing day in February to assist Dawie De Swardt with his Gurney's Sugarbird project was cancelled due to rain – like in >800 mm of rain in 10 days! Unfortunately, Dawie had to return empty-handed, but we decided to reschedule the ringing

outing to another day and see if we could fill in some data for Dawie's project.

On the 21st of March 2023, Billy Attard, Marianne McKenzie and I set our mist nets at one of Dawie's regular field stations in the Wolkberg, hoping to catch some sugarbirds, and, who knows, maybe a recapture. We arrived at the site at 4 am, and the laborious process of erecting the nets got going.





We made good time and had the nets up and open at dawn and savoured the sunrise while having a cup of coffee. Life's good.

Our first check of the nets yielded about 15 birds, including a pair of Buff-streaked Chats,

two Gurney's Sugarbirds, Cape Canaries, and a few Greater Double-collared Sunbirds. To put matters in perspective, a good day's ringing in the Wolkberg usually yields about 15 birds – we had 15 birds at the first check! The good

start wasn't a false start, and with every check of the nets, we added a good number of new birds.

We finished the day with 45 birds ringed, representing 16 species! Wailing Cisticolas dominated the catch numerically,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT TO BOTTOM LEFT
Gurney's Sugarbird, Buff-streaked Chat (male), Buff-streaked Chat (female), Willow Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Cape Canary
© Derek Engelbrecht.





Tell-tale signs of a busy day © Derek Engelbrecht



Greater Double-collared Sunbird © Derek Engelbrecht



Wailing Cisticola © Derek Engelbrecht

RINGING REPORT SUMMARY - 21 MARCH 2023

Ringing site	Wolkberg, farm La Fleur		
GPS	24°03'03.54"S; 29°51'53.56"E; 1753 masl		
Name of outing leader	Derek Engelbrecht (#1245)		
Other ringers	Billy Attard (#1402), Marianne McKenzie (#14522),		
Habitat types targeted	Protea veld in highland grassland.		
Weather conditions	Fine, with moderate breeze.		
Total number of nets erected	26	Total length (m)	96
Nets open	05:30 - 14:30		
Height of bottom shelf	1 m		
Other traps used	None		
Birds ringed			
Species	n	Species	n
European Bee-eater	1	Wailing Cisticola	10
Lesser Honeyguide	1	Zitting Cisticola	1
Buff-streaked Chat	7	Tawny-flanked Prinia	1
Familiar Chat	2	Chinspot Batis	1
Gurney's Sugarbird	4	Dark-capped Bulbul	3
Greater Double-collared Sunbird	7	Red-billed Quelea	1
Malachite Sunbird	1	African Firefinch	2
Willow Warbler	1	Cape Canary	2
Birds retrapped			
Buff-streaked Chat	1		
Number of species ringed	16	Number of species retrapped	1
Number of birds ringed	45	Number of birds retrapped	1
Total number of species processed (ringed + retrapped)			16
Total number of birds processed (ringed + retrapped)			46



Lesser Honeyguide © Derek Engelbrecht



Chinspot Batis © Derek Engelbrecht

with 10 birds ringed. The second place was shared between Buff-streaked Chats and Greater Double-collared Sunbirds (seven birds each), while the third place went to Gurney's Sugarbird (four birds). Other birds of interest included a Zitting Cisticola, Lesser Honeyguide, Malachite Sunbird, and two Cape Canaries. We also caught a Willow Warbler, crossing

the mountains on his way back to Eurasia.

We had one recapture, a male Buff-streaked Chat ringed on 25 February 2021 at the same site. The days elapsed between ringing and recapture were 755 days or 2y 25d. The Catch of the Day was a unanimous decision – European Bee-eater – what a stunning bird.

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CATCH OF THE DAY European Bee-eater

ROBERTS 8
IS ONLINE
AND FREE
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



Photo: Holger Teichmann/Macaulay Library

The John Voelcker Bird Book Fund has partnered with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (Ithaca, NY, USA) on a multi-year effort to update species profiles of the 8th edition of *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa* (Roberts 8) and publish them on *Birds of the World*. *Birds of the World* is a comprehensive ornithology resource with detailed information on the world's birds. As part of this effort, free, unlimited access to *Birds of the World* is available to all birders in southern Africa. Create an account at BirdsoftheWorld.org and [Sign In](#) to gain access. Newly updated species content can be found wherever you see the Roberts 8 logo (on the left-hand side of any species account, under the navigation). Visit the *Birds of the World* regularly to look for new updates, and watch this space in *The Lark* to follow the project's progress. The latest releases include:

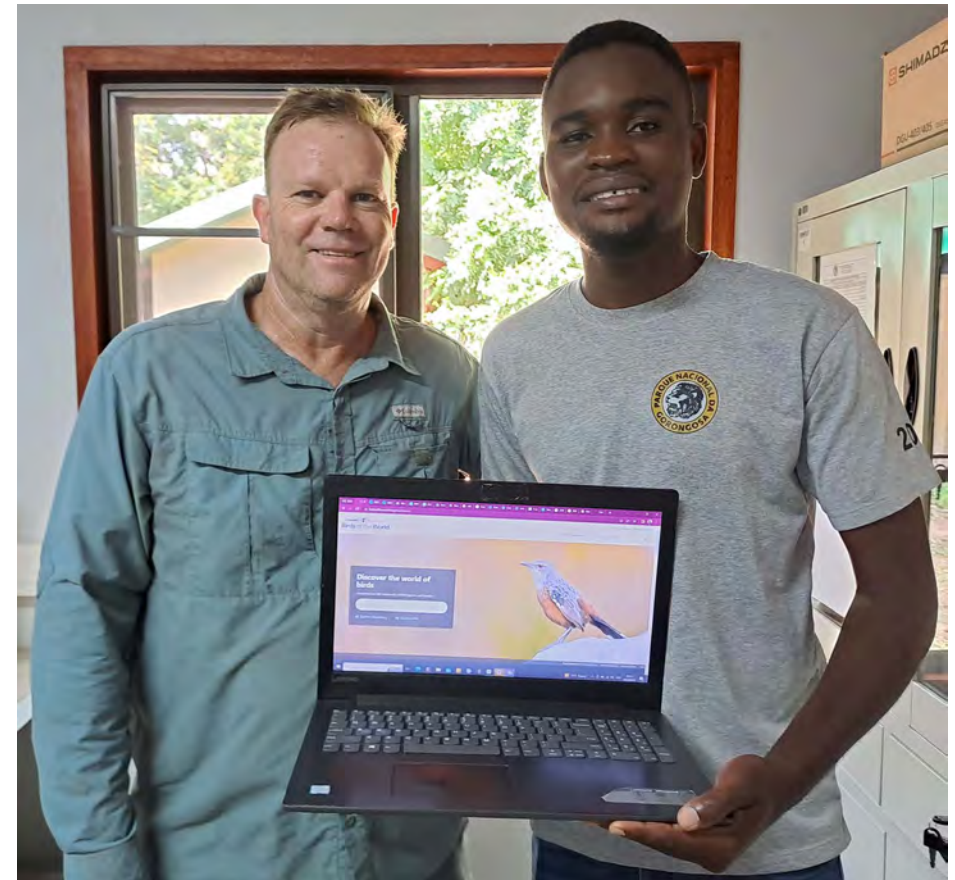
[Short-clawed Lark](#)
[South African Shelduck](#)

[Olive-headed Weaver](#)
[Scaly-feathered Finch](#)

For more information about how you can be part of this proudly southern African project, contact Derek Engelbrecht email: roberts8revision@gmail.com

Roberts 8/Birds of the World collaboration reaches Mozambique

On a recent visit to Mozambique, Derek Engelbrecht assisted promising young ornithologist Raúl Chomela in signing up for [Birds of the World](#) to enjoy the benefits of the [Roberts 8/Cornell Lab collaboration](#) and to improve his knowledge of birds, not only of those in the subregion, but also of bird species beyond.





Common Moorhen

Regulars

Birds in Art

Common Moorhen

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe

In this issue, we feature a bird that is very often seen but perhaps not appreciated enough, a Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*. In Afrikaans, it is known as a Waterhoender or 'Water Chicken'. The 'moor' in the English name is a holdover from the old days when it meant 'marsh' rather than what we today think of as moorland. A more appropriate name sometimes given for it is 'Waterhen'. The scientific name means 'green/yellow-legged little chicken'. Despite these names, it is not a chicken, but a member of the family

Rallidae, along with rails, crakes, coots, and a few other things with chicken-ey names. The rail family is large and diverse and occurs worldwide. The moorhen, too, is very widely distributed, occurring on all continents except Antarctica, and Australia, where it is replaced by the Dusky Moorhen *Gallinula tenebrosa*. The American Moorhen has recently been split off into a separate species, the Common Gallinule *Gallinula galeata*, but is practically indistinguishable from the Common Moorhen. A few interesting relatives occur on islands, such as a flightless Gough Moorhen *Gallinula comeri* on sub-Antarctic Gough Island, and the Makira Moorhen *Gallinula silverstris* of the Solomon Islands, that hasn't been seen since 1953.

In addition to being widespread, the Common Moorhen is very common. In South Africa, as in many other places, it is one of the most frequently seen wetland birds. It can inhabit pretty much any kind of body of fresh to brackish water fringed by vegetation, except fast-flowing streams. In South Africa, it has benefited from the many dams that have been built to secure water supplies for farms. Moorhens can be seen paddling along on the water or walking on the banks. It swims well despite not having webbed or lobed toes. Its long toes that you can see here, help it to walk on floating vegeta-

tion. Their calls, various clucks, gargles, hisses and chirrups, are common features of wetland ambience. Moorhens are not spectacular, but easily recognizable. Their bodies are dusky blackish-brown, relieved by their bright red, yellow-tipped bills, their greenish-yellow legs with red 'garters' above the ankle joints, a white streak along the side, and white patches underneath the tail. Moorhens flick their tails a lot; this might help birds to stay in visual contact as well as send a signal of alertness to potential predators. They have a prominent red frontal 'shield', an extension of the top of the bill, as is found in several other members of the rail family and some other birds, such as jacanas. They are about 30–38 cm in length and can weigh up to 500 g, about half as heavy as a small chicken.

A big reason why moorhens are common as they are is because of their versatility in feeding. They can eat many kinds of plants, whether floating in the water, or growing along the banks, snipping off pieces with their stout bills. They eat a variety of small aquatic critters, from insect larvae, molluscs and crustaceans, to fish and occasionally small vertebrates. They can eat while swimming, pecking titbits up from the water surface or submerging their heads to reach something deeper down, or while they walk on land or clamber about

vegetation. They can eat eggs from the nests of other waterside birds, and will even eat carrion.

Moorhens also show adaptable breeding behaviour. Mostly, they are monogamous for a season, sometimes monogamous for life. But they also sometimes form trios, whether a male and two females, or a female and two males. Often there are helpers who attend the couple, typically their offspring from previous seasons. They build bowl-shaped nests

from vegetable matter, and the nests can be anywhere from floating in the water, anchored to the bottom or to submerged vegetation, built amongst plants growing on the banks, or even up in a tree 8 m above the ground. Floating nests may have a ramp of vegetation to allow a swimming bird to climb into it. A moorhen female

BELOW A clutch of Common Moorhen eggs © Warwick Tarboton.





may parasitize the nests of other moorhens, laying some of her eggs in them and letting the other couple raise them. Nests typically have 5 to 9 eggs but up to 14 have been recorded for a single female; in cases where up to 17 eggs per nest have been found, it is likely that more than one female laid in them. In addition to being able to lay such large clutches, moorhens can even lay three to four clutches in a single year! In South Africa they can breed at any time, not having a specific breeding season. They can thus rapidly make use of the available resources. Both sexes incubate, females typically by day,

and males at night. The eggs hatch in about three weeks.

Moorhen chicks are funny little things, with black down covering their bodies except for bare patches on their heads showing red and bluish skin. Their orange-red, yellow-tipped bills are prominent. They also have bare 'wings' that resemble little arms with two, pointed 'fingers'. They even have wing claws, and they use these when they clamber into vegetation or onto their nests. They can swim within a day or two after hatching, accompanying their parents, who show them where and how to find food. Parents will even carry chicks

away in flight when there's danger. They also occasionally brood the chicks on the nest for the first two weeks to keep them warm. At the age of three weeks, the chicks can forage on their own, and they can fly at the age of 40–50 days.

In South Africa, moorhens will stick to permanent waterbodies or move around to exploit various seasonal ones. In the rest of the world, they can also be resident, or nomadic, or migrant. Especially in the colder northern regions of Europe and Asia, they will fly south when waterbodies freeze over, and spend time in more welcoming climes. All around, this is

ABOVE Common Moorhen chicks are somewhat bizarre-looking with their bare heads and wings
© Warwick Tarboton.

an abundant species in no danger of extinction. But there are populations that are not doing so well. In Britain, they are in decline, and the reasons are not yet apparent. Also on some small oceanic islands, they suffer from factors like hunting and habitat destruction. Common or not, we should be on the alert for the well-being of these friendly and fascinating birds.

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Learn more about albatrosses

WHY IS THE LIGHT-MANTLED ALBATROSS NEAR THREATENED?

[Scientific name – *Phoebastria palpebrata*]



Saving Marion Island's Seabirds
The Mouse-Free Marion Project
<https://mousefreemarion.org>

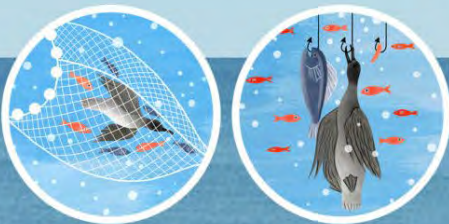


19 000 – 24 000 breeding pairs

1. Light-mantled Albatrosses breed on many sub-Antarctic islands in the southern Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans

2. Risks at sea: Small numbers of Light-mantled Albatrosses may be hooked and drown on longlines, or collide with trawl warps causing injury or death

Light mantled Albatrosses eat fish, squid, crustaceans and small seabirds



3. Risks on land: Introduced mammals have been eradicated on some breeding islands, such as Antipodes, Campbell, Macquarie and South Georgia*, but House Mice on South Africa's Marion Island remain a threat, killing chicks. Feral cats and rodents are present on some French sub-Antarctic islands in the southern Indian Ocean and on New Zealand's Auckland Island; the last also supports feral pigs that are known to kill albatrosses

4. On-land and at-sea risks make the Light-mantled Albatross Near Threatened, defined as "close to qualifying for, or likely to qualify for, a threatened category in the near future". Fishery-caused mortality needs to be reduced by enforcement of mitigation measures, including on the high seas outside territorial waters. The Mouse-Free Marion Project aims to eradicate the island's mice. New Zealand is working towards introduced mammal eradications on Auckland Island.



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

*A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas), South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (Islas Georgias del Sur y Islas Sandwich del Sur) and the surrounding maritime areas

Reflections

Reflections

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

Past sacred mountains on the road to Klopperfontein, and beyond...

Chris Patton

One of the essential requirements as a birder in visiting the far northern extremities of the Kruger National Park is to spend time in the Pafuri region. But unless you are staying in that area, most of Pafuri's visitors will come from camps further south. Guests staying at Punda Maria have a choice of getting there via tar or gravel road.

The tar route of the H13, that then connects to the central H1 that runs through the spine of the Park from Malelane Gate to Pafuri. The birding along the H13 was described in a previous *Reflections* about the secrets of mopane woodland, while birding along the relevant stretch of the H1, between

the H1/H13 junction and the S61 turn-off to Klopperfontein has many similarities with what was described in another *Reflections* article focussing on the Northern Plains around Babalala.

However, it is the 20-odd kilometres of gravel roads along the S60 and S61 that lead from the Punda access road past Gumbandebvu and ultimately to Klopperfontein Windmill, Dam and Spring, that I am going to write and reminisce about here.

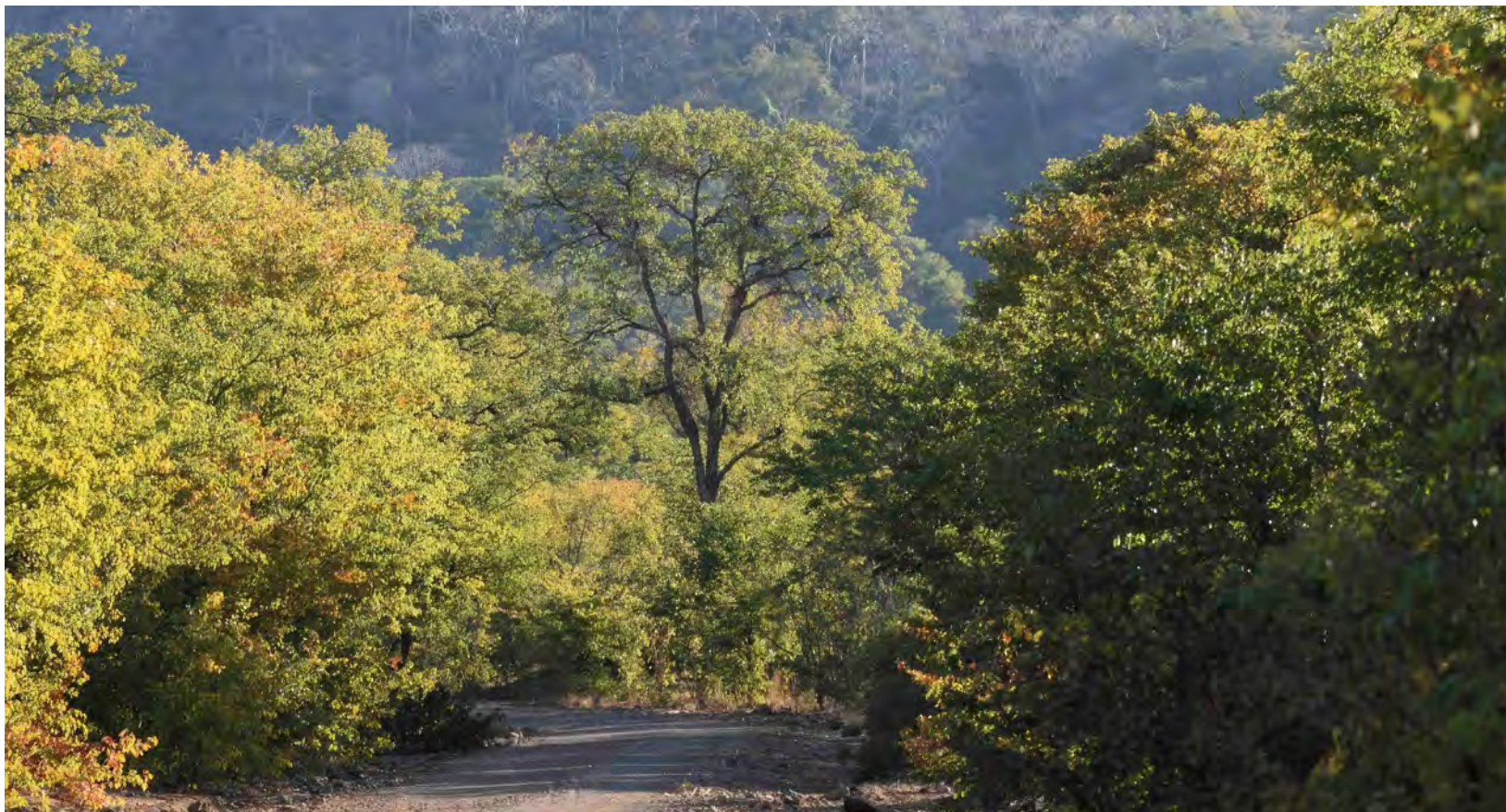
The turn-off east onto the S60 is a couple of kilometres from Punda Maria, just before the tar reaches the H13. The road soon becomes a tunnel through tall mopane woodland, and after a kilometre or so, the 561 m hulk of Gumbandebvu

looms impressively on the north side of the road.

Gumbandebvu is covered in a wonderful array of trees and smaller plants, and hosts incredible birds, many identical to those described in the two previous editions of *Reflections*, about the birds of the Mahonie Loop. The Hill is sacred and named after a local chief who once resided in the area... and means 'to shave one's beard' in Tshivenda, derived from a custom the chief ordained, that only those who shaved their beards were allowed to climb this holy hill.

The Hill is the easternmost point of the series of hills in the Punda Maria valley. It is also the furthest eastern toe of the Soutpansberg foothills and offers a beautiful





ABOVE Typical tall mopane woodland in the rich soils around Punda Maria with the hulk of Gumbandebvu behind © Joep Stevens.

unspoilt view of the Northern flats and Dzundwini. The chief's daughter Khama or Nwakama, practiced rain-making and people brought her snuff, livestock and other gifts for this talent.

Gumbandebvu played an important role in the Venda culture and is still respected to the extent

that no Venda man will climb the hill willingly, and a person ascending the hill must shave his beard first – hence the name. According to former Park ranger Gus Adendorff, many Limpopo people consider Gumbandebvu a haunted and sacred rain hill, because Nwakama, who allegedly was a relative of Queen Modjadji, the famous rain queen of the Balobedu people to the southwest, lived here. Whenever her tribe needed rain, Nwakama would order a black beast, preferably a goat, to be slaughtered at the foot of the mountain.

She would prolong the death cries of the dying animal so that the ancestors would hear the desperation of the people. With one of the animal's bones in her magic ingredients, Nwakama would climb the hill and weave spells in a secret bower until clouds appeared and the rain fell. Only a few privileged men were allowed to accompany her, as anyone who dared to climb the mountain without her knowledge was sure to die. Whether the rain fell in other areas where her clients lived is not known, but the hill is always green, and the sum-

mit is covered in Lebombo Ironwood trees to this day.

I've digressed a little here, I know, from my usual sharing of birding memories and tips from my own experience of the place in question...but I felt that the background was important, culminating in the following birding link to the royal head-ware, which is a nice way to bring us back to the usual subject matter.

Gumbandebvu Hill is home to Narina Trogon and Purple-crested Turaco. As birders, we know that both these birds have magnificent crimson feathers, and in historical times only regal figures like the Gumbandebvu chief, and Nwakama could wear these red feathers in their headdresses as a symbol of their royalty. Because modern visitors cannot currently climb the Hill and get satisfactorily close to it for birding purposes, these birds, and other vocal species like African Barred Owlet and Gorgeous Bushshrike are best located by parking at the edge of the road and listening for their distinctive calls. There is a particular spot that is quite reliable to be able to entice a trogon roadside by blowing into cupped hands.

In truth, birding in the dense mopane woodland, and further east the mopane bush, then scrubland is a hard sell. Birds are present, but the moment they leave the road, they tend to disappear. Buntings



ABOVE Female Arnot's Chat in the mopane woodland of the S60 © Chris Patton



LEFT Look out for buntings like this Golden-breasted Bunting as you drive along the S60 © Chris Patton

(Cinnamon-breasted and Golden-breasted) and White-browed Scrub-Robin are some of the easier species to find during the day. But this tall woodland is home to Arnot's Chat, and with luck, a flock of these inquisitive and

busy birds can be found in the first few kilometres of the S60. Orioles are a feature of this woodland too, mostly Black-headed and European Golden, but there was one fabulous year on a Punda Extreme Weekend where our truck elected to return to Camp early from Pafuri, instead of completing the usual full route of going down the Eastern boundary into the N'wam-biya Sandveld and then across the Northern Plains. From a birding numbers point of view, the decision may have sacrificed some Sandveld specials, but we were rewarded with a mind-blowing sighting of a pair of African Golden Oriole on the opposite side of the road, but right alongside the mighty Gumbandebvu, as we returned to Punda Maria.

Now a lot of the time I have travelled along the S60, it has been between 2 and 3 am in the morning. Trucks on the SANPark's Honorary Rangers Punda Extreme Weekends which I have lauded and described in several previous *Reflections*, leave camp at 2 am to ensure that they are in the Pafuri basin by dawn, and there is a lot of nocturnal birding to be done en route. The mopane woodland may make difficult birding by day, but by night the gravel road can be swamped with activity, with nightjars, coursers, thick-knees and owls using its warmth and abundance of invertebrates as a banquet. Sometimes nightjars are

so numerous that progress is very slow. And these nocturnal enemies of flying insects are particularly interesting, because they can become mesmerised by the lights of the vehicle or its searchlights, and the rangers on board will, on request, hop out and catch them, to show the guests onboard the diagnostic wing and tail patterns that distinguish the various species. The noticeably small Square-tailed are by far the commonest of the species along this stretch of road, and it is quite easy to pick up the difference in the sexes of this species, with the males having white outer tail feathers and the females having buff outer tail feathers. Fiery-necked and Rufous-cheeked Nightjars should both be heard or even caught if the group in the truck is interested, and close to hills like Gumbandebvu, Freckled Nightjar will swell the species diversity. European Nightjars are quite common too...but these big bulky birds are more frequently found by the trucks' spotlights shining in the foliage for their eyes, with their curious habit of perching along a branch, instead of across it like most other birds do. To complete the suite of Kruger nightjars along the S60, twice in my experience of the nocturnal run along it, a Pennant-winged Nightjar erupted from the side of the road and thrilled participants, although they had usually seen them the previous evening at our sundowners, where



they are far more reliable on the stony hillsides to the west of Punda Maria.

Although nightjars are the worst offenders at slowing down the trucks, Bronze-winged Coursers and both thick-knee species can be equally culpable, and because of the tunnel-like nature of the woodland, they often take off and fly a few dozen metres ahead and then settle in the road again. It is interesting to observe the different take-off techniques between coursers and thick-knees: coursers will alight vertically and fly straight upwards, while the thick-knees need a run-up before they launch into the air. I guess it is like comparing helicopter and aeroplane take-offs.

But while guests on the trucks will often find the nightjars and coursers become monotonous with their repetition, the route's owls are always a welcome addition. Southern White-faced, African Scops, Western Barn, Spotted Eagle and Verreaux's Eagle owls and African Barred and

Pearl-spotted Owlets all have a high chance of being heard and caught in the searchlights as one travels this route at night.

Quite suddenly, the characteristics of the mopane woodland of the S60 change. The same species of mopane tree loses a few metres in height and becomes an equally dense bushland. This is particularly the case if one remains on the S60 heading towards the H1 tar road and ignores turning north along the S61. Birding aside, it's a great area for some of the Park's rarer or more range-restricted antelope, such as Sharpe's Grysbok, Roan Antelope, and Eland.

Red-billed Quelea will become prominent in this vegetation, and on occasion, this eruptive species will randomly annex an area of the mopane bush to breed in a thriving, chattering, chaotic colony. There was one year where there were thousands, if not millions, of queleas breeding in their clumsily woven nests at the S60/S61 junction, and hundreds of migrant eagles (mostly Lesser Spotted, but some Steppe among them too)

ABOVE The mopane woodland transitions into dense shorter mopane bush the further east one travels away from Punda Maria © Dries De Wet.



Male (TOP) and female (BELOW) Square-tailed Nightjar can be abundant along the S60 (note the white outer tail rectrices of the male and buff ones of the female © Chris Patton.



ABOVE The nice thing about Lesser Spotted Eagles is they are easy to identify from afar when perched because of their distinctive stove-pipe leggings © Chris Patton.

feasting on them in a magnificent feeding frenzy.

One of the most dramatic nocturnal finds along the S60 while on a Punda Extreme Weekend in early February 2017 was hearing the insect-like pulse of a Striped Crake by an ephemeral roadside pan just near the junction where the S61 leads to the north and to Klopperfontein. The truck I was in was the last of the four trucks on the road making our way towards Pafuri, and I think it was the acute hearing of Don English and Nic Squires, who picked it up in one of the earlier trucks, but they had stopped and waited and got the bird responding to sound recording, and everyone was delight-

ed to share this great record when our truck arrived. Sadly in the dark, the bird, which started to sound very belligerent when hearing a potential rival in his annexed wetland, failed to emerge into view, but nevertheless, it was still exciting to have this 'new' sound calling so close to our vehicles. In 2020/21, there was a 'relative' eruption of this rare migratory vagrant, with several sightings and birds photographed throughout



ABOVE The Levhuvhu River Valley as seen from the S61 © Joep Stevens.

the Park – some even became quite reliable stakeouts, I believe, but back in 2017 the trucks (I think from memory it was only the two of the four trucks who got him).

If daylight time is not a factor to get back to the tar as quickly as possible, turning north onto the S61, as an alternative to staying on the S60, is a drive of exquisite beauty. From a birding point of view, the dense tunnel-like confines of the mopane woodland open nicely and reward its trail-goers with wonderful vistas of the Levhuvhu River Valley.

Dickinson's Kestrel is a special to search for here, but other small falcons like Amur Falcon and Less-

er Kestrel may be found in the summer months. The nomadic Monotonous Lark and Wattled Starling can both be abundant here at times, and the more open vegetation will also reveal some large ground birds like Common Ostrich and Kori Bustard. In some wet years, there will be an explosion of grassland gamebirds such as Harlequin Quail, the identity crisis victim, the Common/Small/Kurrrichane Buttonquail and even if you are lucky African Crake, and early morning when the roadside grass is wet is



a good time to find all these species out in the road, as well as the commoner spurfowls (particularly Swainson's) and Crested Francolin found here and throughout the Park.

We started this article by writing about Gumbandevu Hill, and it is perhaps fitting to end it

with another impressive hill that the S61 affords magnificent views of – Xantangelani Hill (sometimes spelt Shantangelani) is a group of weathered sandstone hills and rocks 12.5 km north-east of Punda. Typical of such outcrops in the Park, Xantangelani is home to birds like Mocking Cliff Chat and Rock Kestrel, and various eagles will use its uplift to aid their soaring, or to feed on the abundant colonies of rock hyrax that roam its slopes.

And then the S61 finds the Shinkuwa Creek – home to Klopfontein borehole, weir and spring... but that will be the subject for the next edition.

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

ABOVE Xantangelani Hill on the S61 is a spectacle of extreme beauty © Joep Stevens.

OPPOSITE TOP A Kori Bustards stalks the veld along the S61 © Chris Patton.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Nomadic and prone to iirruptions, a Harlequin Quail emerges from roadside grass © Chris Patton.

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BIRD BRIEFS

Additions to the White-berry Bush berry-eating bird list

TEXT AND PHOTOS Pietman Muller

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In the previous issue of *The Lark*, Muller and Engelbrecht (2023) presented a list of birds recorded feeding on the berries of the White-berry Bush *Flueggea virosa*. According to them, nine bird species have been recorded feeding on the berries, but they admitted it is likely a gross under-estimation of the real number of species feeding on these berries.

This note includes three new records and brings the list of

White-berry Bush berry-eaters to 12 species. The three new additions are: Brown-headed Parrot, Natal Spurfowl and Arrow-marked Babbler, the latter also recorded but not photographed by Derek Engelbrecht.

References

Muller, P., and D. Engelbrecht (2023). Birds and the White-berry Bush. *The Lark* 46:73–76.



Editor: Please submit your records of birds eating the fruit of the White-berry Bush to **Derek Engelbrecht** at thelarknews@gmail.com.

ABOVE Arrow-marked Babbler.

TOP Natal Spurfowl.

OPPOSITE Brown-headed Parrot.

A fishing story: Striated Heron

TEXT AND PHOTOS Johan Janse van Vuuren

email: firesjohan@gmail.com

I was at Gardenia Hide in the south of the Kruger National Park on 15 December 2022, when I noticed an adult Striated Heron standing at the water's edge (1). After a while, it walked up the shore, where it collected a short stick. It returned to the water, wading into the shallows before dropping the stick into the water (2 and 3). It stared intently for a while (4) before it held the stick in its beak, vigorously

shaking it before dropping it back into the water again. It repeated this several times while I was at the hide. It is possible that small aquatic organisms like tadpoles or small fish may seek shelter around submerged vegetation, or that the vigorous shaking disturbs the substrate, dislodging aquatic invertebrates which may attract small fish. Unfortunately, I had to leave and did not see if its efforts were rewarded.



Notes on Gray's Lark

Ursula Bryson

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The aim of this note is to present some of my field observations and to highlight inconsistencies in the descriptions of Gray's Lark *Ammomanopsis grayi* in the literature. The evidence I present is based on field observations and detail observed while ringing Gray's Larks.

Description

Adult

The description of the bill shape and colour is inconsistent in the literature. Dean and Keith (1992)

described it as "... grey with dark tip", but Dean (2005) describes the bill as "... grey, with blackish tip, washed yellow towards base; fairly short and slender". Also, both Dean and Keith (1992) and Dean (2005) describe the colour of the eyes as ol-

BELOW Head profile of an adult Gray's Lark. Note the bluish-grey base to the bill and the black tip and culmen. Also note the dark, chestnut-brown colour of the iris ((2007-01-21) © Ursula Bryson.



ive-brown. It is clear from the head detail of an adult (opposite) that the bill is not washed yellow towards the base but is as described by Dean and Keith (1992). Also, the bill is not fairly short and slender, but fairly long and stout, as described by Peacock (2012). The eyes, in my opinion, are also not olive-brown, but rather a dark chestnut-brown colour.

ABOVE Dorsal view of an adult Gray's Lark (2007-01-21) © Ursula Bryson.

RIGHT Spread tail of an adult Gray's Lark (2007-01-21) © Ursula Bryson.



There also appear to be inconsistencies concerning the description of the underparts. Dean and Keith (1992) describe it as "... white washed with buff on breast and belly; a few dark feathers on sides of breast", while Dean (2005) describes it as "... white, breast and belly with buff wash, sides of breast with a few dark streaks". In my opinion, the streaks referred to by Dean (2005) resemble diffuse blotches (see ML182441131), rather than streaks and are probably

closer to Dean and Keith's (1992) "a few dark feathers on side of breast".

First-year bird

The bill is like the adult's in colouration, but the gape is still somewhat swollen. There are distinct but diffuse black blotches on the side of the breast and contrasting fringes on the coverts.

BELOW A first-year bird in the hand. Note the more prominent blotching on the sides of the breast © Ursula Bryson.



ABOVE A first-year bird in the hand © Mark Boorman.

RIGHT Dorsal view of a juvenile bird © Mark Boorman.



Juvenile

The juvenile has a yellow bill with a dark tip and dark culmen. Like in other passerines, I have found that the feathers around the eye are growing with age into a full ring.

Although there is some spotting on the crown, I have not found signs of diffuse mottling on the body contour feathers as described in the literature. Although the mantle is clearly streaked due to dark shafts of the dorsal plumage, the plumage of a juvenile has the same washed-out appearance as the adult. It is possible that nestlings may show some blotching, but it fades very soon after fledging.



ABOVE AND LEFT Head profile and in-hand view of a juvenile Gray's Lark showing the yellow bill with a dusky tip and culmen, spotting on the crown and a partially developed eye ring © Mark Boorman.



Nestling

For comparative purposes, I include images of Gray's Lark nestlings of different ages (see Demasius 2003, Demasius 2009 for more details). Nestlings have white down, not grey-white

down, as described by Dean and Keith (1992).

Gray's Lark nestling ~3 days old (BELOW) and one almost ready to fledge (BOTTOM) © Eckard Demasius.



Comparing the wings of an adult and a juvenile (yellow bill)

In the adult, the secondaries are more strongly marked compared to the primaries, with broad, pale-buff outer margins and plain brown centres, the inner secondaries (tertials) being more rufous

when fresh. The outer primaries, from P5 to P10, are black-tipped.

In juveniles, the flight feathers are more uniform, without distinct, black-tipped outer primaries and less contrasting, pale creamy margins on the secondaries.



Adult wing. Also see FH34383 in Table 1 © Ursula Bryson.



Juvenile wing © Mark Boorman.

Moult

Four birds were moulting their primaries in December and January; three adults and one first-year/immature individual (Table 1). All four birds showed an irregular moulting pattern. For example, two birds (one adult and the immature bird) had old innermost primaries (P1), but all the others

were fresh or moulting, and a second bird had a fresh P1, worn P2, but the rest of the primaries were either fresh or moulting. The other adult had a bifocal moulting pattern (1000540000) with a primary moult score of 10 on 26 December 2009. Primary moult lasted into January in adults and the first-year bird.

Table 1. Moult details of four Gray's Larks ringed in Namibia.

Age	Date	Moult pattern	Moult score	Ring #
Adult	2007-01-21	5055555541	40	FH34802
Adult	2009-12-26	1000540000	10	FH44946
Adult	2013-01-11	0555555541	40	FH34383
1 st -year	2015-01-16	0555555521	38	FH78644



Moult in FH34802. See Table 1 for details © Ursula Bryson.



Moult in FH44946. See Table 1 for details © Ursula Bryson.



Moult in FH78644. See Table 1 for details © Ursula Bryson.

Habitat

The image below is of typical Gray's Lark habitat - desert with sparse vegetation.

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Dean, W. R. J. (2005). Gray's Lark *Ammomanopsis grayi*. In Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. 7th edition (P. A. R. Hockey, W. R. J. Dean, and P. G. Ryan, Editors), Trus-

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Peacock, F. (2012). Chamberlain's LBJs. Mirafr Publishing, Cape Town.



ABOVE Typical Gray's Lark habitat in Namibia © Ursula Bryson.

African Harrier-Hawk diet

TEXT AND PHOTOS Jody De Bruyn

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ABOVE Ripping into its prey, a bat, which it must have grabbed from the crevices under the bridge where the bats are known to roost.

On the 11th of March 2023, I found myself on the Levhuvhu River bridge (H1-8) in the northern parts of the Kruger National Park. This bridge is a popular spot where you can get out of your vehicle and stretch your legs a bit. Just be sure to stay between the demarcated yellow lines.

I got out and started looking around if I could see something interesting. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a large bird fly in and perch on a dead tree stump that



ABOVE Swallowing the remaining carcass, wings and all.

was sticking out of the water. I identified the bird as an adult African Harrier-Hawk. The bird was just below eye level, which made for great views and good photo opportunities.

I noticed that the African Harrier-Hawk had something in

its talons and was busy ripping into the victim's flesh. I first thought it could be a young monitor lizard, but on closer inspection of some



ABOVE Cleaning its beak on the tree branch.

OPPOSITE The African Harrier-Hawk is an opportunistic and amazingly successful hunter, and its catholic diet means anything is on the menu, including bats.

photos, I saw that it was a medium-sized bat. The harrier-hawk was devouring the bat at a fast pace. Since the bird's arrival at 10:29, it took 5 minutes to rip and swallow pieces of flesh from the bat, and then it swallowed what was left of the bat's carcass - wings, and all!

By 10:38, the harrier-hawk had enough of my camera clicks and flew off. In 9 minutes, it managed to consume an entire bat. When it had finished its meal, it

cleaned its beak on the branch it was perched on, straightened a few feathers, and then took off. This was a first sighting for me of an African Harrier-Hawk with a bat as its prey.



The odd man out - Common Moorhen

TEXT AND PHOTOS Hugh Chittenden

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As an aquatic waterside bird that regularly swims, Moorhen is definitely the odd man out!

RIGHT Common and Lesser moorhen are the only freshwater swimming water birds in the region that don't have webbing or lobed toes!

BELOW A Common Moorhen swimming across a waterbody.





ABOVE Common Moorhen seldom climbs up into surrounding vegetation. This bird conveniently perches on a low branch over water showing its long green-yellow toes that lack any lobes or webbing.



ABOVE Gallinules aren't really swimming species, so one can understand why they don't need lobed toes.

All other freshwater swimming species in the region have lobed toes or webbing to assist with swimming. The following are examples.



ABOVE: Lesser Moorhen spends much of its foraging time on the muddy margins of water bodies and far less time actively swimming than its larger congener, Common Moorhen, so its lack of lobed toes doesn't really come as a surprise!



ABOVE Coots probably spend more time on the water than out, and their toes are heavily lobed!



LEFT A Little Grebe, an extremely strong swimmer, shows the extent of lobing to its toes.



LEFT African Finfoot climb trees to roost and build their nests on overhanging branches. This female shows her bright, orange-coloured legs and feet, as well as lobbing to her toes.

Growth and development of Red-headed Finch nestlings

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

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The Red-headed Finch *Amadina erythrocephala* is a common to abundant near-endemic inhabitant of arid and semi-arid habitats in southern Africa. Within its distribution range, it has adapted well to farmland and urban habitats. Despite being common and its widespread distribution, the species' breeding biology is poorly known.

It is a popular species in the aviculture industry, especially in Europe, and most of our knowledge of its breeding is based on observations of birds in captivity (Goodwin 1982; Brickell and Konigkramer 1997).

BELOW The female perched outside the nest.

Although they occasionally construct their own nests, an untidy ball of grass lined with soft material such as grass inflorescences, feathers, cotton etc., they generally lay in the nests of other birds, including weavers, sparrows, and Little Swifts *Apus affinis*, or in holes in trees or buildings (Goodwin 1982; Brickell and Konigkramer 1997; Dean 2005). The clutch size is usually 4–6 eggs, but may range from 2–11 eggs (Dean 2005), the latter undoubtedly the result of two or more females laying in the same nest. Both sexes participate in incubation (12–14 days) and brooding and feeding the young (15–22 days) (Brickell and Konigkramer

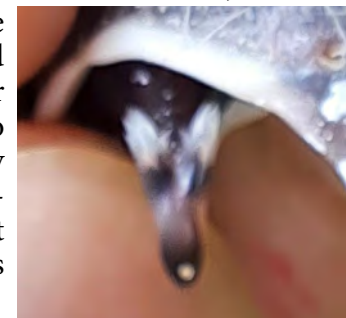
1997; Dean 2005). Little is known about the nestlings' growth and development. This note will describe this aspect of the species' biology based on observations at a single nest.

At 07:30 on the morning of the 22nd of March 2023, I found a Red-headed Finch nest at the Koraal Retirement Village, Polokwane. The nest had four nestlings that hatched the previous day and an unhatched but pipped egg. The nest, a disused or usurped Scaly-feathered Weaver *Sporopipes squamifrons* roosting nest, was placed about 1.7 m high in a climbing rose (*Rosa* sp.) growing in an arched pergola.

Growth and development of nestlings

Day 0 (hatch day)

The newly hatched nestling had dark purplish-black skin and long strands of grey down on all feather tracts except the ventral feather tract. None of the feather tracts was visible below the skin. The culmen was black with a sharp hook at its tip, and the lower mandible was slightly paler. The gape was thick and pale creamy-white. The palate was as described by Payne (2005): white with five large black spots on a network of white, which is continuous with the gape. The lining of the lower mouth was black as described by Maclean (1993). Payne (2005) described the tongue as being pink with a broad black band, but my observations were somewhat different, and more detail is given here. The tongue was boldly marked (see adjacent image). Proceeding from the posterior end (the root) towards the tip of the tongue, the two horns of the root of the tongue were white, followed by a broad, black band where the horns join. This was followed by a paler pinkish-black band in the central part of the tongue and another broad black band towards the tip. The eyes were closed, large and bulbous.



Day 2

Eyes still closed, no feather tracts were visible, only the neosoptiles of the primaries and secondaries were visible.

Day 3

The eyes began to open as slits, the feather tracts were now visible below the skin. Primaries and secondaries were now only just in pin, but still only the neosoptiles on the tail.



ABOVE Note the sharply hooked bill tip of the nestling.

TOP A 3-day old nestling.

Lateral (ABOVE), ventral (RIGHT) and dorsal (BELOW) views of a newly hatched Red-headed Finch nestling.



Day 4

Most of the primaries and secondaries were in pin, but only some of the rectrices. No feathers on the other tracts had erupted, but all the tracts were clearly visible below the skin. Eyes were still slitty.

Day 5

All the primaries, secondaries and their coverts were in pin, but the tail feathers were only just starting to erupt. Some feathers on the ventral and crural feather tracts were in pin, but only a few on the dorsal feather tract. The eyes were almost fully open, but still kept mostly closed.



ABOVE A 5-day old nestling.

Day 6

The eyes were fully open and all the tracts were in pin, albeit only just, except the feathers on the capital tract that had not erupted yet. The primaries, secondaries and rectrices were now well in pin.

Day 7

All tracks in pin, including most on the capital tract. The first primaries, secondaries, coverts, tail and ventrals are in brush.



ABOVE A 7-day old nestling.

Day 8

Some more primaries, secondaries and the first few coverts in brush. The tail is only just in brush.

Day 9

All tracts had at least some in brush, except the capital tract, which was still in pin. All the primaries and secondaries were in brush, and some primary coverts and all the secondary coverts were in brush.



ABOVE A 9-day old nestling.

LEFT At 9 days of age, all the primaries and secondaries were in brush.



Day 10

All tracts were in brush and the first few on the capital tract also in brush. All primaries and secondaries were about 10% in brush and most of their coverts were in brush, although only just. The hooked bill tip had now been absorbed.

Day 11

All tracts through and in brush. All primaries and secondaries were about 25–40% in brush, and all the coverts were now in brush too. This was the first day I heard the chicks call the adult *chirp* call.



ABOVE An 11-day old nestling.

RIGHT Note the size difference between a 10-day (BOTTOM) and an 11-day old (TOP) nestling.



Day 12

All feathers were in brush, except for a few on the capital tract that were still in pin. Primaries and secondaries were about 50–60% in brush. From Day 12 onwards, the feathers continued growing, but the handling of nestlings was kept to a minimum.



ABOVE A 12-day old nestling.

RIGHT Spread wing of a 12-day old nestling.



Fledging

The first three nestlings fledged when they were 19 days old (9th of April 2023), and the remaining two nestlings fledged the following day, i.e., when they were 19 and 20 days of age.

Miscellaneous observations

In common with other estrildids, there was an accumulation of faeces within the nest as the nestling period progressed.

The entrance to the nest was often concealed by drawing grass stems and inflorescences across the entrance. When the parents arrived with food, they would simply access the nest through the somewhat flimsy "veil" of grass stems that concealed the nest entrance.

BELOW Note the accumulation of faeces in the nest containing 17 and 18-day old nestlings.





ABOVE The nest entrance was often concealed by drawing grass stems and inflorescences across the nest entrance.

Generally, the nestlings were silent and lay motionless while waiting for their parents to deliver food. When the parents arrived with food, begging was a noisy affair and could be heard from a considerable distance away, at least 15 m away. When threatened, the nestlings usually looked down, often closing their eyes. In the days prior to fledging (from about day 17), I noticed some of the nestlings perform a threat display when I inspected the nest contents. The nestling would start the display by raising the feathers on the crown and neck, presumably to make it appear bigger, and slowly swaying its head from side to side. This stage of the display can last up to a minute. Initially, this is performed with the mouth closed,

but if the threat persists, it would open its mouth wide, exposing the white gape and palate, and alternating opening and partially closing its mouth while swaying its head from side to side (see Macaulay Library [ML569751591](#)). No audible sounds accompanied the threat display.

Although no extended observations of parental provisioning were made, I noticed a second adult male in the company of the breeding pair. Unfortunately, I was unable to confirm if this bird participated in parental care, or whether it was



ABOVE On a couple of occasions, a 'mystery' male (top right in the image above) was seen near the nest and in the company of the breeding pair, but it could not be established if it was helping the parents.

only there by chance. Future observations at Red-headed Finch nests should confirm if the species exhibit cooperative breeding.

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Interesting sightings

16 February 2023 - 15 April 2023

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

European Honey Buzzard - 5 March 2023. One at Hout River Dam (Birdlife Polokwane club outing); 6 April 2023. One seen in Bendor (Hein Warmenhoven).

Great Spotted Cuckoo - 1 April 2023. One seen at the stadium section (Mark Friskin).

Levaillant's Cuckoo - 24 March 2022. One calling in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

Red-throated Wryneck - 29 March 2022. One in Welgelegen (Susan Dippenaar).



European Honey Buzzard Owl © Jody De Bruyn

PASSERINES

Bushveld Pipit - 25 February 2023. Seen in Dikgale region (Jody De Bruyn).

Lark-like Bunting - 10 April 2023. At least 5 birds in the Polokwane Game Reserve (Minkie Prinsloo).

Malachite Sunbird - 8 April 2023. One seen on Krommedraai Road (Jody De Bruyn).

Pink-billed Lark - 10 March 2023. Several males in song flight at the junction of the Bylsteel and Soetdorings roads (Derek Engelbrecht).

Southern Black Flycatcher - 1 April 2023. One seen at Moletji Nature Reserve (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).



Larklike Bunting © Minkie Prinsloo



Malachite Sunbird © Jody De Bruyn



African Pygmy Goose © Richter Van Tonder



Corn Crake © Geoff Goetsch

BEST OF THE REST LIMPOPO PROVINCE

NON-PASSERINES

African Pygmy Goose - 17 February 2023. At least four seen east of Waterpoort north of the Soutpansberg (Jody De Bruyn).

Black Coucal - 19 February 2023. Two birds at Nshawu 2, near Mopane Rest Camp, Kruger National Park (Andrew Pike).

Corn Crake - 28 February 2023. A bird found near Makhado (Geoff Goetsch).

Greater Flamingo - 24 February 2023. One seen flying over a recently tilled land near Hoedspruit (Darren Pietersen).

Greater Painted-snipe - 17 February 2023. One seen east of Waterpoort north of the Soutpansberg (Richter Van Tonder).

Sooty Falcon - 22 February 2023. One seen near Magamba Waterhole, Kruger National Park (Lance Robinson).

Harlequin Quail - 9 March 2023. An irruption at Weipe (Mark Bullough).

Osprey - 6 March 2023. One bird seen on a stop-over near Entabeni, Waterberg (Warwick Tarboton).

White-backed Duck - 17 February 2023. Large numbers seen on a farm dam east of Waterpoort north of the Soutpansberg (Jody De Bruyn).



Greater Painted-snipe © Richter Van Tonder



Osprey © Warwick Tarboton



White-backed Duck @ Richter Van Tonder



Striped Pipit @ Tineke Malan

PASSERINES

Ant-eating Chat - 9 March 2023. One seen at Weipe (Mark bullough).

Dusky Lark - 17 February 2023. Two birds seen east of Waterpoort north of the Soutpansberg (Jody De Bruyn).

River Warbler - 23 March 2023. One in Letaba Rest Camp, Kruger National Park (Ehren Eksteen).

Striped Pipit - 5 March 2023. One seen at Masorini Picnic Site, Kruger National Park (Tineke Malan).

CAPE PARROT

The Cape Parrot is a flagship species for South African biodiversity. It is the only parrot species endemic to the country.



TAXONOMY

KINGDOM: Animalia
PHYLUM: Chordata
CLASS: Aves
ORDER: Psittaciformes
FAMILY: Psittacidae
GENUS: *Poicephalus*
SPECIES: *P. robustus*

COMMON NAMES

Cape Parrot (English)
 isikhwenene (isiXhosa)
 isikwenene (isiZulu)
 Hokwe (Setswana)
 Dikgwapa (Sepedi)
 Woudpapegai (Afrikaans)

DISTRIBUTION

The Cape Parrot is only found in South Africa. It inhabits a mosaic of patches of **Fromontane mistbelt forests**, stretching from the Amathole mountains in the Eastern Cape, through Kwa-Zulu-Natal along the escarpment, and into the Limpopo Province in the north of South Africa. These **high altitude** forests are between 1000 to 1400 metres above sea level. Cape Parrots are heavily dependent on the yellowwood trees within these forests for their entire **life cycle**.

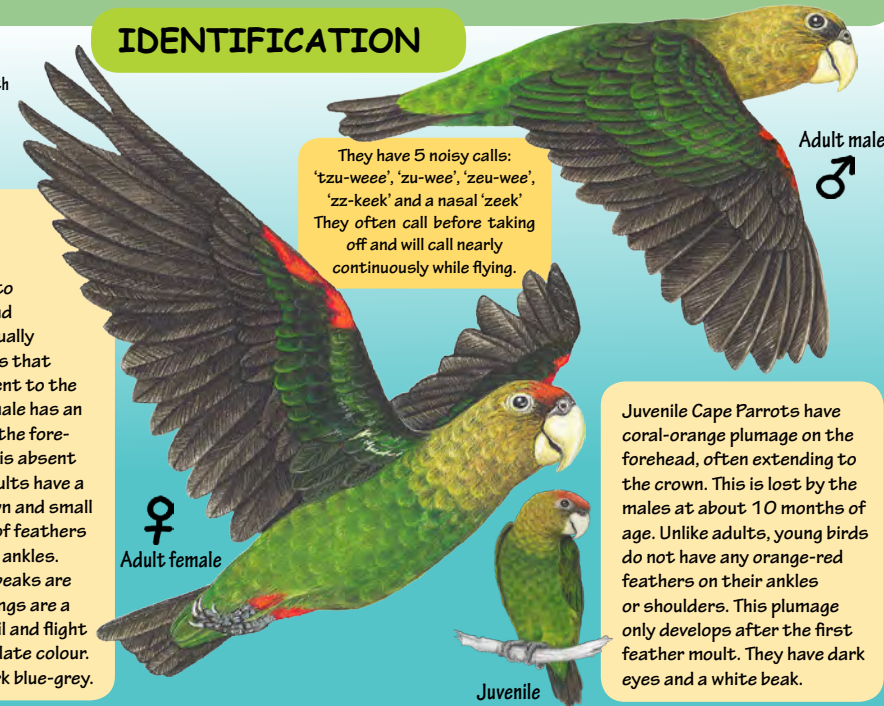
ORIGIN OF SCIENTIFIC NAME

The genus, *Poicephalus*, means 'different head'. All the species in this genus have heads that are a different colour to the rest of their bodies. The species name, *robustus*, is Latin for 'robust', probably referring to its hefty beak, which allows the Cape Parrot to crack open all sorts of hard nuts and fruits, especially those of its preferred food, the **kernel**s of the fruits of yellowwood trees (*Podocarpaceae*).

IDENTIFICATION

Size: 251 - 349 mm length
Weight: 260 - 329 grams

Cape Parrots are medium to large parrots with a bright green body and olive to golden yellow head and neck. Adults are sexually dimorphic. This means that the male looks different to the female. The adult female has an orange-red patch on the forehead and crown. This is absent on the male. Both adults have a dark brown fore-crown and small orange-red patches of feathers on the shoulders and ankles. Their ivory-coloured beaks are robust and sharp. Wings are a dark bottle-green. Tail and flight feathers are a dark slate colour. Legs and feet are dark blue-grey.



They have 5 noisy calls: 'tzu-weee', 'zu-wee', 'zeu-wee', 'zz-keek' and a nasal 'zeek'. They often call before taking off and will call nearly continuously while flying.

Juvenile Cape Parrots have coral-orange plumage on the forehead, often extending to the crown. This is lost by the males at about 10 months of age. Unlike adults, young birds do not have any orange-red feathers on their ankles or shoulders. This plumage only develops after the first feather moult. They have dark eyes and a white beak.



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/>



Percent of target reached: 19.8%
Sponsored Hectares: 5941 ha
Sponsors: 1828

UPCOMING EVENTS



Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 9 May 2023
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Hibernating
No monthly club meetings are scheduled for June and July, but look out for club outings.

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 1 August 2023
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Club outing

Where? Koedoes River valley, farm Vreedsaam (ZZ2)
Date: 13 May 2023
Contact: Richter van Tonder
Cell: 082 213 8276



Shopping list: Verreaux's Eagle, Crowned Eagle, Narina Trogon, White-browed Robin-Chat, Green Twinspot, Black Stork.

Club outing

Where? Moorddrift Dairy
Date: 8 July 2023
Contact: Richter van Tonder
Cell: 082 213 8276



Shopping list: This is a new venue for a club outing, but we expect to see a variety of waterbirds and bushveld species. © Richard Greenfield

Club outing

Where? Mockford Vulture Restaurant
Date: 10 June 2023 (to be confirmed)
Contact: Richter van Tonder
Cell: 082 213 8276



Shopping list: Cape Vulture, White-backed Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Hooded Vulture, Secretarybird, Rock Kestrel, Cape Teal, Marabou Stork, Black Sparrowhawk, and various thornveld species.



All birds are equal

In 2023, the front covers of **The Lark** will be dedicated to species that may never feature on any front cover. This year, our back cover is reserved for the non-LBJs.



White-throated Robin-Chat © Jody De Bruyn