

THE LARK

25 years

50 issues

Birding
Crimea
Club Ranch

To tick or not

Saving baby birds

The river bully - African Finfoot • One hour at a Collared Pratincole nest • Notes on Bennett's Woodpecker from the Nylsvley area • Resighting of a ringed African Skimmer • Penduline Tits, the smallest birds in southern Africa • Female Rufous-naped Lark song



Affiliated to Birdlife South Africa

25 YEARS
1998-2023



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 2023

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

COVER Short-clawed Lark
© Richter Van Tonder

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It's the breeding season for birds. Read our easy-to-follow step-by-step guide about what you should do when you find a baby bird.



For a lark ...



Now don't you dare!
© Derek Engelbrecht

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Editors' chirps

This issue of *The Lark* is a celebratory issue on many fronts! Not only did our club celebrate its 25th birthday in October, but we've also reached the 50th-issue milestone with *The Lark*, and, to add a special cherry on top of it all, the Springboks won the Rugby World Cup for a record 4th time. At the time of writing this editorial, our cricketers are also still battling out for the Cricket World Cup crown in India - let's keep our fingers crossed for a World Cup double!

On behalf of the club management committee, we want to thank every member, past, present and departed, for their contribution over the past 25 years and who helped build Birdlife Polokwane to be the club it is today. Thanks, everyone, here's to the next 25 years!



But back to birds and birding. For this special issue, we thought it was appropriate to feature our club mascot, the Short-clawed Lark, on the front cover. For our back cover, we decided on the Crimson-breasted Shrike, the club's mascot from its founding days in 1998 until 2009, when we adopted our current mascot.

As usual, this issue is packed with trip reports of club outings and some fascinating snippets of the natural history of birds. A special word of appreciation to Warwick Tarboton for sharing his field notes - and stunning photos - of Bennett's Woodpecker with us and choosing *The Lark* as his outlet of choice for these fascinating observations. You can also read about African Finfoot, African Skimmer, Collared Pratincole, penduline tits, and if you want to know what is special about a female Rufous-naped Lark singing, then be sure to read the note on page 92 of this issue. Please take inspiration from these notes - you may just recall something unusual you saw or heard in the past, and please share it with us. And who knows, perhaps your note may be referenced in the Roberts 8 species accounts that are currently under revision. On this point, you can catch the latest Roberts 8 project news on pages 32 to 34.

Finally, a reminder of this year's Birding Big Day on the 2nd of December. Please register your team, and let's keep the BBD title here at home.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and we look forward to receiving your contributions to the next issue.

Raelene and Derek



The chairperson's message on On our 25th anniversary

How do you write about Birdlife Polokwane's 25th anniversary, without first looking back to the beginning years when a number of individuals with a passion for birds and birding came together to lay the foundation for what would become a thriving, diverse and record-breaking club? These individuals, through their mentoring

and teaching skills, instilled their passion in many of the members who have joined the club since its inception in 1998.

My journey with Birdlife Polokwane started in 2008 as a novice birder when a work colleague told me about a club for birders. I was intrigued, to say the least, and the monthly club meetings were a

real eye-opener. The guest speakers shared their expert knowledge at the club meetings, and I joined most of the monthly club outings in pursuit of seeing more of our feathered friends.

With more than 600 bird species recorded in the Limpopo province, the club serves as a

gateway to access the wealth of the avifaunal riches that are on offer. It's no wonder that members of the club hold the current South African Birding Big Day record, and why, during the past 25 years, so many records have been set and broken by members that come from this club. A club member also holds the annual 100 km birding challenge record.

We truly live in a habitat-diverse province, and pressures on nature and natural resources are a matter of concern. Through the club's professional and world-wide distributed newsletter, "The Lark",

scientific studies and continual educational messages do reach a multitude of people around the world. We have the platform to reach communities to educate them on the protection of natural resources, the importance of birds and birding areas and the opportunities for bird guide training.

Furthermore, it's important that we harness the foundation built by the founding members to continue to teach and mentor the youth of tomorrow. It's through the youth that the future of Birdlife Polokwane will be secure for all birding enthusiasts to come.

Birdlife Polokwane has, for the past 15 years, made me part of their birding family. Each member has added value to my birding journey, and I can only thank everyone who has taken this journey with me. To all the committee members, thank you for your selfless dedication. To the members who aren't with us anymore – we salute you.

In conclusion, I hope that this short celebratory message and insight into what the club stands for and what we offer highlights the future potential of Birdlife Polokwane not just in Polokwane, but Limpopo and the broader birding community. Safe travels and Happy Birding!

Jody De Bruyn



BIRDING CRIMEA

TEXT AND PHOTOS Jody De Bruyn



2x4 high-clearance vehicle, albeit somewhat scary at times. On our way down, we found Golden-breasted Bunting, Black-chested Snake Eagle, Black-headed Oriole, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Southern Black Tit, flocks of Red-winged Starlings, and a Peregrine Falcon hugging the edges of the cliff.

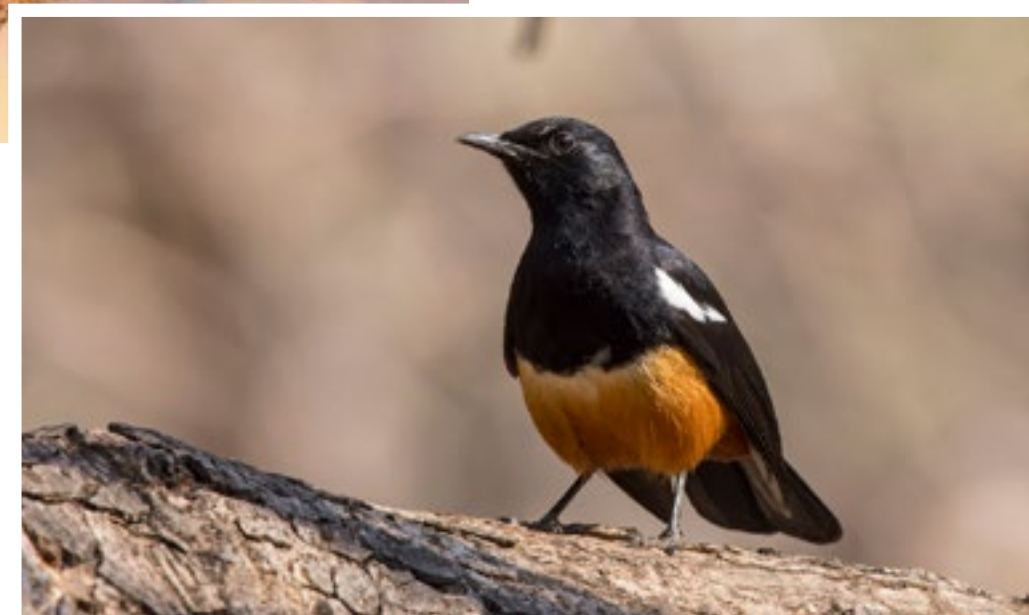
At the bottom of the valley, we made our way over the Sand River at a shallow but rocky crossing. The river area was very productive, and we managed to spot a number of different species, including: Southern Crested Guineafowl,

LEFT Van Coller's Pass provides spectacular scenery and hairy moments in equal measure.

BELOW Mocking Cliff Chats were frequently encountered.

An early start on Saturday, the 19th of August, saw us head out to the northern side of the Soutpansberg near Waterpoort, and in particular, Crimea Lodge situated down Van Coller's Pass. The entrance to the pass is situated just off the R523 and runs through

the Soutpansberg Mountains. Our descent down the pass and into the valley was greeted with stunning views, and every so often, we would stop to enjoy the spectacular scenery. The pass runs down the western side of the mountain valley, and we found the terrain quite accessible with a





Little Bee-eater, Jameson's Firefinch, Black-collared Barbet, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Burchell's Coucal, Lesser Swamp Warbler, Black Crake, Red-faced Cisticola, a number of swallow species, Familiar Chat, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, and also our first view of Striped Pipit, a bird that we'll get to see a view more times on our short single night stay-over.

We made our way east towards the lodge. The easy-to-travel gravel

road winding through the valley crosses a small stream a few times before you reach Crimea Lodge. The lodge is well equipped with a number of rooms, a kitchen with all the necessary cutlery, utensils, gas plates, fridge, and the likes. The solar solution was perfect for providing enough lighting at night,

ABOVE We had several encounters with very confident Striped Pipits.



ABOVE Crimea Lodge, set against the base of a cliff and with a lush garden, makes for excellent birding.

RIGHT An 'old-style' donkey ensured we had a constant supply of warm water.



and the wood-fired geyser solution ensured we had hot water.

On our arrival, we were greeted by Rock Martin, Kurrichane Thrush, Bar-throated Apalis, Long-billed Crombec, Green Wood Hoopoe, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Terrestrial Brownbul, Striped Pipit, and a pair of Mocking

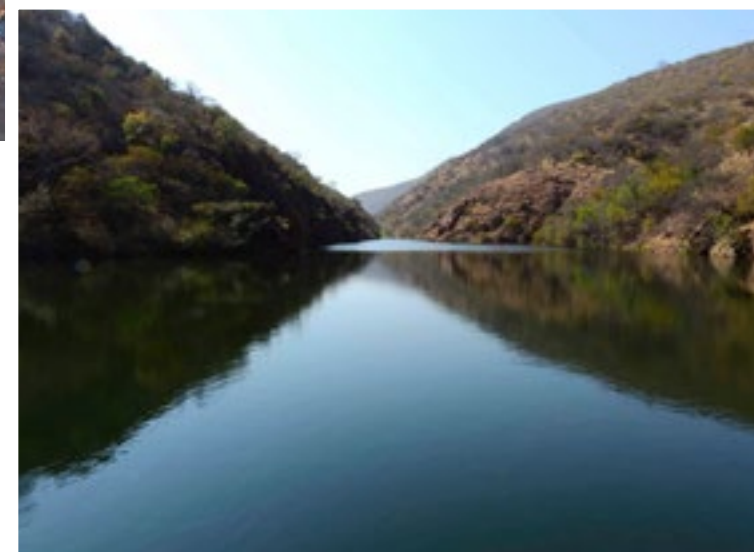
Cliff Chat that kept a sharp eye out for the open kitchen. The steep cliff was a buzz of activity with several raptors present, including a pair of African Hawk-Eagle, a Brown Snake Eagle, and a Verreaux's Eagle.

After taking a quick break, we had a walk a few hundred metres east until we came to a dammed-up part of the little stream. Climbing onto the dam wall, we found birds such as a Little Grebe and a Mountain Wagtail. On our way back to the lodge, we ran into some Sweet Waxbills and also found Lesser Honeyguide, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Tambourine

Dove, White-crested Helmetshrike, Cardinal Woodpecker, and Bearded Scrub Robin.

We headed out later that afternoon to see what birds the night would bring. We got some more Striped Pipits that gave good photographic opportunities. Other species we also found included Red-billed Firefinch, White-browed Robin-Chat, African Goshawk, African Pied Wagtail, Greater Honeyguide, and Retz's

BELOW The Kurrichane Thrush formed part of the welcoming party upon our arrival at the lodge.



Helmetshrike. As the sun set, the nocturnal birds became active, and we managed to add Fiery-necked and Freckled Nightjar, African Wood Owl, Western Barn Owl, and Spotted Eagle-Owl.

After a good night's rest, we

ABOVE A short walk along a small stream took us to a small dam where we were rewarded with views of Mountain Wagtail.



ABOVE Sweet Waxbill

OPPOSITE Always a delight -
Bearded Scrub Robin.

were up early and made our way from the lodge back over the Sand River, up Van Coller's Pass and out of the valley. A most enjoyable weekend, with over 100 bird species finding their way onto our list. Thanks to ZZ2 for allowing the club access to this wonderful

place.
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Opinion

To tick or not to tick

Derek Engelbrecht

I don't recall another more contentious bird than the White-breasted Waterhen discovered at a small farm dam near Politsi in the Limpopo Province. For the uninformed, the bird was found on the 29th of July 2023 on the farm Groenfontein and represents a new species for Africa. No sooner was it reported, and the debate started: is it a genuine vagrant or an aviary escapee?

Both camps (vagrant vs escapee) presented their arguments on various social media platforms, and I won't repeat those here (you can email me if you want to read some of the correspondence). However, a lot of people asked me if they could tick the bird or not. The

simple answer is an easy one: it's your call. Here's my view of the matter.

As birders, we all play the same game, but it is a strange game as we all play it according to our own rules. As a birder, you set the boundaries of what you regard as an acceptable sighting before you can tick it. This is a personal decision; for some people, you have to have a good view in which all the distinguishing features can be seen; for others, a mere glimpse or a silhouette will do, and others may tick a bird only on sound. Some people will tick a bird if a guide points it out, while others won't. Some people will only tick it if they have either a photo or a recording of the bird. I've been with people who ticked a bird

based on a very sketchy view of it, but who am I to judge their decision? They have their own set of rules. I have not been in that position yet, but I would find it extremely difficult to tick, for example, a duck such as Pintail, Garganey, or Northern Shoveler, unless it is in an extremely remote area, but even then, it would not be an easy call to make.

Back to the White-breasted Waterhen. Like others, I had to resolve the vagrant vs escapee conundrum within my rules. I had to evaluate all the arguments presented for an aviary escapee and weigh them up against the evidence that I gathered from my research, together with Dominic Rollinson's summary of vagrancy records of White-breasted Waterhen.

Despite an unconfirmed, second-hand report of a few individuals having been imported sometime in the 1980s and efforts to verify this, there is as yet no credible, concrete evidence that the species is, or ever has been, in captivity in South Africa. On the other hand, there are plenty of published records of this species currently undergoing a global range expansion, and which shows a tendency towards vagrancy.

So, based on the available evidence, I weighed it all up, and I believe that the bird in question is a genuine vagrant - a first for Africa. Will I tick it? Of course I will. I should add that I am not a lister in the sense of keeping a running tally of birds I have seen, but I do like seeing species I have never seen before. So, to me, the overriding decision has nothing to do with boosting my life list but rather the enjoyment of observing a bird I had never seen before and seeing how similar or different it is to other species I have seen.

Since my decision is not about a number on my life list or whether it is tickable or not, it matters very little to me if the rarities committee, or anyone else for that matter, comes to another conclusion, namely that the bird is an aviary escapee and hence not tickable from a South African or regional life list perspective. According to the rules of my birding game, I have satisfied my mind that it is a genuine vagrant, and that's it. But then again, we all have our own rules. Play your game according to your rules, and more importantly, enjoy the bird for what it is - not a number on a list, but a gorgeous and fascinating living being.

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BIRD of the YEAR 2023

CAPE PARROT

Poicephalus robustus

INTERESTING NUMBERS

Less than **1%** of South Africa's land surface is mistbelt forest.
Less than **10%** of South Africa's mistbelt forests are protected.



HOMES IN PERIL

Mistbelt forest habitat is a highly **biodiverse ecosystem**. It is home to numerous plant and animals species, including the rare Samango Monkey, Crowned Eagle and Hogsback Chirping Frog. Sadly, it is a highly threatened habitat with many species at risk of extinction because of habitat loss and degradation. The large yellowwood trees, which form part of the forest canopy, provide the Cape Parrot with nesting sites and food. The loss of these trees and important habitat, is threatening the survival of the species.



FLAGSHIP SPECIES

Cape Parrots are only found in South Africa and have a close association with Afrotemperate forests. As their very existence is dependent on the survival of this specialised habitat, they are a **flagship species** for mistbelt forest ecosystems. This means that they are used as **ambassadors** to promote the conservation of this threatened forest habitat and the protection of other species of fauna and flora found within it.



SA NATIONAL TREE

South Africa's national tree is the **Real Yellowwood** (*Podocarpus latifolius*). The Real Yellowwood and Outeniqua Yellowwood (*Afrocapus falcatus*) are slow-growing evergreen trees and can reach up to 30m in height. Yellowwood trees are important in the life of Cape Parrots. Their preferred food is the tough kernel of their fruits, they breed in the cavities of dead and decaying trees and they roost communally in the safety of the crowns of these and other tall trees.

ALIEN INVASION

The encroachment of **non-native** tree species is threatening some of the last remaining intact areas of mistbelt forests. The fringes of these forests have seen an increase and spread of these non-native trees, including pine plantations. These ever-expanding planted areas further **fragment** and reduce the extent of the indigenous forest patches. Many forest animals, including the Cape Parrot require safe passage between these increasingly isolated forest patches in order to feed and breed successfully.



FROM TREE TO CHAIR

Before South Africa began commercial **exotic** timber plantations, mistbelt forests were the main source of **timber**, with the ancient giant yellowwoods and stinkwoods being highly sought after. Yellowwood timber is hard and durable and prized for its colour and quality. During the 1800s to 1950, these trees were preferentially harvested for railway sleepers, mining operations, floors, wagons, and furniture. Today the yellowwood species are officially **protected trees**, although logging is occasionally allowed.



HEATING UP

Another threat to this fragile forest habitat is **climate change** and the negative impact that more frequent droughts and increased extreme temperature or rain events are having on the ecology of these forests.



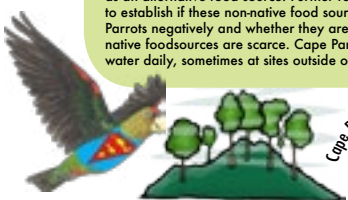
KILLER BEETLES

The **Polyphagous Shot Hole Borer** (*Euwallacea fornicates*) is a tiny 2mm long beetle from South East Asia that is causing devastating damage to the environment. They are known to colonize yellowwood trees, infecting the host tree with a fungus which spreads through the tree's sap transport system, blocking it and causing the tree to wilt and eventually die.

SUPER FLYERS

Cape Parrots are **food nomads**, moving between patches of forest to forage. They feast on indigenous fruiting trees, favouring the kernels of yellowwood fruit. As these trees do not produce fruits all year, the parrots regularly travel between inland forests as well as coastal forests to find other fruiting trees. They are good flyers and can fly long distances while foraging for food. Pecan nut orchards and domestic gardens are also visited as an alternative food source. Further research is needed to establish if these non-native food sources affect Cape Parrots negatively and whether they are important if native food sources are scarce. Cape Parrots fly to drink water daily, sometimes at sites outside of forests.

Cape Parrots can fly up to **90kms** a day to find food.





CLUB

Ranch
Safaris

TEXT AND PHOTOS Minkie Prinsloo

As is customary by now, our September club outing this year was to Club Ranch Safaris in search of a few Limpopo River valley specials such as Pel's Fishing Owl, White-crowned Lapwing, Meyer's Parrot, Tropical Boubou, and Meve's

Starling. This year, we were a small group with only six club members joining the outing. As we had an excellent rainy season, we didn't

know what to expect regarding the water level of the river.

We arrived on the farm just after 7 am and our list started



Parrot, Saddle-billed Stork, and White-crowned Lapwing.

After enjoying breakfast, we headed to the river, not knowing exactly what to expect. The river was a lot higher than usual, and we had to wade through the water, knee-deep in some places. Luckily for us, the water was crystal clear, and we could see that there were no crocodiles lurking around. After

everybody put their shoes back on, we headed onto the island, searching for our main target of the day, the Pel's Fishing Owl. It was not long before we managed to find this magnificent species. First,

BELOW Mission successful - with the #1 target on our list, Pel's Fishing Owl, ticked off, there was a sense of relief.



Two of our targets, Meve's Starling (ABOVE) and Meyer's Parrot (LEFT) were some of the first species that made it onto our list.

growing as we headed to the camp where we usually have breakfast before heading out. When we reached this spot, we already had more than 30 species on our list, including species such as Meve's Starling, Meyer's





we only saw one flying as it flushed out of a dense treetop. We were searching for this individual when two more birds flushed from the same tree as the first bird. We could

ABOVE White-crested Helmetshrikes are generally restless birds, but we were fortunate to spend some time with a small group of these delightful birds.



clearly see that it was a juvenile bird accompanied by two adult birds; the juvenile bird was way more relaxed than the adult birds and allowed us great views.

ABOVE Bennett's Woodpecker.



LEFT The biggest surprise of the day was this SABAP2 Full Out of Range White-breasted Cuckooshrike.

After enjoying time with this special species, we decided to move on and leave the owls in peace. We moved along the riverbank and added species such as African Darter, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Giant Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher, a very curious group of White-crested Helmetshrikes and,

to our surprise, a White-breasted Cuckooshrike, before heading back to the camp for a bite to eat.

After enjoying a well-deserved lunch we headed off on a walk through the camp; this area usually produces a couple of species to add to the list. Unfortunately, the staff was busy

with maintenance on some of the buildings, so birds were scarce this time around. Our walk along the riverbank from there was quite productive, delivering species such as African Hawk-Eagle, Bearded Scrub Robin, Ashy Flycatcher, Black-faced Waxbill, and Red-billed Firefinch.

We headed back to camp and decided to head home as it was quite hot, and we had found most of the species we were looking for. Luckily, the drive home still follows the river for a bit, before we turn away through some Mopani veld and finally drive past some agricultural farmlands. This last stretch usually provides something of interest. On this last bit, we added species such as Wood Sandpiper, Red-crested Korhaan, Tawny Eagle, Black Crake, Striated Heron, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark and Grey Penduline Tit.

We ended our tally for the morning with just over 100 species, and we even saw Kori Bustard and Lark-like Bunting on the drive back to Polokwane. So, all in all, it was another amazing outing. Something I should probably mention is the number of Egyptian Geese that we found along the river; they numbered in the hundreds. Personally, I have never seen them in such great numbers. Yet again, Club Ranch did not disappoint.

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I found a baby bird ... now what?

Move or shepherd it to a safe location.

It is OK to handle the baby bird, the parents won't abandon it if touched by humans.

Is the bird in immediate danger?

Yes

No

Contact a wildlife rehabilitator, the SPCA or a veterinary surgeon for advice?

Do not feed or give it water; place the bird in a dark box with ventilation and some padding for warmth.

Is the bird bleeding or visibly injured?

Laboured breathing; weeziness when breathing; appearing sleepy/drowsy; puffed-up feathers; flopping

No

Yes

What does it look like?

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

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

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



Can you see the nest?

Yes

No

Is it in immediate danger?

Yes

No

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


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

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

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

ROBERTS 8

IS ONLINE
AND FREE
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



The Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Birds of the World



PROJECT NEWS

Derek Engelbrecht
email: roberts8revision@gmail.com

The Roberts 8 editorial team recently received a boost with two highly respected and experienced ornithologists joining the project. Prof Ben Smit, Rhodes University, will serve as an editor alongside Prof Peter Ryan (University of Cape Town), and myself. At the same time, Dr Vincent Parker joined the team as an editorial assistant. Vincent will mainly be responsible for the distribution and demography sections but will also assist with general editorial duties when called upon. Welcome, gents, and I look forward to working with you on this project.



Prof Ben Smit



Dr Vincent Parker



Roberts 8 on Learn the Birds

On the 12th of October 2023, Derek Engelbrecht, editor-in-chief of Roberts 8, and Laura Kammermeier, communications manager with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, presented a webinar on how the 8th edition of Roberts Birds of Southern Africa (Roberts 8) has evolved, the Roberts 8/Birds of the World partnership, and where you can find the newly revised Roberts 8 content. You can watch the webinar on the Learn the Birds YouTube channel at <https://youtube.com/@learnthebirds>. Please reach out to either of us if you have any questions about Birds of the World or would like to contribute data, observations, photos, or sound recordings (even from Xeno-Canto) to the Cornell Lab.

Derek Engelbrecht, email: roberts8revision@gmail.com

Laura Kammermeier, email: lmk25@cornell.edu



Species currently under revision

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

Courasers

- Bronze-winged Courser
- Burchell's Courser
- Double-banded Courser
- Temminck's Courser
- Three-banded Courser

Parrots

- Cape Parrot

Storks

- Yellow-billed Stork
- Abdim's Stork

Tinkerbirds

- Green Tinkerbird
- Red-fronted Tinkerbird
- Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird
- Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird

Babblers

- Southern Pied Babbler

Larks

- Pink-billed Lark

Weavers

- Chestnut Weaver
- Spectacled Weaver

Sugarbirds

- Gurney's Sugarbird

Pipits

- Rock Pipit

Swallows

- Blue Swallow
- Wire-tailed Swallow

Cisticolas

- Cloud Cisticola
- Croaking Cisticola
- Grey-backed Cisticola
- Levillant's Cisticola

Starlings

- Red-winged Starling
- Pale-winged Starling

Grassbird-like warblers

- Barratt's Warbler

Thrushes

- Orange Ground Thrush
- Spotted Ground Thrush

Secretarybird

Falcons

- Pygmy Falcon

Soon-to-be-released species accounts

African Finfoot

Cape Weaver

Southern Brown-throated Weaver

Regulars

Birds in Art

Yellow-streaked Greenbul

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



Yellow-streaked Greenbul

In this issue, we feature a rather nondescript little bird, the Yellow-streaked Greenbul *Phyllastrephus flavostriatus*. Its only feature of note is the yellow-streaked breast and belly, and these are seldom clearly visible. Even in the best of light, they're faint and hardly visible, and these birds stick to the gloom of the wet, mossy mist-belt forests of the mountains of southern and

eastern Africa. Basically, under such conditions, all you can see is a little bird that is uniformly drab-coloured. But strangely enough, it can be easily identified. Indeed, it's one of the very first bird species I saw, and I immediately managed to identify it the first time I went birdwatching in the amazing forests of the Magoebaskloof region.

So, while we have it within good view, let's take a long, hard look at this unassuming yet unique little bird. What is a 'greenbul'? They're members of the Pycnonotidae, the Bulbul family. Now, a funny thing about African bulbuls is that, here in South Africa, we used to call them all 'bulbuls', but in East Africa, there developed the practice of calling the dull-coloured forest bulbuls 'greenbuls' or 'brownbuls', even when they're more

LEFT A Yellow-streaked Greenbul clambering woodpecker-like on a moss-covered trunk, looking for invertebrate prey
© Derek Engelbrecht..



ABOVE A hand-held Yellow-streaked Greenbul, showing the very faint lemon-yellow streaking that's the origin of the species' common name
© Derek Engelbrecht.

greyish than either green or brown. Indeed, hardly any are fully brown or remotely approximating bright green. But recently, there have been calls to standardise the names of birds across Africa for the sake of tourist birdwatchers wanting to log their 'lifers' in different countries. Because Tanzania and Kenya are such popular destinations, we got stuck with changing our bird names to theirs, so greenbuls these became.

But what are 'bulbuls' anyway? Americans and Europeans will find them mysterious, but in Africa and Asia, bulbuls include some of the most common and familiar of birds. They are small to mid-sized perching birds, mostly fruit- and

insect-eating, many with crests, some with bold markings, and then a vast swathe of species with hardly any distinctive features, making them some of the most challenging birds in the world to identify. The one fortunate thing is that bulbuls are very vocal, and most have loud, very distinctive calls. At present, about 166 species are recognised. There have been many re-arrangements and reclassifications of the species, with some of the previously big genera being broken up and new genera created, as it became clear that many very similar species are not that closely related. Some have even been removed from the Bulbul family. As recently as 2009, a new species has been described, the Bare-faced Bulbul *Nok hualon* which is unique in the family for its entirely featherless face.

The Yellow-streaked Greenbul is easy to identify if seen reasonably well for any length of time - and by using behaviour and voice as cues. They occur singly, but more often in pairs or small family groups. Their way of life is predominantly clambering up and down mossy tree trunks, along branches, or around tangles of vines. They creep and climb like woodpeckers, though they don't have comparatively

dexterous grabbing feet. They also don't peck but will probe their bills into the moss or cracks in the bark, seeking spiders, insects and other small invertebrates. A characteristic behaviour of theirs is to now and then flick a wing outward, perhaps in an attempt to startle little critters into revealing themselves by moving. Accompanying their creeping and wing-flicking movements is a constant, rather nasal and sometimes wailing chatter. They always tend to keep in the gloom of the forest mid-story, occasionally venturing into the canopy or rarely descending to inspect mossy fallen logs on the floor.

These bulbuls typically breed in mid-summer. The rather flimsy nest is usually positioned between 1 and 4 m above the ground, and the female typically lays two salmon-pink eggs with darker reddish squiggles and spots. An interesting habit of these greenbuls is their extreme reluctance to leave their nests once they have laid eggs. It's been reported that the incubating bird will stay put even when you're right next to it. One female eventually was pressured into dropping out of the nest to the forest floor, where she went into a slow shuffle, perhaps a distraction



display to lure predators away from the nest.

At present, Yellow-streaked Greenbuls are some of the most abundant forest birds, and they occur over much of Africa.

Though not presently endangered, they are very dependent on the continued conservation of their habitat.

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ABOVE The eggs of Yellow-streaked Greenbul must be some of the most beautifully-coloured eggs of all birds © Derek Engelbrecht.

TOP The rather flimsy nest of a Yellow-streaked Greenbul © Derek Engelbrecht.

Sunbird, to try and get close enough to secure a decent photo, and then being very disappointed when I downloaded the image, because the metallic shimmer of their iridescent plumage was not in sharp focus. But some flowering plants around the park's administration buildings attract them and their cousin, the White-breasted Sunbird.

Another bit of entrance gate excitement with better results was watching a flock of Southern Pied Babblers work their way through the undergrowth of the surrounding woodland, showing particular interest in grubs and insects underneath a thorn tree growing out of a termite mound, just a few metres past the entrance gate.

Last time, I took readers straight to Bontle Camp... but alternatively, from the gate, one can turn left and hug the perimeter fence along a route that is known as Tshugulu (white rhino) Drive. This takes visitors into arid thornveld, which will contrast with the taller open woodland characteristic of other parts of the section, particularly around the picnic site. Driving along this western route should produce some very interesting sightings, with more arid-loving species associated with

BELOW A Southern Pied Babbler picking its way through the undergrowth © Chris Patton.



The Tshugulu Drive hat trick: Black-faced Waxbill (TOP), Violet-eared Waxbill (ABOVE, LEFT) (both © Mike Buckham), and Blue Waxbill (ABOVE, RIGHT) © Chris Patton.

the Kalahari, and things to look out for include three birds not on the current bird list found on the SANParks' website (which I think must have been originally drafted for the predominant mountainous section of the park, perhaps before the farm Kwaggasvlakte was incorporated into the park). These are Barred Wren-Warbler, Ashy Tit, and Great Sparrow, and other

birds to look for include Crimson-breasted Shrike, Brubru, Chestnut-vented Warbler, and a hat trick of waxbills, namely Violet-eared, Black-faced, and Blue.



ABOVE While Southern Black Tit is the commonest Marakele tit, this Ashy Tit can be found in the more arid thornveld of the Bontle Section
© Daniel Engelbrecht.

As Tshugulu Drive winds northwards, one passes a few no-entry roads that head in the direction of Bontle Camp or the picnic site, but access is forbidden so as not to impair the waterhole experience for residents of the camp... but further north, the road forks into two accessible options. Taking the left-hand option north, the route becomes Kudu Drive, while Tshugulu Drive continues for those taking the right-hand option... this will soon intersect Ndlopfu Drive. Ndlopfu means elephant in Tsonga, which is ironic, as in this Bontle part

of the park, elephants (along with lion and buffalo) don't occur and are actively kept out. However, Ndlopfu Drive is the road which links the Bontle Section to the main section of the park, where all the large and dangerous animals roam freely, so I guess it is an appetite setter. To get to the main section, one would turn left off Tshugulu onto Ndlopfu Drive,

and then at the next fork, after a kilometre or two, follow the signs to the right... Uniquely in SANParks' parks, the road reaches a tunnel under a public road. This tunnel, under the Rooiberg road (the public road) leads into the mountainous section of Marakele. The sections are further separated by a button-controlled electric gate, to prevent lion and elephant from entering the Bontle section, as the campsite, as described in the previous article, is open access save for a few gum-pole stumps to denote the fringe of the camping area... and antelope species, warthog and even white rhino regularly stroll through and around the camp.

But if I take readers back to that previous fork on Ndlopfu Drive, if one takes the left-hand fork and heads north, this is the route to Bollonoto Bird Hide. After a few hundred metres, the road joins up with the same Kudu Drive mentioned earlier, and at this point, there is another road forking off northeast and named Kgokong Drive (Sepedi for wildebeest). The drive is short but ends in a parking cul-de-sac for the bird hide, at one of the few publicly accessible waterholes in the section.

BELOW The tunnel under the Rooiberg road into the mountainous section of Marakele © Chris Patton.





ABOVE The contrasting moods of Bollonoto Bird Hide in dry (LEFT) and wet (RIGHT) seasons © Dries de Wet.

Bollonoto Bird Hide was funded and built by the SANParks' Honorary Rangers. It is an important water source for wildlife in the Bontle section but tends to be a little underwhelming from a waterbird perspective. However, there can be some nice woodland birds in the general area and sitting patiently in the hide should produce some seedeaters and doves coming to the water's edge to quench their thirst. The delightful tumbling whistle of the Brown-crowned Tchagra is something I associate with the dense vegetation next to the hide, and with a little luck, they will reveal themselves out the side viewing slot, particularly in the early morning.

But the one place in the section I have yet to write about is Ikhsutseng Picnic Site, which is set in tall open woodland, dominated by silver cluster-leaf trees. Nestled in a road

off Ndlopfu Drive, but south of the junction with Tshugulu, between that crossroads, and the road back to Bontle Campsite, Ikhsutseng is a wonderful opportunity to leave the confines of one's vehicle. The birds are a little different to those in the drier thornveld. Birds like Amethyst Sunbird, White-crested Helmetshrike, and Golden-breasted Bunting should be looked for, and the tall woodland is also ideal for accipiters that may be seen ghosting their way through the trees, with Gabar Goshawk, Shikra, Little Sparrowhawk, and Lizard Buzzard all possibilities.

I wrote in Part 1 how I have been travelling to the park for meetings



ABOVE The Brown-crowned Tchagra is often first picked up by its charismatic descending call © Chris Patton.



LEFT AND BELOW The Ikhsutseng Picnic Site is set in open woodland and allows park visitors to leave the confines of their vehicles © Chris Patton.





LEFT A White-crested Helmetshrike photographed at Ikhutseng in February 2004 © Chris Patton.

BELOW A Grey-headed Kingfisher was an unexpected find about 50 m east of Ikhutseng © Chris Patton.



with the park staff since the late 1990s, right through to 2017 when I transferred down to Garden Route National Park. When I go through my old photo folders from previous trips to the park, I find some cherished memories of surprises seen in and around the Ikhutseng Picnic Site, even though, in those early days, the site wasn't fully operational. I mentioned White-crested Helmetshrike already, but Coqui Francolin and Grey-headed Kingfisher are a couple of other photo records of species one might not expect in this westerly part of Limpopo. The open woodland is ideal

habitat for the helmetshrikes, and the enchanting cyclical call of a feeding flock moving through the canopies is usually the first notification this species is around. They are busy and restless as they pass by, and something I associate more with riverine drives in Kruger.



ABOVE Finding Yellow-throated Sandgrouse in this section of Marakele is a treasured birding memory © Chris Patton.

Another observation about birding in Bontle is that bee-eaters are conspicuous, particularly White-fronted and Little around the bird hide. Swallow-tailed may suddenly and excitingly appear in winter, while in the summer, Southern Carmine and European are present as well.

I highlighted it already, but just to reiterate, the bird list on the SANParks' website, although a good general guide, is not fully comprehensive, and in my years working for SANParks, I've seen a few species there not on the park's website checklist, and it is more accurate to use resources like the SABAP2 website for complete detail. The three birds I listed at the start

of this article are all regular resident species, namely Great Sparrow, Ashy Tit, and Barred Wren-Warbler. But a fourth absentee from the list of species was a little more special... I saw Yellow-throated Sandgrouse in this section in 1999, which, although it is regularly recorded in pentads close to Thabazimbi, has not been reported in the park during the SABAP2 recording period post-July 2007. And that's a great bombshell to end this *Reflections* article.

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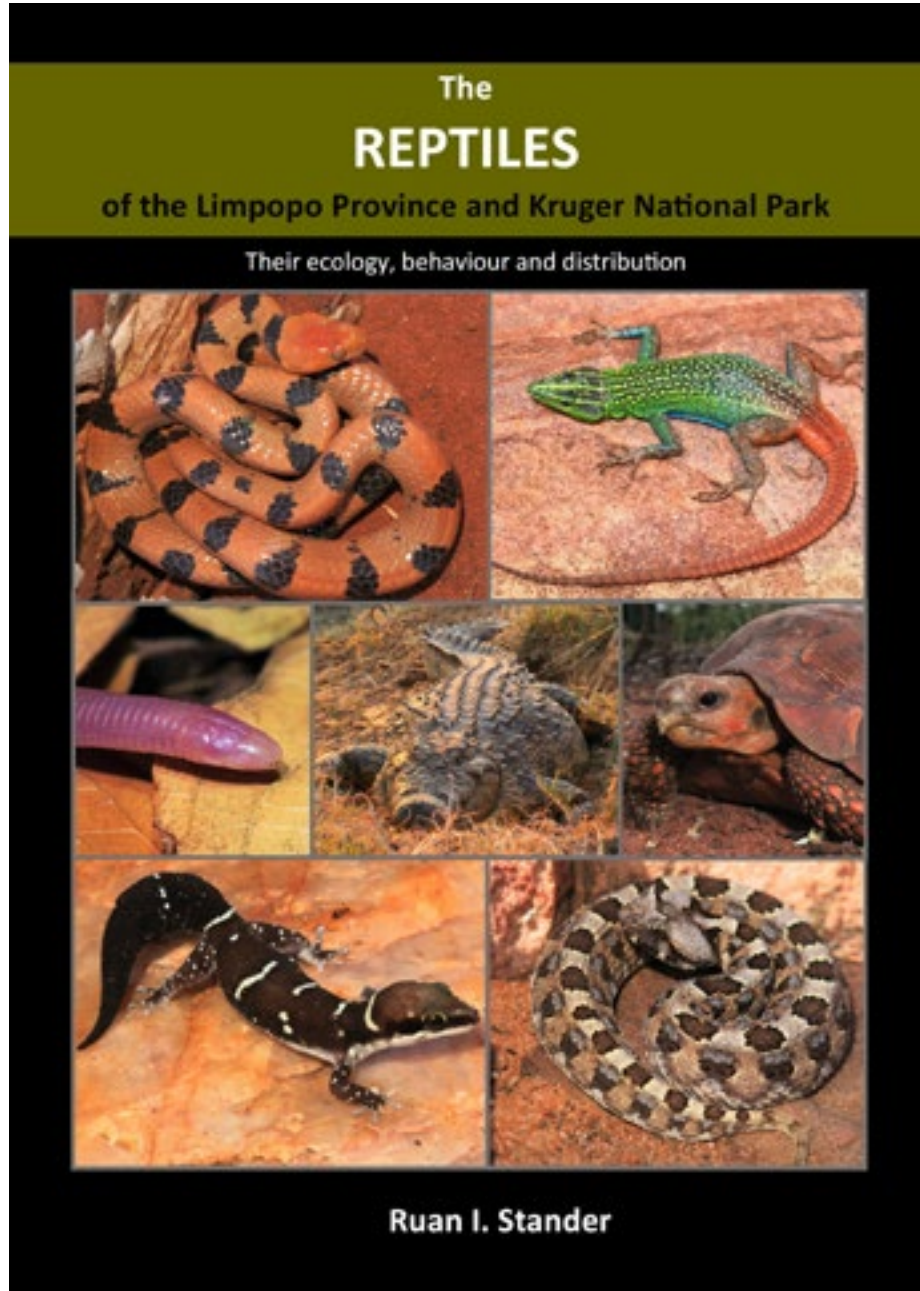
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The river bully - African Finfoot

Derek Engelbrecht

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The African Finfoot must rate as one of the most sought-after species in Africa. Nowhere particularly common and as shy and secretive as a maid, every sighting of this species is always a cherished memory. I've been fortunate to spend many hours with the species and seen some never-seen-before behaviour. One aspect that has intrigued me, though, is its degree of sociality.

African Finfoot is invariably seen singly, occasionally a female with young, or rarely a pair. According to the literature, the African Finfoot is monogamous, with pairs defending a stretch of river ranging from a few hundred metres to a few kilometres (Chittenden 2005). I am not convinced that the species has a monogamous mating system, and circumstantial evidence suggests a polygynous mating system cannot be ruled out (Engelbrecht 2023). For example, over several days of observations at an active nest on the Levhuvhu River, Limpopo

Province, I have never seen a male near the nest, nor performing any paternal duties (although others have apparently noticed this elsewhere). Furthermore, at the same site as the nest under observation, I observed another female with a young chick on the same stretch of river, suggesting that suitable stretches of a river are not necessarily occupied or defended by a resident breeding pair. Although a male and one or two females may be seen on the same stretch of river, a territory-holding male will not tolerate another male in its territory and will aggressively defend it against rivals. But what about a female in its territory?

My observations suggest that although adult African Finfoots may be seen on the same stretch of river, they usually maintain a reasonable distance from one another. Occasionally, though, a male and female will find themselves in the same area, and that is when the male shows his true colours – that of being a

bully! I am not sure if these close encounters between two birds are the result of pure chance or if the male detected a female and deliberately but casually made his way across to her. Although I have never witnessed physical contact between a male and female, the male's actions are clearly intended to intimidate the female and show 'who's the boss' on that stretch of river. Below are two examples of this aggressive kind of behavioural interactions I observed.

Observation 1 (Plates 1A–F, all photos in series © Derek Engelbrecht).

A female was crossing from one side of a river to the next when the resident male started swimming towards her (1A). He swam quite fast towards her with his neck slightly extended and his head just above the water (1B). The female must have sensed the antagonism, turned around and swam swiftly back towards where she emerged from. The male continued his pursuit (1C) and when he got close to the female, lunged forward with his neck extended forward and upward, his beak wide open and spluttering across the water (1D and 1E). The female escaped by running across the water for the

cover of some bankside vegetation (1F). The male then continued foraging calmly, working his way along the vegetated margins of the river, the female only emerging some 30 minutes later when the male was nowhere to be seen.

Observation 2 (Plates 2A–F, pp. 59–60, all photos in series © Daniel Engelbrecht).

A male and female were working the margins of the same stretch of river, but quite far apart. At one point, the female climbed onto a rock in the river, where she started preening (2A). The male started making his way towards her – from about 30 m away. She too must have sensed his antagonistic intentions and clambered onto another nearby rock (2B). The male calmly clambered (2C–E) onto the rock the female was on and chased her off, the female flying about 3 metres while calling a chattering, nasal and duck-like *chac-chac-chac* call (2F). The male then slipped off the rock and continued foraging. Again, the behaviour seemed to be a subtle form of intimidation directed at the female. Both sexes swam away in different directions.

The behaviours I've observed over the years suggest males



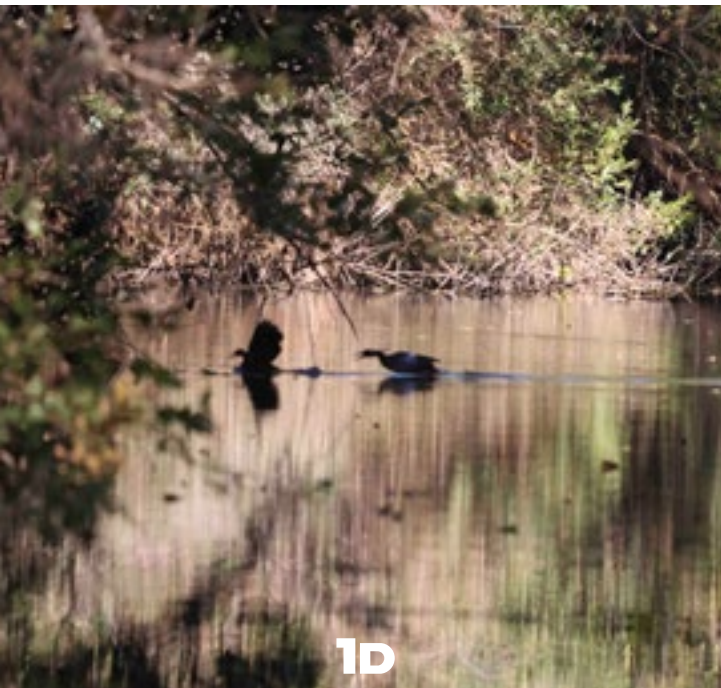
1A



1B



1C



1D



1E



1F



2A



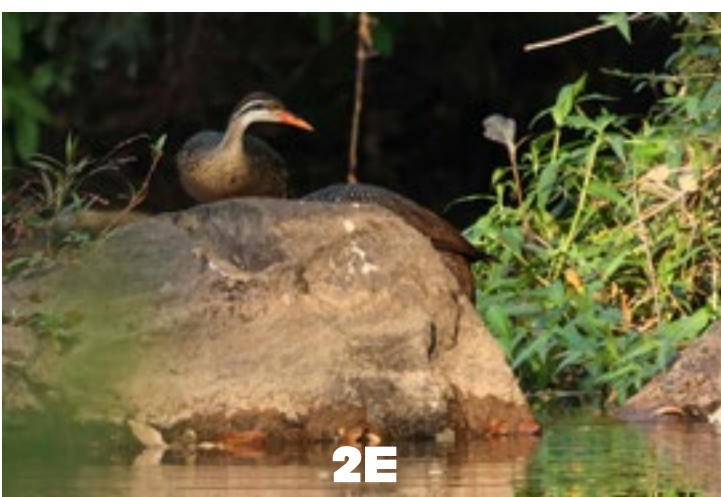
2B



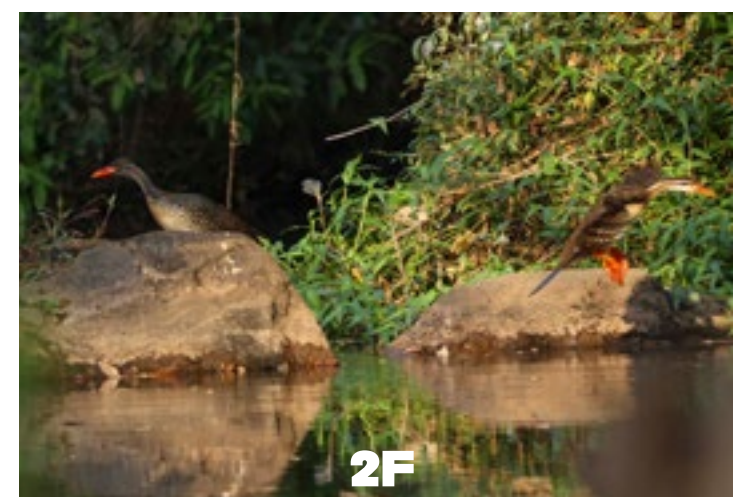
2C



2D



2E



2F

occupy and defend suitable stretches of rivers. It is possible that a female may defend a stretch of river near her nest in the breeding season. Still, I have never seen any evidence that a pair defends a territory against conspecific trespassers. Since not all stretches

of a river are necessarily equally suitable for occupation by finfoots, a territory-holding male would aggressively defend its territory, and females would be attracted to such suitable stretches of rivers. Why a male would seemingly be intent to intimidate, harass, or

show aggression towards a female is not known, but it may in some way or another be an indicator of the male's fitness.

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One hour at a Collared Pratincole nest

TEXT AND PHOTOS Hugh Chittenden

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Collared Pratincoles breed annually on fallow sugarcane fields at Emoyeni (between Mtunzini and Gingindlovu). On Saturday morning, the 28th of October 2023, I managed to spend about an hour photographing at the one nest site, where a single chick had hatched only a few hours earlier. The chick

was mobile and was able to move about slowly. When found, it was about a metre away from the nest that had been inspected the previous day when the birds were incubating a single egg.

The following photos document the scene where the chick was fed and brooded by the adults.







Notes on Bennett's Woodpecker from the Nylsvley area

TEXT AND PHOTOS Warwick Tarboton

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Bennett's Woodpecker is one of four woodpecker species that coexist in the broad-leaved woodlands around Nylsvley Nature Reserve, where I lived for 30 years, and the

notes here record the observations I made of them. The habitat they most favour in this area is open broad-leaved woodland on sandy soils dominated by wild *seringa* *Burkea africana*, silver cluster-leaf *Terminalia sericea*, lekkerbreek *Ochna pulchra*, and African wattle *Peltophorum africanum* where grass cover is relatively sparse and there are open sandy patches on which the birds spent time foraging on the ground for ants. The more wooded areas in this landscape provided refuge for them when

LEFT An adult female (above) and a juvenile male (below) Bennett's Woodpecker. Young males have blackish malar stripes and their crowns resemble females' crowns, not the all crimson red crownS of adult males.



ABOVE A pair of Bennett's Woodpecker feeding on ants on the ground.

RIGHT A female Bennett's Woodpecker foraging on a tree stem.



not foraging and provided roosting (and in summer) breeding sites.

Though not quantified, ants appeared to be their primary prey, and they spent extended periods on the



ABOVE An adult male drinking water.



ABOVE An adult female at her roost hole.

ground excavating into ant holes and lapping up emerging ants with their tongues. Less frequently, they gleaned ants from dead stems in trees, taking these from the surface rather than excavating into cavities in the branch. Unlike other woodpeckers in the area, they did not often give away their presence by tapping, nor were they ever recorded drumming, as the other three species were.

Social dispersion

One year (1971), I kept observations on a family group of three birds (ad ♂, ad ♀, imm ♂) that lived in an area of ±50 hectares in the habitat

as described at different times during winter, finding them in this area in April, May, June, July and August. In April and July, I spent ±15 hours following the group continuously on different mornings and recording their foraging and other behaviour.

The birds were not colour-marked, but I assume that over the five months, they were the same individuals since they remained in the same area and roosted in the same holes at night.

Roosting

In April and again in July, the three birds were found roosting at night in the same places, two in woodpecker-type holes in the main stems of adjacent trees and the third about 50 m away in a crevice behind loose bark. In April, I missed the time of their emergence, but in July, they emerged from their roost holes 8–12 minutes before sunrise, peering out from the hole for some time before leaving. Usually, the first bird out called, and this triggered the other two to emerge.

In the late afternoon, the group returned to the roost area, calling at intervals in April (but not in July)

in the hour before settling in their roost sites. Then, 30 minutes after sunset, they silently entered their respective holes.

Daily activity

I followed the group from the time they emerged from their roosts for four mornings in April (291 min) and July (155 min), and during this time, they ranged up to 300 m from their roosting area, spending time at one foraging site before moving on to another. In one instance, the

move was prompted by seeing a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill actively feeding on the ground 100 m from them, and they flew there to join it.

While feeding on the ground, they remained vigilant and flew to the nearest tree if approached or threatened, and at intervals after a bout of foraging on the ground, they'd also fly to the nearest tree trunk and clung there, either motionless and inactive, or preening.

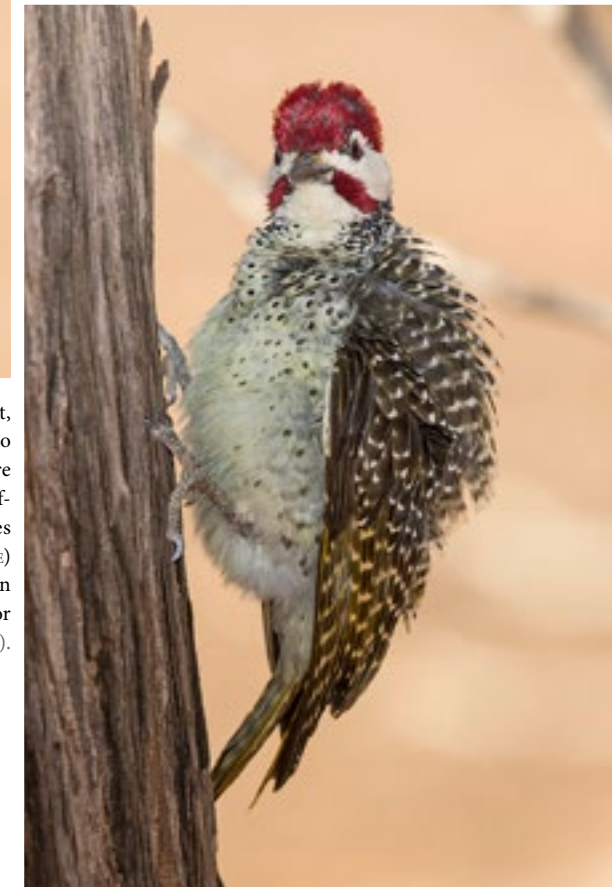
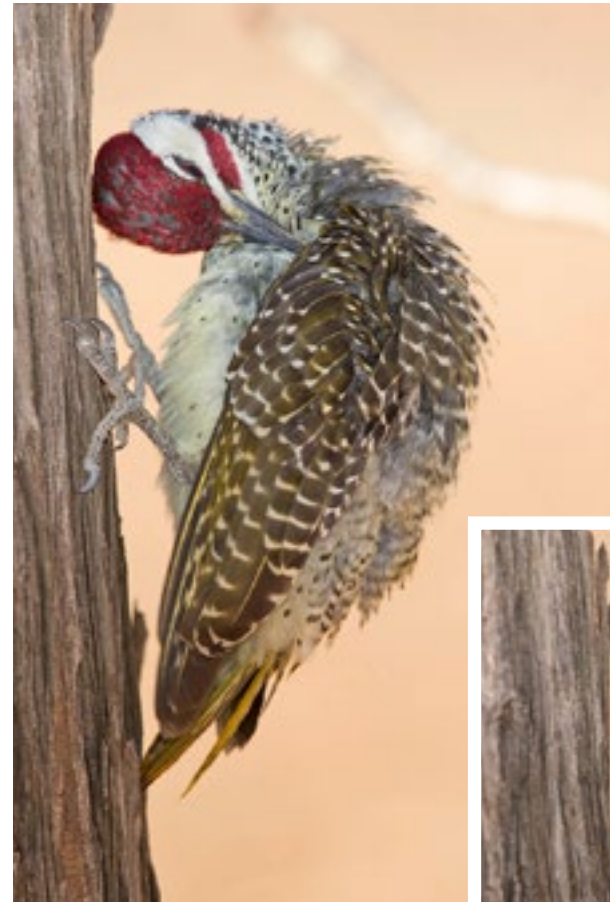
Their overall activity in April and July is compared in Table 1 below. The table shows, firstly, that the proportion of time they spent foraging increased from 32% in April to 50% in July (the result of diminished food availability in mid-winter perhaps?) and in July all their foraging time was spent on the ground. In contrast,

in April it was divided between tree-foraging (33%) and ground foraging (67%).

Secondly, although they spent a considerable part of the day inactive, simply clinging to a tree trunk, either still or preening, this inactivity diminished from 56% in April to 45% in July. On one occasion, when they were parked out like this, the call of a Grey Go-away-bird alerted them to the presence of a Gabar Goshawk, which flew past within 20 m of them. All three birds flattened themselves against the trunks they were on, the female remaining immobile for 23 minutes before flying off, while the male remained unmoving for 48 minutes before joining her. When approached by an observer, they characteristically shuffled around to the far side of the trunk to keep out of view.

Table 1. A comparison of the overall activity of a group of three Bennett's Woodpeckers in April and July in the Nylsvley area.

Activity	April	July
% of the time on a tree stem inactive	56.3	44.5
% of the time on a tree stem preening	7.2	5.1
% of the time on a tree stem displaying	4.5	0
% of the time on a tree stem foraging	10.6	0
% of the time on the ground foraging	21.4	50.4



After a foraging bout, they would often fly to the nearest tree where they would perform self-maintenance activities such as preening (ABOVE) or simply 'park' and remain motionless or inactive for long periods (RIGHT).



LEFT Bennett's Woodpecker has the comical behaviour of playing 'peekaboo', always shuffling to the far side of a tree trunk so as to keep out of view.

these were mostly in a small clump of exotic Cape syringa *Melia azedarach* trees around a disused cattle pen: seven of the holes used were in these *M. azedarach*, four were in *B. africana*, two were in *T. sericea*, one in a jacaranda *Jacaranda mimosifolia*, and three were in unidentifiable long-dead trees.

It is likely that *Melia* trees were especially favoured in this area because their trunks had hollow centres, and the effort to excavate a cavity was limited to

making an entrance hole to access the cavity. In my sample of 34 nests, the woodpeckers only excavated a new hole in four instances, to my knowledge, almost always electing to use an existing hole in which to breed. The holes that they used repeatedly may have been excavated originally

Nest sites

Between 1971 and 1988, I kept records of 34 breeding attempts by Bennett's Woodpecker in the Nylsvley area.

More than half of the recorded nests were in exotic trees around homesteads, and



by the birds themselves, but if they were, this happened before my time. Two of the holes used were originally excavated by a Bearded Woodpecker, and one was originally excavated by Golden-tailed Woodpecker. In turn, one of the Bennett's Woodpecker holes was subsequently used by a Bearded Woodpecker.

ABOVE A low nest in a live silver cluster-leaf *Terminalia sericea*.

One much-favoured *Melia* hole that was originally excavated by the birds themselves in 1975 was reused by them seven times

between then and 1980, and other holes were reused 2x (5) and 3x (1x) in successive years. In turn, the same nest holes were also used by Yellow-footed Squirrels, Burchell's Starling, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Lilac-breasted Roller, Green Wood Hoopoe, and Woodland Kingfisher. In one instance, I recorded an altercation between the kingfisher and the woodpecker, which resulted in the woodpecker being killed by the kingfisher.

The different nest holes used by the woodpeckers ($n = 17$) ranged in height between 1.0 m and 7.4 m above the ground, most being between 2 m and 4 m up ($x = 3.2$ m), and most were in the live main stems of the trees selected. In four instances where the Bennett's Woodpeckers excavated the hole themselves, the nest hole entrance was (height x width) 47 x 47 mm, 55 x 47 mm, 60 x 45 mm, and 65 x 45 mm. Cavity depth ($n = 8$) ranged between 230–420 mm ($x = 320$ mm).

Eggs, nestlings

In 19 instances where I could establish the clutch size, 15 were c/3 and four were c/4. A further nest had four eggs plus one just-hatched chick when inspected. The chick in this nest was suspected to be that of a honeyguide sp., but there was

no follow-up to confirm this. Egg-laying ($n = 34$) occurred in October (12), November (7), December (7), January (5) and February (3). Two of the December clutches were known to be replacements for failed first attempts, and two of the February clutches were seemingly repeat/second broods following successfully rearing first broods from the same nest holes.

Both sexes incubated the eggs, and both brooded and fed the nestlings, but no measure of the proportion that each did was made. In one instance, it was the male that spent the night on the eggs. Eggshells were not removed from the nest after hatching and were eventually trampled into the nest floor. Faecal sacs from the nestlings were removed by the parents and dropped away from the nest. The parent birds never carried visible food items to the nest but instead regurgitated food (entirely ants?) to the chicks. In one instance, a fledging period of at least 23 days was recorded.

A rough measure of nesting success from 15 attempts was success 10x (at least one young reared), and five were known failures (3x with eggs, 2x with chicks).

OPPOSITE A female at a nest in a dead trunk.





Conclusions

- Bennett's Woodpeckers in the study area foraged mostly on the ground, and their primary (and perhaps exclusive) food source here appeared to be ants.
- They breed in pairs, not in cooperative groups, although a pair and their offspring remain together as a group through the winter.
- They appeared to maintain year-round territories that centre on

available roost- and nest holes, and these sites were regularly re-used, some over successive years.

- When breeding, they were far more likely to reuse an existing nest hole than excavate a new one.

LEFT Female at a nest-hole in a *Melia* tree.

MIDDLE Female regurgitating food to young.

RIGHT Two nestlings close to fledging.

Resighting of a ringed African Skimmer

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As part of my study of the ecology and behaviour of African Skimmers, I have been recording chick growth and development, parental care strategies and breeding success at Letaba Estates near Letsitele since 2017. To study chick survival, movements, and post-juvenile dispersal, every chick is fitted with a unique combination of colour rings when they are 7–10 days old.

The colour-ringing project has already yielded valuable information about the species' ecology, with several resightings of colour-marked individuals. One of the study's highlights so far has been the resighting of one of the chicks that fledged at Letaba Estates at a dam in Venda, about 90 km to the north (Engelbrecht 2020). Below follows another remarkable resighting of one of the chicks ringed at Letaba Estates.

On the 28th of October 2023, Gijs Rinsma reported a pair of African Skimmers at a small dam near Bateleur's Nest Lodge in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve, Limpopo Province. The pair's female had two

colour rings on the left leg: pale blue over orange. Gijs posted a request for info about this bird on social media platforms, and the request eventually made its way to me. And it is a bird I know well...

The colour-marked bird hatched on the 28th of September 2022 at Letaba Estates. She was part of a clutch of three eggs, of which two hatched. Her sibling vanished (presumably predated) when they were ten days old, leaving her as the only surviving chick of that brood. She was ringed (5H35167) on the 9th of October 2022 with the standard SAFRING metal ring and the two colour rings on her left leg. I notice in the photo that the metal ring has somehow come off. She left Letaba Estates between the 19th of November and the 3rd of December 2022, presumably on her way north. The days elapsed between ringing and recapture were 389 days (1 yr, 24 d), and the straight-line distance between the ringing and resighting localities was 97.7 km. By the way, her mother returned to Letaba Estates



LEFT The colour-marked female in the foreground © Gijs Rinsma.

BELOW Pale blue/Orange hiding in a hippo track (LEFT) and an image taken after she was ringed, showing the SAFRING metal ring and the two colour rings (RIGHT) © Derek Engelbrecht.



this year, as she has done every year since 2017, but didn't breed because the water levels were too high at Letaba Estates.

This study keeps yielding fascinating insights into the ecology of African Skimmer.

Acknowledgements My sincere appreciation to Johan Botma at Letaba

Estates for his support of the project and for being my eyes on the ground.. Also thanks to Gijs Rinsma for reporting it and Hannes Swanepoel notifying me of the posting.

References

Engelbrecht D. (2020). Remarkable resightings of African Skimmers in the Limpopo Province. *The Lark* 32:53–58.

Penduline Tits, the smallest birds in southern Africa

TEXT AND PHOTOS Hugh Chittenden

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Penduline Tits rank as the smallest (lightest) birds in the region, along with the two southern African swee waxbills that weigh almost the same. The family Remizidae (Pen-

duline Tits) is widely distributed in sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and Asia, with one species that also occurs in North America (see <https://birdsoftheworld.org/bow/species/remizil/cur/introduction>). The two southern African species belong to the genus *Anthoscopus*, which is represented by six species in Africa.

OPPOSITE Cape Penduline Tit, weighing in at an average of 7.7 g.

BELOW Grey Penduline Tit, weighing in at an average of 6.5 g.



Penduline tit nests are extremely strong, pear-shaped structures woven from wool, downy plant material, and cobweb. The intricate, finely woven 'bags' have a false entrance immediately below



Nests of the two southern African penduline tit species; Cape Penduline Tit Penduline Tit (LEFT), and Grey Penduline Tit (RIGHT).

the true entrance. This exposed false entrance leads nowhere and doesn't give entry to the nest chamber. The true entry hole is kept closed at all times, except when the birds need to exit or enter the chamber.





A Cape Penduline Tit arrives, landing at the lip of the false entrance ...



... and enters the tunnel. Once inside, the bird turns around and closes the tunnel entrance with its bill.



... then pulls the lower part of the entrance tunnel open with its feet, and lifts the spout up with its bill...



A Cape Penduline Tit arrives with soft nest lining, which is added to the base of the nest.



On exiting the nest, the bird turns and pushes the tunnel entrance closed with its head.



The tunnel entrances are only momentarily left open once the birds have entered or exited the nest; otherwise, they remain closed.



A Grey Penduline Tit exits the nest.



These active, agile little birds that occupy the drier shrubland and woodland regions of Africa are forever on the move and will seldom be seen sitting still for more than a second or two! Neither are endemic, though Cape Penduline Tit could be considered as a near-endemic.

Female Rufous-naped Lark song

Derek Engelbrecht

email: faunagalore@gmail.com



The average weight of Grey Penduline Tit is approximately 6.5 grams, and the weight of a small marble is slightly more than 5 grams!!! That'll give you an idea of the weight of these minute little birds!



Acknowledgements I thank Lizelle and Dawie Burden for their kindness and hospitality while we stayed at their 'Platbakkies Farm Retreat'. Also, for help given by Chris Rochford, and Derek and Wendy Coley for information supplied.

Song in birds was traditionally thought to be exclusively performed by males, and it provided evidence for classical Darwinian sexual selection. However, as recently as the last decade, research has shown that females also sing in 64% of songbird species! This has stimulated research into its function and social and ecological correlates. In a recent study involving 1023 songbird species, it was found that there is a significant positive correlation between female colourfulness and the presence of song in that species. Given this tendency, female song would seem unlikely in a dun-coloured group such as the larks. The survey by Webb et al. (2016) found no evidence of female song in any of the 46 lark species they evaluated. Enter the Rufous-naped Lark to bug this trend.

While video recording nesting activity at a Rufous-naped Lark nest at De Loskop north of Polokwane, I found that the female regularly sang

from the nest during incubation on-bouts. The song included the typical territorial song (*tseep tseeeooo*), but also mimicking of other species, including bits of song notes of Desert Cisticola, European Bee-eater, and Chestnut-vented Warbler, to name a few. A short clip of the song and mimicking can be heard [here](#). These song bouts typically lasted between 1 and 2 minutes. Although one can hear the male singing in the background, he was never seen near the nest (at least during incubation). This appears to be the first record of singing by a female in the family Alaudidae.

References

Odom, K. J., M. L. Hall, K. Riebel, K. E. Omland, and N. E. Langmore (2014). Female song is widespread and ancestral in songbirds. *Nature Communications* 5:3379.

Webb W. H., D. H. Brunton, J. D. Aguirre, D. B. Thomas, M. Valcu, J. Dale (2016). Female song occurs in songbirds with more elaborate female coloration and reduced sexual dichromatism. *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 4:22.



**Interesting sightings
16 August 2023 - 15 October 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 Bee-eater (Returning migrant) - 22 September 2023. Several heard and seen in town (Julia Friskin).

Levaillant's Cuckoo (Returning migrant) - 10 September 2023. Seen in the Soetdorings region outside Polokwane (Leonie Kellerman).

Lilac-breasted Roller - 23 September 2023. One seen in



Lilac-breasted Roller © Derek Engelbrecht

Die Meer Street, Eduan Park, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).

Saddle-billed Stork - 20 September 2023. A pair seen on farm Rietfontein outside Polokwane (Anton Botha).

Wahlberg's Eagle (Returning migrant) - 20 August 2023. One seen in a garden in Welgelegen, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht); 27 August 2023; The breeding pair in the Polokwane Game Reserve was seen at their nest (Leonie Kellerman).

White-breasted Waterhen - 30 September 2023. Still present at Groenfontein Farm near Politsi (Cordi).

Yellow-billed Kite - 2 September 2023. Two birds seen feeding on an unidentified mammal in a garden in Welgelegen, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).



Saddle-billed Stork © Anton Botha



Wahlberg's Eagle © Derek Engelbrecht



White-breasted Waterhen © Sheila



Yellow-billed Kite © Derek Engelbrecht

PASSERINES

African Paradise Flycatcher (Returning migrant) - 23 August 2023. Seen in Dorp, Polokwane (Mark Friskin).

Barn Swallow (Returning migrant) - 9 October 2023. Seven birds seen flying over Welgelegen, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).

Klaas's Cuckoo (Returning migrant) - 26 August 2023. One

calling in Dorp, Polokwane (Julia Friskin).

Red-breasted Swallow (Returning migrant) - 13 August 2023. Seen in the Waterpoort area (Jody De Bruyn).

Violet-backed Starling (Returning migrant) - 4 October 2023. Seen near Politsi (Dalena Mostert).

White-throated Swallow - 20 August 2023. Seen at the Peter Mokaba Stadium, Polokwane (Marcia Van Tonder).

Willow Warbler (Returning migrant) - 5 October 2023. Several birds seen and heard in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).



African Skimmer © Derek Engelbrecht



Bat Hawk © Jan-Louis Pretorius



Brown-necked Parrot © Lana Hoffman



Caspian Plover @ Carl Taljaard

BEST OF THE REST LIMPOPO PROVINCE

NON-PASSERINES

African Skimmer - 29 September 2023. A pair seen at Mahela (Edward Vorster).

Bat Hawk - 28 September 2023. One seen near Letsitele (Jan-Louis Pretorius).

Brown-necked Parrot - 30 September 2023. Seen feeding in a garden in Levhubu (Lana Hoffman).

Caspian Plover - 11 October 2023. Two birds seen at Tihongonyeni Waterhole near Mopani Rest Camp, Kruger National Park (Carl Taljaard).

Red-chested Cuckoo (Returning migrant) - Heard outside Gravelotte (Johan Van Vuuren).

Rufous-bellied Heron - 20 August 2023. One seen at Vogelfontein in Nylsvley Nature Reserve (Elandré Scherman).

Three-banded Courser - 18 August 2023. One seen on Doreen in the Balule Game Reserve (Ian Owtram).

PASSERINES

Grey Waxbill - 2 September 2023. A pair seen drinking in a garden at Khaya Ndlovu, Hoedspruit (André Van der Merwe).

White-breasted Cuckooshrike - 2 September 2023. One seen at Club Ranch, near Pontdrift in the western Limpopo River valley (Birdlife Polokwane club outing, see article in this issue).



Three-banded Courser © Ian Owtram



Grey Waxbill © André Van der Merwe



White-breasted Cuckooshrike © Minkie Prinsloo





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/>



23 September 2023

Percent of target reached: 21.5%
 Sponsored Hectares: 6460 ha
 Sponsors: 1647

UPCOMING EVENTS



Birdlife Polokwane Year-end Function
 Date: 21 November 2023
 Time: 18:00
 Venue: To be confirmed

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
 Date: 6 February 2024
 Time: 18:30
 Venue: To be confirmed

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
 Date: 5 March 2024
 Time: 18:30
 Venue: To be confirmed

Club outing

Where? Mockford Vulture Restaurant
Date: 4 November 2023
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.



Birding Big Day 2023 - 2 December 2023

Register at

<https://www.birdlife.org.za/birding-big-day-2023-entry-form/>

BBD

To participate in Birding Big Day is easy, just follow these steps!

- Select a Birding Big Team, you can have as many members as you like. However, only teams with 2-4 members will be considered for national and provincial records.
- Give your team a name – please limit the length of the name to 25 characters.
- Select the category your team will participate in, either the 50 km or 6 km radius area.
- Complete the registration form – link below.
- On BBD, record all the bird species seen or heard during a 24-hour period from midnight on Friday 1 December to midnight on Saturday 2 December 2023. You can bird all 24 hours or just a few hours, up to you!
- You can record your list on paper, but we prefer that you use the BirdLasser mobile app.
- Only free-flying birds may be recorded (i.e. no caged birds).
- The majority (for example 2 out of 3 or 3 out of 4) of the team members have to agree on a call or sighting.
- Teams are requested to limit the use of callback to attract birds to an absolute minimum (preferably avoiding using callback at all). This is especially true when birding in a nature reserve or national park or targeting threatened bird species.
- Most importantly have fun and enjoy the day out in the field!

Categories

50 km Radius Category

The maximum area that can be visited is an area within a radius of 50 km. Please note this a RADIUS of 50 km – so from boundary to boundary it is 100 km.

Teams registering for this category will automatically be entered into provincial challenges (this will not be the case for the 6 km radius category).

6 km Radius Category

The maximum area that can be visited is an area within a radius of 6 km.

Note this is a RADIUS of 6 km – from boundary to boundary the distance is 12 km.

Teams registering in this category will not be automatically entered into provincial challenges. Please email bbd@birdlife.org.za if you want your team to be entered into a provincial challenge. Indicate clearly which provincial challenge.

REGISTRATION FOR BIRDING BIG DAY

click [here](#) 

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.



Crimson-breasted Shrike © Daniel Engelbrecht