

THE LARK

Local Birding
Mahela

Travel
Madagascar Part 2

BBD 2024

**All the results
Team Reports**

Red-backed Shrike recapture • European Honey Buzzard • Another African Skimmer resighting • Amur Falcons feeding on armoured ground crickets • Courtship and copulation of African Finfoot • Black Coucal nuptial gift • Interspecific alloparental care by an African Pygmy Kingfisher • Kleptoparasitic behaviour of Red-winged Starlings • ... and more

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.

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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 FEBRUARY 2025

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

Cover page theme 2025: Limpopo Specials

COVER Racket-tailed Roller
© Daniel Engelbrecht.

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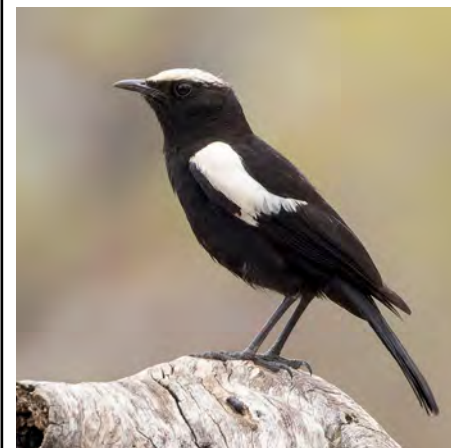
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All the results and the Editors's Reports of Birdlife Polokwane teams that participated in the 40th South African BBD.



For a lark ...



"Look Mom, only one leg!"
Southern Black Tit © Derek Engelbrecht

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Editors' chirps

What a year 2024 has been for birds and birding in the Limpopo Province. We've had some new additions to the province's bird list - Spur-winged Lapwing, Olive Bee-eater, and Common Tern - and quite many regional rarities for the province. We've reported some of our more common residents in some way-out places in the province, and that's the beauty of birding - you must expect the unexpected. Here's to 2025 and more lifers and wonderful sightings. Make sure to join our club outings, and let us know if you have any bogey birds we can help you find.

To everyone who contributed to The Lark in 2024, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts. We really appreciate that you chose The Lark to share your interesting sightings or trip reports. Judging by the comments we receive from our readers, people really enjoy our magazine, and your contributions are why people love it. Keep it up. Make it one of your New Year's resolutions to write a trip report or an interesting natural history note in 2025.

As promised in the editorial of the previous issue, we filled the Bird Briefs section of this issue with lots of interesting snippets. From resightings or retraps of ringed birds, to diet, kleptoparasitism, an African Pygmy Kingfisher feeding African Paradise Flycatcher nestlings, a monster 1.25 kg nest of a Red-winged Starling, and the courtship behaviour of the elusive African Finfoot. You'll read all about these and other interesting natural history notes in this issue.

If you haven't done so yet, please check out the latest official bird list for the Limpopo Province, and join the Limpopo Rarities Group on Telegram.

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

Raelene and Derek





Mystical MADAGASCAR

Part 2

TEXT AND PHOTOS Daniel Engelbrecht



Birding Africa



Appert's Tetraka

I had the privilege of visiting Madagascar in November last year (2023) on behalf of [Birding Africa](#) – an incredible opportunity with a company with years of tour-leading experience in Madagascar. [Part 1](#) of a three-part series covers my time spent in the Eastern Rainforests in the Andasibe area. In Part 2, I take you to the spiny forests of the southwest and the search for one of Madagascar’s most range-restricted birds.

Day 6, 24th November 2023: Andasibe – Antananarivo

Today was mostly a travel day, and we left the wonderful Vakona Forest Lodge just after dawn. The drive to Antananarivo was largely uneventful, and a few brief roadside stops produced Olive Bee-eater, Madagascar Stonechat, Mascarene Martins, and our first Three-banded Plover for the trip. After arriving in Tana, I said goodbye to Reja and Gimme, who continued south to Antsirabe and Ranomafana. I would complete the trip in reverse and catch the flight to Toliara in the southwest the following day.

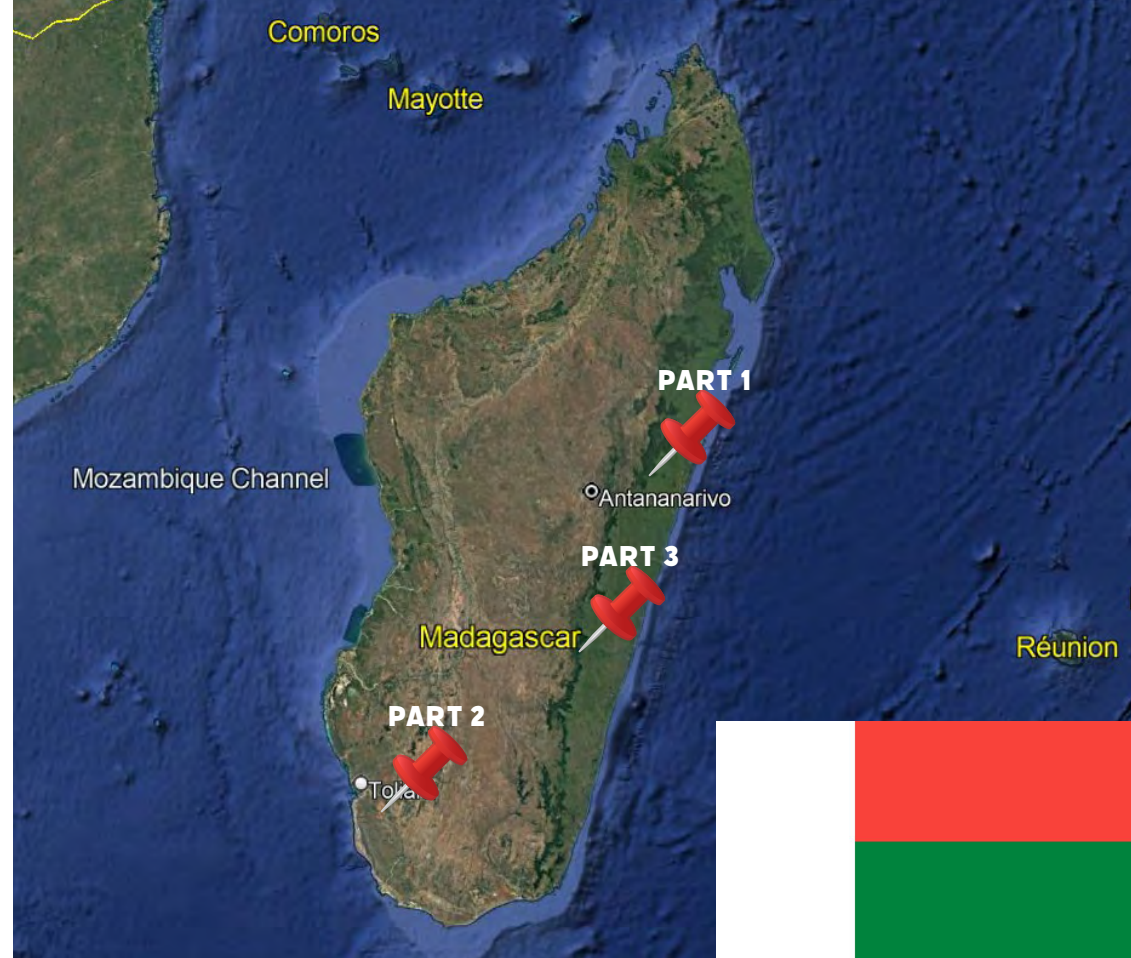
Day 7, 25th November 2023: Antananarivo – Toliara

I was up again before dawn to catch the 6 am flight to Toliara. The flight took just under two

hours, and it was exciting to see the landscape change from terraced rice paddies to the dry, spiny forests of the southwest. The plane touched down in Toliara, and I stepped out into what felt like another world, culturally and climatically. I met up with my local guide and driver, and we drove north to the small town of Ifaty. The habitat was a stark contrast to the lush rainforests of the east. To my left were mangroves and the turquoise waters of the Mozambique Channel, while on my right, an arid, almost desert-like landscape with low shrubs stretched for kilometres.

OPPOSITE ABOVE Google Earth map of Madagascar showing the regions covered in this three-part series of my birding trip to Madagascar.

OPPOSITE BELOW The coastal plains between Toliara and Ifaty.





As we approached Ifaty, these shrubs were gradually replaced by taller woodlands and started to resemble the spiny forests I had seen in documentaries I had seen in documentaries as a child. Before reaching my accommodation at Hôtel Solidaire Mangily, a quick roadside stop delivered two lifers, Madagascar Cisticola and Sakalava Weaver (the western counterpart of the Nelicourvi Weaver from Part 1).

LEFT Sakalava Weaver.

BELOW The Ifaty Spiny Forests.



ABOVE Crested Drongo.



Namaqua Doves were common in the lodge grounds, as were Malagasy Palm Swifts, Olive Bee-eaters, and Crested Drongos.

After unpacking, I met with Relatsy - a legend of the southwestern birding scene and a delightful person. We made our way to the Ifaty Spiny Forests at 2 pm. It was so unbelievably hot, but the birding was spectacular. Within 5 minutes, we had connected with one of the most iconic species in Madagascar –



the Long-tailed Ground Roller. This was also my final ground roller species, which was extra special. *Thamnornis* followed, an odd-looking warbler-like tetraka, another southwest special. After struggling for good views of the three rainforest coua species, Running, Olive-capped, and

Crested Coua proved to be a breeze, and we had beautiful views of these three species. A small group of Sickle-billed Vangas made an appearance later and other birds seen included numerous Madagascar Buttonquails, Lesser Vasa Parrots, Madagascar Hoopoes,

and Malagasy Turtle Doves. I had foolishly forgotten to take along my water for the afternoon mission and had come down with dehydration – well done, Dan. We had a few species left to target and agreed to meet pre-dawn again the following day when the temperatures were lower.

TOP A Running Coua doing what it does best - running!

ABOVE Olive-capped Coua.

LEFT This Long-tailed Ground Roller completed my haul of the quintuplet of ground rollers in the family Brachypteraciidae.



Sickle-billed Vanga



Madagascar Hoopoe

Day 8, 26th November 2023: Ifaty and Toliara

I was already birding before sunrise and had terrific views of Madagascar Nightjars from the lodge grounds. I met up with Relatsy, and as planned, we made our way to the Ifaty Spiny Forests. The temperatures were far more comfortable, and the birds were active. We had more views of many of the species seen the day before and quickly picked up our remaining targets, including Archbold's Newtonia and Subdesert Mesite – what a bird! We also managed an unexpected Lafresnaye's

Vanga, a bulky bird with a sturdy bill. Our morning raid had been successful, and after 9 am, the temperatures had risen to a point where spiny forest birding was no longer feasible. So, we drove to the Ifaty Salt Pans and had point-blank views of Madagascar Plover along with Kittlitz's Plover and Ruddy Turnstone – both trip birds.

BELOW The Subdesert Mesite, this one a female, is restricted to spiny subdesert thicket in a small region of southwestern Madagascar.



Madagascar Buttonquail





We then returned to Toliara and headed up to the La Table Plateau after lunch. The vegetation on this limestone plateau has a distinctly different feel to it, more stunted and tangly than that of the Ifaty Spiny Forests. As such, it has a different suite of species – with two major targets. After a few minutes of walking

LEFT The Madagascar Plover resembles Kittlitz's Plover, but the black breast band distinguishes it from Kittlitz's Plover.



ABOVE The Madagascar Lark is in the genus *Eremopterix*, the sparrow-larks.



BELOW Habitat at La Table.

through the thickets here, we picked up Subdesert Brush Warbler and the first of our big targets – Red-shouldered Vanga. This vanga was only described in the 1990's and occurs exclusively in this specialised vegetation type. The other target here, Verreaux's Coua, followed suit and showed shortly after our encounter with the vanga. Madagascar Larks were common here, and we had additional views of Chabert and Lafresnaye's Vanga. We returned to Toliara at sunset with a long travel day and thrilling birding in store for me.

Day 9, 27th November 2023.
Toliara - Isalo National Park

Tantely (my translator and guide) and I departed Toliara before sunrise, hoping to arrive at Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park before the heat of the day. I had spent the previous night investigating our chances of seeing Madagascar Sandgrouse en route to Zombitse, and I found a stretch of road where the birds had recently been seen. To my surprise, a pair of Madagascar Sandgrouse came flying over as soon as we pulled off onto the side. Too easy.

The drive to Zombitse took around four hours, and we arrived

just after 8 am. This sizeable, protected tract of dry forest is accessed from the main road linking the towns of Toliara and Fianarantsoa. It is an essential stop for visiting birders. We hadn't even started the trail when a Giant Coua came strolling past - I was mind blown. This bird was one of

OPPOSITE Red-shouldered Vanga, a species first discovered in 1948, but only formally recognized and described as a distinct species in 1997

BELOW The Giant Coua was an easy tick.





Hook-billed Vanga



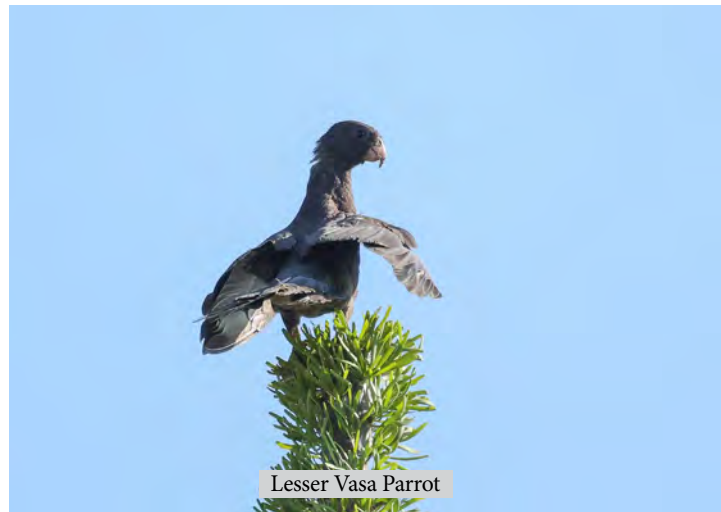
Grey-headed Lovebird



Archbold's Newtonia



Lafresnaye's Vanga



Lesser Vasa Parrot



Madagascar Blue Vanga



Madagascar Cuckoo



Torotoroka Scops Owl



Rufous Vanga



ABOVE The habitat at Zombitse-Vohibasa.



LEFT Coquerel's Coua, one of my targets, he Giant Coua was an easy tick.

Scops Owl almost immediately followed by a pair of Appert's Tetrakas (see cover photo of this article)! This bird is extremely localised and found in only a few forest patches in the southwest – a true global mega! I spent ages following these birds as they went about their business and in the process, picked up Rufous, Madagascar Blue, and Hook-billed Vangas, a Madagascar Cuckooshrike and several Common Jerys. As we returned to the car, our final target, Coquerel's Coua, ran across the path. Zombitse had been an overwhelming success, and we continued to our accommodation at the stunning Hôtel le Relais de la Reine de l'Isalo.

our main targets here, and it put up no fight at all. Cuckoo-rollers and Broad-billed Rollers flew overhead, and Long-billed Bernierias darted through the undergrowth. The park guide pointed out a roosting Torotoroka

The lodge grounds were very birdy, and I enjoyed watching Grey-headed Lovebirds, Malagasy Palm Swifts, Greater Vasa Parrots, and Madagascar Hoopoes, among others. At night, I tracked down a pair of calling White-browed Owls and was treated to close-up views after a while. The next day, I would continue east to the rainforests of Ranomafana National Park, but for this, you would have to wait for Part 3 in the next issue of *The Lark*.

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African Barred Owlet © Jody de Bruyn

Mahela

magic - agair

Willem van der Merwe

On Saturday, the 9th of November, our group set off at 4:00 in the morning, for our outing to Mahela farm near Letsitele. The farm produces mainly oranges, but a large part of it is left wild and maintained in excellent veld condition by the owners. The natural habitat is well-developed, tall mopane woodland, and other common trees are knob thorn (knoppiesdoring), red bushwillow (rooibos), and marula (Maroela). This is one of the best places in the Limpopo Province, and the closest to Polokwane, to have a reliable chance to see Arnot's Chat (Bontpiek)!

Arnot's Chat is a habitat-specific species that occurs in

woodland, either mopane or miombo. Almost its entire range is south of the equator. It prefers tall woodland with many cavities and a very open understory. This is exactly the habitat over much of Mahela, and the chats have a few favourite spots, but sadly last year, we dipped on them despite spending some time at their favourite haunts.

Not so this time! We found the chats in the first spot we looked for them – it was a male, with a juvenile, to which it seemed to be giving some attention. The juvenile had what looked like the beginnings of the female plumage. In addition to offering excellent views and photo opportunities, the chats also regaled us with their cheerful songs, which



included mimicked calls of the Thick-billed Cuckoo (Dikbekkoekoek)! We subsequently found more of the chats in a couple of other places. It was very comforting to see them at home and doing well.

Mahela has some other specials, which we also kept our eyes peeled for – including the handsome White-breasted Cuckooshrike (Witborskatakoeroe), which we missed on this occasion. But we did see a few, such as Retz's Helmetshrike (Swarthelmlaksman), which is the actual host of the Thick-billed Cuckoo. Another Lowveld woodland special was Stierling's

Wren-Warbler (Stierlingse Sanger), which showed beautifully. Bennett's Woodpecker (Bennettspeg), with its jeering calls, also favours mature woodland, and offered great views along with the more usual Golden-tailed Woodpecker (Goudstertspg). Not particularly rare, but mainly a Lowveld species, is the Greater Blue-eared Starling (Groot Blouoorglansspreeu), whose nasal call announced their presence all

BELOW Retz's Helmetshrike
© Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE A small group of Arnot's Chats put on a really good show for us, with this adult male leading the charge
© Jody de Bruyn.

LEFT The paparazzi firing away at the Arnot's Chats
© Derek Engelbrecht.



over the farm. We also enjoyed good views of another Lowveld special, the White-browed Robin-Chat (Heuglinse Janfrederik), previously known as Heuglin's Robin, with its rich, cheerful call. More common woodland and savannah species, though always pleasing to find, include Brubru (Bontroklaksman), Bushveld Pipit (Bosveldkoester), Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill (Geelbekneushoringvoël), African Grey Hornbill (Grysneushoringvoël), many Southern Red-billed Hornbills (Rooibekneushoringvoël), hundreds of Yellow-breasted Apalises (Geelborskleinjantjie), Yellow-

bellied Greenbul (Geelborswillie), Levillant's Cuckoo (Gestreepte Nuwejaarsvoël), Southern Black Tit (Swartmees), Green-backed Camaroptera (Groenrugkwêkwêvoël), Emerald-spotted Wood Dove (Groenvlekduifie), Red-headed Weaver (Rooikopwewer), and Violet-backed Starling (Witborsspreu).

Other fine sightings included a Verreaux's (or Giant) Eagle-Owl (Reuse Ooruil), perched high in a tree and being bothered by some crows, and an African Barred Owlet (Gebande Uil) who perched in some dense bushes but allowed us all to approach closely enough for decent views and photos.

The farm has a good diversity of large mammals, including giraffes, kudu, nyala, impala, zebra, and warthog. The owners throw orange peels and oranges unfit for sale on big heaps, and the animals come to nibble on them and receive a



LEFT Verreaux's Eagle-Owl © Jody de Bruyn.

vitamin C boost. The large animals, especially the giraffes, sustain a good population of Red-billed Oxpeckers. Small animals also abound, including monkeys and bush squirrels.

Also on the farm is a large camp containing a good pack of African Wild Dogs (Wildehonde). Vultures, primarily White-backed (Witruugaasvoël) and Hooded (Monnikaasvoël), come to feed on the scraps left over after the dogs have fed. So do many Marabou Storks (Maraboes), but they can also be seen soaring overhead or standing solemnly beside the water.

Raptors we encountered include Lizard Buzzard (Akkedisvalk), Yellow-billed Kite (Geelbekwou), Black Sparrowhawk (Swartsperwer), Brown Snake-Eagle (Bruin Slangarend), Booted Eagle (Dwergarend), Wahlberg's Eagle (Bruinarend), and Tawny Eagle (Roofarend).

The farm has several dams and fine riverine vegetation. On one of the dams, a big angling contest was taking place, and there weren't



It was a good day for raptors, with Black Sparrowhawk (TOP), Booted Eagle (MIDDLE), and Tawny Eagle (BOTTOM) all showing well. All © Jody de Bruyn.

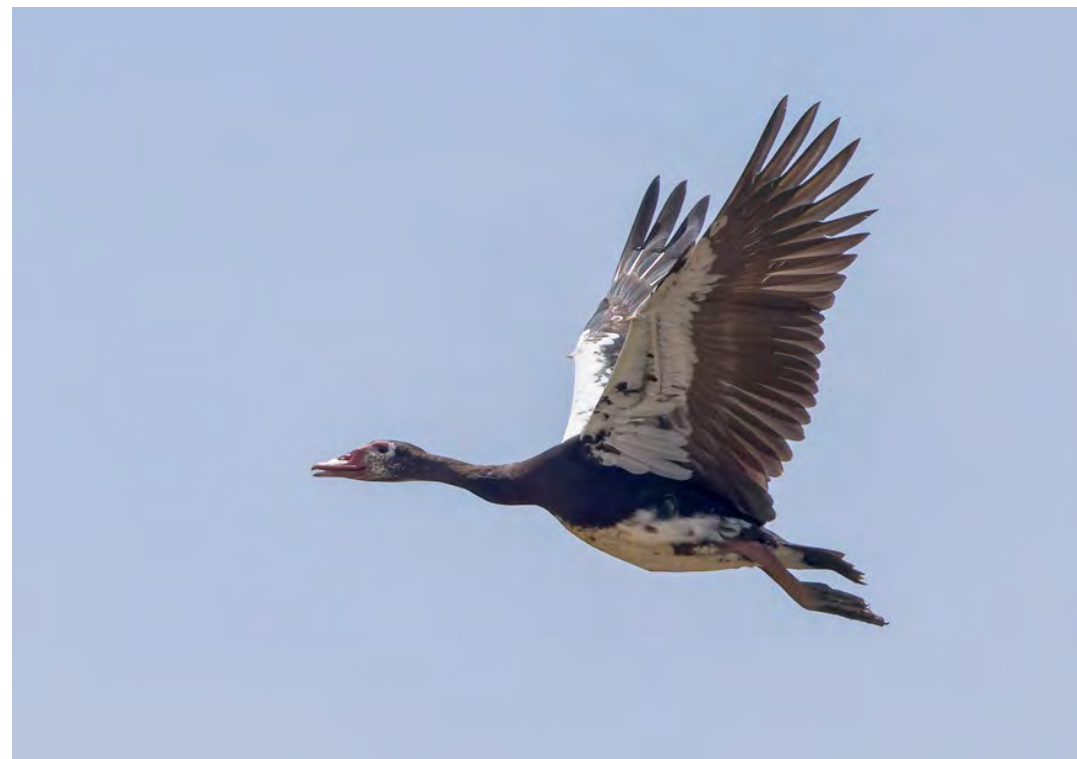


many birds at that one, but other dams provided views of a variety of waterbirds, including the stalwarts like Egyptian Geese (Kolgans), White-faced Whistling Ducks (Nonnetjieseend), Green-backed Heron (Groenrugreier), African Jacana (Grootlangtoon), Wood Sandpiper (Bosruiter), and Black-winged Stilt (Rooipootelsie), but also a few more unusual ones like Spur-winged Goose (Wildemakou), Knob-billed Duck (Knobbeleend), African Openbill (Oopbekooievaar), Woolly-necked Stork (Wolnekooievaar), Yellow-billed Stork (Nimmersat), Glossy Ibis (Glansibis), African Spoonbill (Lepelaar), Goliath Heron

ABOVE Difficult to photograph, especially at eye-level, but this African Green Pigeon was surprisingly obliging
© Jody de Bruyn.

The many dams on the farm delivered a rich haul of waterbirds, like Goliath Heron (OPPOSITE TOP) and Spur-winged Goose (OPPOSITE BELOW). Both © Jody de Bruyn.

(Reusereier), Darter (Slanghalsvoël), and Water Dikkop (Water Thick-knee). The tall fig trees beside the rivers and dams attracted beautiful fruit-eaters like Purple-crested Turacos (Bloukuifloeries) and African Green Pigeons (Papegaaiduiwe).





ABOVE Bushveld Pipits were heard more often than seen © Derek Engelbrecht.

themselves in the trees. In a riverine thicket, we had yet another special treat, a tiny African Pygmy Kingfisher (Dwergvisvanger) that rewarded us with great views. When we left Mahela, a few of us went with Jan-Louis Pretorius to his farm, where he said we were virtually guaranteed to see a Half-collared Kingfisher (Blouvisvanger) – which would have been a lifer for more than one of us. And we saw it indeed! Just beyond their house is a magnificent stretch of river with massive trees such as sycamore figs and matumi (mingerhout), and there, after some seeking, we saw the bright blue flash as it flew past, and then it

perched in some bushes beside the water for a while, allowing for great views and photos. We also found a Giant Kingfisher (Reusevisvanger) along the same stretch! Seven kingfisher species in total!

All in all, we encountered over 130 species over the morning. A heartfelt thanks to everyone who was present and contributed to the outing and Sias van Rooyen for allowing us access to this gem in the Lowveld!

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Standing on one of the dam walls, we had Malachite Kingfisher (ABOVE LEFT) on reeds in the water and an African Pygmy Kingfisher (ABOVE RIGHT) in the riverine thickets below the dam wall vying for our attention © Jody de Bruyn.



A male Striped Kingfisher "flashing" to his mate © Derek Engelbrecht.



2024

All the Birdlife Polokwane teams, all the results



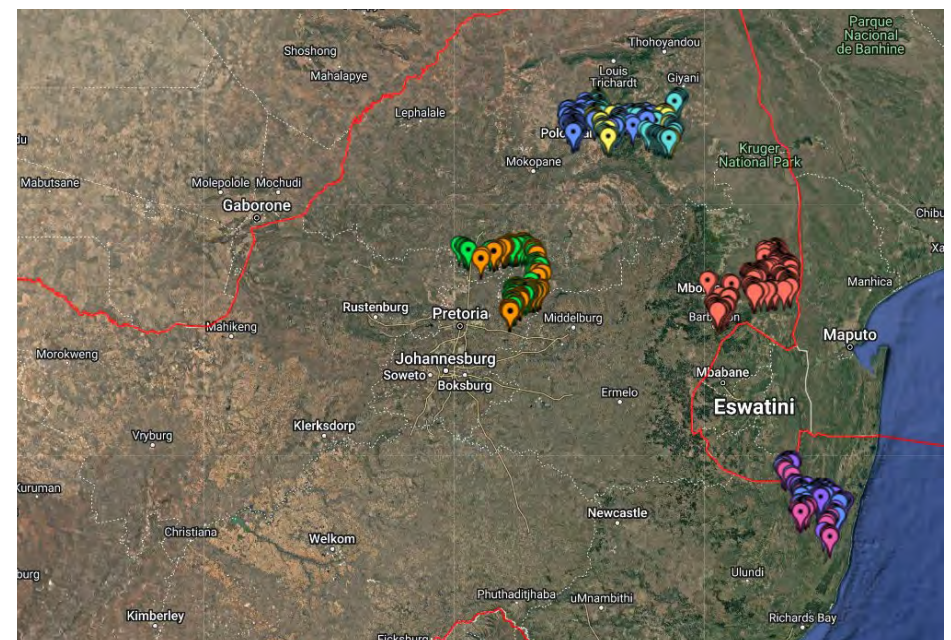
Birding Big Day 2024 saw just under 450 teams participating on the 7th of December 2024 in the 40th edition of this competition. Despite a heatwave that has overstayed its welcome, and drought conditions in the north of the country, all teams in the Top 10 were operating in the northeast of the country, mainly Limpopo, Mpumalanga and northern KwaZulu-Natal, but with some teams straddling two or more provinces, including Gauteng. Mpumalanga-based team Hamerkop retained their crown as overall winners for 2024, scoring 329 species. Well done once again to Ehren and Johan Eksteen,

Lourens Grobler and Duncan McKenzie. Our club's team, Team Wat-kyk-Jy was second with an excellent total of 228, one short of their previous best. The Ndebele Nightjars, whose route straddles three provinces, were third with 322 species.

Five teams broke through the 300 species mark this year, which is one better than last year's four teams.

Three Limpopo-based teams were in the Top 10 this year, all using the popular Polokwane Plateau-to-the-Lowveld route.

BELOW The distribution of the Top 10 teams on BBD 2024.



The popular 6K competition saw the Red-billed Rocket Tails signing off with an incredible total of 208 species, using Polokwane as their base. They were chased all the way by two Mpumalanga-based teams who finished second and third with 205 and 180

species, respectively. Another of our club's teams, Vriende van Blouberg finished fourth in this category.

Below is a summary of the Top 10 of the two categories and the report cards for Birdlife Polokwane's BBD 2024 teams.

The Top 10 teams in BBD 2024's 50 km and 6 km categories.

Category	Place	Name	Province	Total
50 km	1	Hamerkop	MP	329
	2	Wat-Kyk-Jy	LP	328
	3	Ndebele Nightjars	MP/LP/GP	322
	4	A Bowl of Corncrakes	LP	317
	5	Soaring iSuzus	MP/LP/GP	312
	6	Off the Rails	KZN	296
	7	Who gives a flock	KZN	276
	8	Simply Birding	LP	268
	9	Visvangers	MP	266
	10	Eastern Accipiters	KZN	265
6 km	1	Redbilled Rocket Tails	LP	208
	2	Die Bosveld Laksmanne	MP	205
	3	Middelburg Storkers	MP	180
	4	Vriende van Blouberg	LP	175
	5	#LetsiteStyle 2.0	LP	170
	5	Shamwari Rangers	EC	170
	5	The Four Pels - Do Pafuri	LP	170
	6	Manyoni Umganu	KZN	162
	7	Kowie Kestrels	EC	159
	10	Balmeri aberrans	EC	158



TEAM NAME: Wat-Kyk-Jy

MEMBERS: Jody de Bruyn, and Rowan, Richter and Marcia van Tonder

AREA: Polokwane to east of Tzaneen Lowveld

CATEGORY: Open

POSITION: 2nd

HIGHLIGHTS: Grey Plover, White-winged Tern, Peregrine Falcon, Lesser Moorhen, Yellow-billed Stork. Almost equaling our previous best score of 329.

DIPS: Green-winged Pytilia, Narina Trogon, Southern Black Tit, Black Saw-wing, and Klaas's Cuckoo

COMMENTS
An impressive comeback from your 2023 total. Well done on your second place and your second highest score ever! You will be inducted into the Melba Dippers Hall of Fame for failing to record it in two consecutive years!

The Lark editors



BBD

TOTAL
225

REPORT CARD 2024

TEAM NAME: The Dikkops

MEMBERS: Charles Hardy, Bruce Goetsch, Zamps Zamparini, Rob Crosbie

AREA: Polokwane to east of Tzaneen

CATEGORY: Open

POSITION: 22nd

HIGHLIGHTS: Long-crested Eagles on four different occasions, Harlequin Quail, and of course, both Dikkop species (we still don't approve of Thick-knee!).

DIPS: Black-collared Barbet - despite them nesting in my garden, many ducks and forest birds.

COMMENTS

Dipping on a bird nesting in one's garden is a worthy mention, but a valuable lesson that there are no guarantees on the day. To dip on Black-collared Barbet two years in a row is unheard of. Better luck next year!

The Lark editors



BBD

TOTAL
208

REPORT CARD 2024

TEAM NAME: Redbilled Rocket Tails

MEMBERS: Mark, Julia, and James Friskin

AREA: Polokwane

CATEGORY: 6K

POSITION: 1ST

HIGHLIGHTS: Many! Black-crowned Night Heron, Southern White-faced Owl, Lanner Falcon, African Cuckoo, Yellow-billed and African Black Duck, Spur-winged Goose, and European Roller.

DIPS: Western Barn Owl, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, African Wattled Lapwing, African Goshawk, Grey-headed Bushshrike.

COMMENTS

Wow! You did us proud. An amazing total, and as far as we know, the first time a club team wins this category. Keep it up! 240 next year?

The Lark editors



BBD

TOTAL
175

REPORT CARD 2024

TEAM NAME: Vriende van Blouberg

MEMBERS: Leonie Kellerman, Les Reynolds, Saartjie en Danie Jansen van Rensburg, Jan Fourie, Allen Harrison, Lynette Els, Susan Dippenaar, Johan Janse van Vuuren.

AREA: Blouberg

CATEGORY: 6K

POSITION: 4th

HIGHLIGHTS: No Common Mynas! White-winged Tern, Saddle-billed Stork, Swallow-tailed and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, and Kori Bustard.

DIPS: Scaly-feathered Weaver!

COMMENTS

Well done on an impressive total in a tough area, and also on improving on your 2023 score! The many specials you saw make up for dipping on the Scalies. Keep it up! 200 next year?

The Lark editors

It's simple.

The longer we wait,
the more we lose.



Since the turn of the 20th century, we've lost nearly two million African Penguin breeding pairs. That's 99% of the entire population. Aside from oil spills, imbalanced ecosystems threaten their existence. As natural habitats and resources continue to disappear, so will our birds. Help us act now.



www.birdlife.org.za

ROBERTS 8

IS ONLINE
AND FREE
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



The Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Birds of the World



ROBERTS 8 WISH LIST

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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.

Amur Falcon

- Photos showing diet
- Large numbers at a roost

Western Barn Owl

- Typical habitat
- Diet
- Nests, eggs and nestlings.

Abdim's Stork

- Nests and nestlings
- Behaviour
- Typical habitat

African Spoonbill

- Foraging
- Different age classes
- Nests, eggs, and nestlings

Coursers (Temminck's, Burchell's, Double-banded, Bronze-winged, and Three-banded)

- Different age classes
- Photos showing diet
- Nests, eggs, and chicks.

Recently published species accounts

[African Rock Pipit](#)
[African Finfoot](#)
[Gurney's Sugarbird](#)

[East Coast Akalat](#)
[Monteiro's Hornbill](#)
[Levaillant's Cisticola](#)

WANTED

Photos of birds eating the fruit of the white-berry bush (witbessiebos) (*Flueggea virosa*)



The white-berry bush is a widespread and common shrub in the northern provinces of South Africa. Following our note in [The Lark 46](#) of 2023, we want to know what other species eat these fruits. Our list includes nine species, but we suspect this is a gross underestimation. Please consider taking photos of birds feeding on these fruits and email your records to Derek Engelbrecht at roberts8revision@gmail.com.

Photos of birds eating mopane worms (any of the instars) or the adult (mopane emperor) (*Gonimbrasia belina*)



At least 34 bird species have been recorded feeding on the instars of the mopane emperor, but photos are few and far between. If you see a bird feeding on the worms or the adult, please take pictures and send it to Derek Engelbrecht at roberts8revision@gmail.com.

Regulars

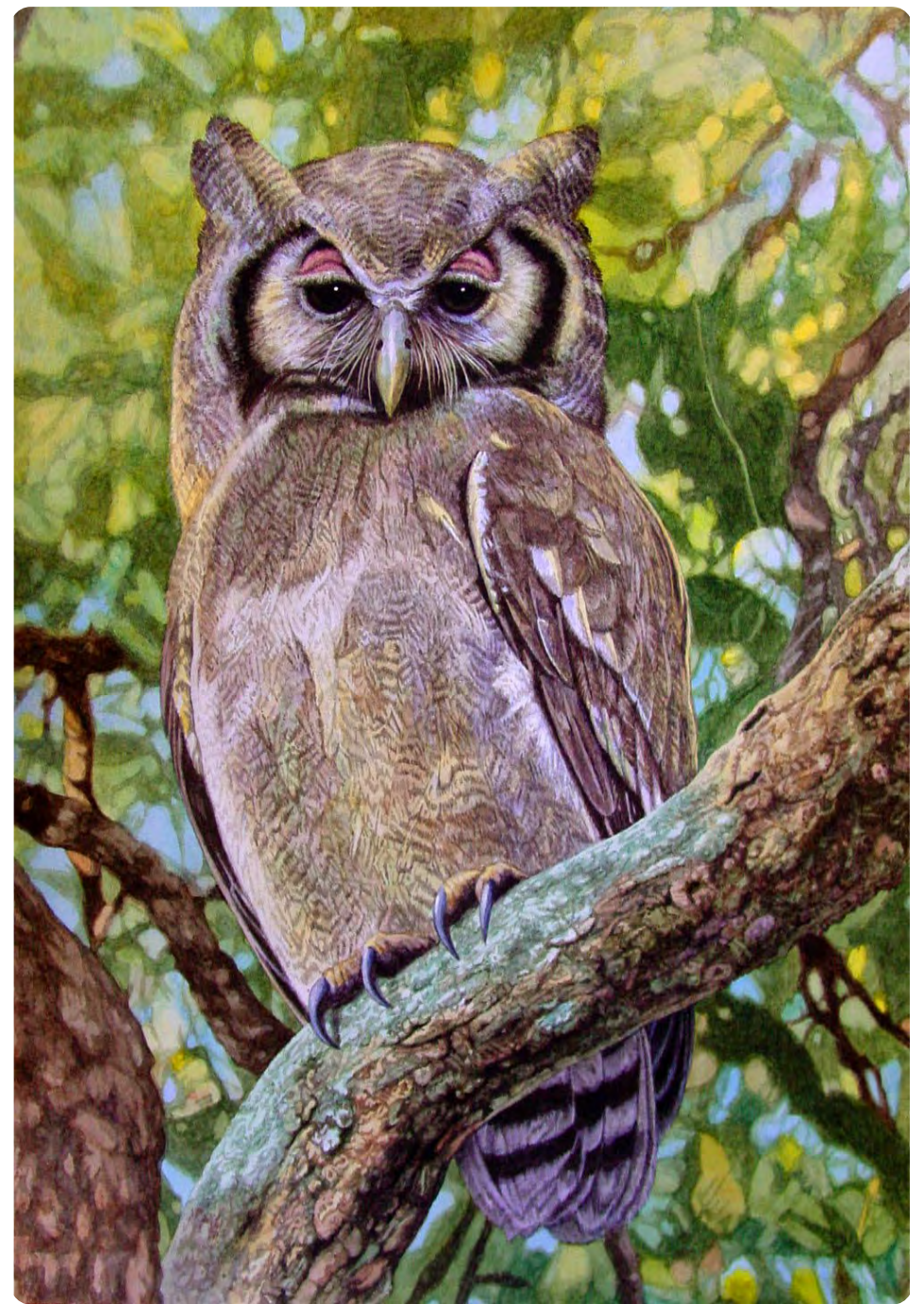
Birds in Art

Verreaux's Eagle-Owl

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



Verreaux's Eagle-Owl

Here is something relevant to my recent birdwatching – I saw one during a recent Birdlife Polokwane club outing (Saturday, 9th November) to Mahela farm (see page 23 in this issue). Verreaux's Eagle-Owl (*Ketupa lactea*) is also known as the Giant Eagle-Owl or the Milky Eagle-Owl in earlier regional field guides. The latter name refers to its light grey colouration and is also reflected in its specific epithet *lactea*, meaning 'milky'.

It is another species that went through some scientific reclassification. It was in the genus *Bubo* together with the eagle and horned owls from Africa, Eurasia, and America. It was moved into the genus *Ketupa*, which used only to contain the Asian fish owls, but it was found that it and a few forest owls from Africa and Asia were indeed close relatives of these. So now it is *Ketupa lactea*. It is the largest of the owls occurring in sub-Saharan Africa, reaching 3.1 kg in mass and an overall length of 66 cm; a female was recorded with a wingspan of 164 cm. Verreaux's Eagle-Owl is sexually dimorphic, the female being larger than the male. It is one of the largest owls in the world, with only a few, such

as the Eurasian Eagle-Owl being larger. The species' common name is in honour of the 19th-century French botanist and ornithologist, Jules Verreaux.

The first time I saw this species in the wild was in the Kruger National Park in 1985, where we found a couple resting in the branches of tall trees growing along a river. They were remarkably well camouflaged amidst the grey of the bark, but I was sharp-eyed enough to spot them. They appeared very relaxed, but impressive all the same. I've seen this species in captivity a lot as well. They often land themselves at raptor rehabilitation centres, and there I got many close-up views of them.

This owl's call is deeper than any other owl's – a deep, grunting sound sometimes considered to be the growl of a leopard! The female's voice is higher than that of the male, even though she's bigger.

Pink eyelids

This eagle-owl is one of the easiest to recognise if seen well. Its size, blunt ear tufts, light grey, finely barred plumage, dark eyes, and prominent black borders to its white face are distinctive. But seen up close, perhaps its most remarkable feature is its eyelids! The upper eyelids are



ABOVE It's not known if the beautiful pink eyelids serve any purpose
© Derek Engelbrecht.

featherless, and the skin is pink. This owl also has a habit of letting its eyelids droop halfway over its eyes so that it has an expression of drowsiness, boredom, or mild contempt. The actual purpose of the pink eyelids is unknown. It might help with species recognition or signalling between birds, but this has not yet been proven. Some owls have been seen with brick-red eyelids, leading raptor expert, the late Peter Steyn, to suggest that they might be suffering from sunburn!

Skinner of hedgehogs

Verreaux's Eagle-Owls are powerful predators. They even catch other large owls and eagles, and one has been seen carrying off a Meller's Mongoose of over 2 kg. At the other end of the spectrum, they often eat insects, particularly termite alates, which constitute one of the great



ABOVE A South African hedgehog graveyard in Basie Prinsloo's garden near Mogwadi. After feeding their chick, a breeding pair of Verreaux's Eagle-Owls dropped the hedgehog skins - no fewer than eight we counted - in one of the beds in Basie's garden © Derek Engelbrecht.

for the claws and beak of the Verreaux's Eagle-Owl. The owls catch the hedgehogs with their powerful feet, the dense scales of which protect them, and with bill and feet together, they peel off the spiny skin of the hedgehog and eat the rest of it. The leftover spiny skin is discarded, usually at a specific dump site a distance away from the owl's perch or nest. It can be distressing to come upon such a site of dumped hedgehog skins, thinking of all the poor critters that fell prey to the owls.

Feigning injury

An interesting behaviour of breeding Verreaux's Eagle-Owls is their feigning displays. These occur in some other birds as well, plovers being well known for it. Eagle-Owls nest in a variety of sites, often taking over the nests of other large birds like hamerkops or eagles, or even the colonial nests of Red-billed Buffalo Weavers. They will lay their eggs exposed on the very top of such a nest. When the eggs hatch, the owlets (usually two, but the younger of the two invariably dies soon after hatching) try to conceal themselves by lying flat on the nest if they suspect the presence of a potential predator. But most of

the time, the parents – probably the mother – will try and distract the predator instead. She will do things like flying a distance off and falling to the ground, where she will limply flop about as if she were injured. She may even dangle upside down from a branch and then crash into the undergrowth. These bizarre displays will distract most predators, who will focus on the female instead, while the chicks will lie frozen in the nest. This behaviour is so ingrained that even if you took the owlet from the nest and put it on the ground right in front of you, it would still try to lie flat and motionless as if that would somehow make it invisible! Therefore, the owlet is completely docile and feels no fear or aggression. Young owls have been seen going beyond this merely passive display, in trying to feign death by lying flat on their bellies with their necks stretched out, heads sagging to the side, and their eyes closed.

An uncommon owl

Today, the Verreaux's Eagle-Owl is not particularly common. It feeds rather voraciously, and each owl needs a large hunting territory. But despite occurring at low densities, the owl has a very wide distribution, encompassing sub-Saharan Africa apart from the dense rainforests or

the open grasslands and deserts. It needs large trees for roosting and nesting. These owls hunt at night and around dawn and dusk, using their excellent eyesight to spot prey. In utter darkness it will, like other owls, mostly rely on its sense of hearing, being able to detect the direction of the slightest rustle caused by a moving critter. Its call is a deep grunting hoot, which resounds through the savannah at night, proclaiming its territory. Mated pairs call to each other in a duet of hoots. They also make bubbling and whistling sounds, and both females and chicks use screeching whistles to beg for food. When food is abundant, breeding can take place each year, but in regions of scarce resources like semi-deserts, breeding may happen only every 2 to 3 years. Chicks fledge at the age of two months but attain sexual maturity only at the age of 3 to 4 years. They may stay with their parents for a year or two before going off on their own. In captivity, these owls have lived for 15 years. An adult Verreaux's Eagle-Owl is considered an apex predator – at the top of the food chain, fearing no other predator. They are mainly at risk from ingesting poisonous bait left out by farmers, and from habitat destruction.

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Reflections

Reflections

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

Painting a Platform for Kruger birding's Holy Grail

Chris Patton

This edition of *Reflections* is going to be a little bit different... Rather than being a dedicated article on birding, it will lay the platform for the six articles planned for 2025.

For five years now, BirdLife Polokwane has been giving me the opportunity to share some of my birding memories from the three SANParks parks in Limpopo Province. This reminiscing evolved during Lockdown when I was asked to reflect on some of my experiences of working and visiting these areas while working

for SANParks for a quarter of a century.

In the five years, I've written articles about birds in Marakele at the top of the Waterberg, and in the surrounding bushveld in the west of the Province; on the floodplains, baobab woodland, and riverine forests of Mapungubwe at the northwestern apex tripoint where Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa meet; and have covered multiple locations in Northern Kruger, including Letaba, Mopani, Shingwedzi, Punda Maria, Klopperfontein, Nshawu, Thulamila Fountain,



ABOVE Map of the far north of Kruger featuring the Pafuri Area.

Dzundzwini, Babalala, Shipandani and the Mahonie Loop. But as yet, I haven't got to arguably the Mecca of Kruger birding... the Pafuri area.

The Pafuri area is the far northern section of Kruger, remote, diverse, and scenically

splendid. It refers to the area between the Limpopo and Levhuvhu Rivers, including the

floodplain of the latter extending to the hills that form the southern boundary of the Limpopo basin. The Pafuri borders Zimbabwe to the north and Mozambique to the east.

Just the very name gets the juices of birders going and brings them out in gooseflesh, triggered

by the onset of an adrenaline rush... try it readers if you know of Pafuri's birding credentials... say "Pafuri" to yourself softly two or three times... admit it... you are starting to salivate and get an intense feeling of excitement and longing... Of course, if you've never heard about Pafuri before,

you probably think I've lost my marbles... but this is a bird publication, so that shouldn't be many of you...

But Pafuri is such an epic birding destination that it would require an entire dedicated edition

of *The Lark* to cover the entire area, so I will be spreading my memories and sharing of birding 'gen' over six articles for next year, and to let you all have a bit of prompting these will be broken down as follows:

1. From Baobab Hill to Thulamela

BELOW The marker for the descent into the Limpopo basin and the Pafuri area is Baobab Hill © Dries de Wet.



2. Pafuri Gate to Pafuri Bridge

RIGHT Kruger's northernmost entrance gate and another access point for the Pafuri area is Pafuri Gate © Dries de Wet.



3. Pafuri Bridge

LEFT View of the Levhuvhu from Pafuri Bridge © Dries de Wet

4. Pafuri Picnic Site

RIGHT Hands down the best picnic site for birding in Kruger is the Pafuri Picnic Site
© Dries de Wet.



5. The Levhuvhu River Meander to Crooks Corner

LEFT The Pafuri river road will take one through enchanted places like the fever tree forest
© Dries de Wet.

5. Crooks Corner to Pafuri Border Post and the Pafuri Border Camp



I acknowledge that the area between the Limpopo and Levhuvhu is the Makuleke Concession and constitutes a contractual community park and partnership within both the Kruger National Park and the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area, and there are a couple of privately run concession camps in the area that give its patrons incredible access to this area often in the company of skilled birding guides, but my articles will focus on what I have experienced in

the SANParks managed roads and get-out points in the Pafuri area.

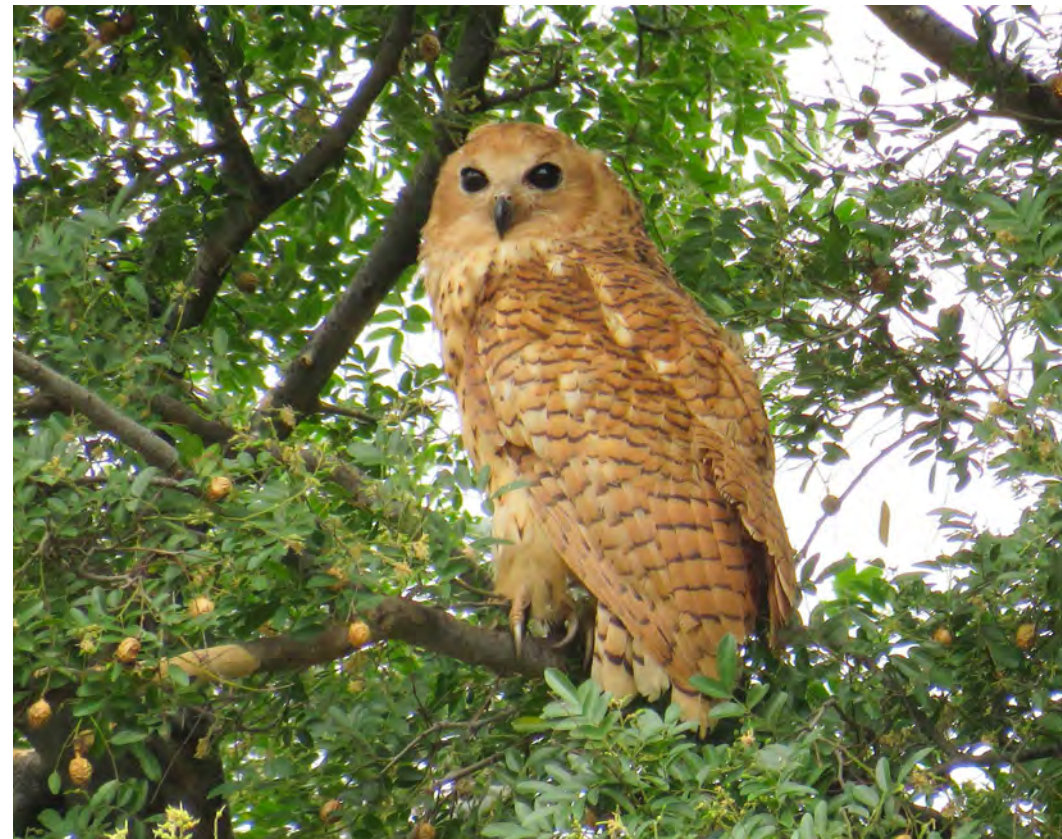
Finally, because this is a bird publication, we need to talk a little about the birds and leave readers wanting more, so to whet all your appetites, here are just a sprinkling of some of the species I'll be writing about... Böhm's Spinetail,

Thrush Nightingale, Three-banded Courser, Retz's Helmet-shrike, Tropical Boubou, Meves's Starling, Lemon-breasted Canary, Grey-headed Parrot, Broad-billed Roller, Green-capped Eremomela, Thick-billed Cuckoo, Racket-tailed Roller, White-crowned Lapwing, African Openbill, Black-throated Wattle-eye, African Yellow White-eye, Dickinson's Kestrel, African Finfoot...and there are many, many more species I will share with readers...

But every team needs a captain, and if I had to list the one bird that is most sought after by visitors to Pafuri, I would suggest that target bird is the Pel's Fishing Owl.

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BELOW Perhaps the most sought-after species in the Pafuri area is the Pel's Fishing Owl © Roy Ballatyne



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Red-backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*) recapture

Kobie Raijmakers

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It is every bird ringer's dream to retrap a ringed migrant bird, and on the 10th of December 2024, I got lucky when I recaptured a Red-backed Shrike. The details of this exiting recapture follow.

Ring number: AB-87906 IBRC Israel
The bird was ringed by Noam Weiss as a first year male on the 25th of

BELOW The ringing and recapture localities of Red-backed Shrike AB-87906.



September 2017 at the Eilat Ringing Station in Israel. It was recaptured on the 10th of December 2024 at Schoemansdrift Farm in the Potchefstroom district, South Africa. The straight-line distance between the ringing and recapture site was 6312 km and the days elapsed were 2633 days (7y, 2m. 15 d). This makes it one of the oldest ringed Red-backed Shrikes on record. The two oldest records are 8y 0m and 7y 10m (Fransson et al. 2023).

ABOVE Red-backed Shrike AB-87906, now in his 8th year, is one of the oldest Red-backed Shrikes on record. It has also undertaken 15 migrations from the Palaearctic to Africa and back
© Kobie Raijmakers.

References

Fransson, T., T. Kolehmainen, D. Moss, and R. Robinson (2023). EURING list of longevity records for European birds. https://eurring.org/files/documents/EURING_longevity_list_20230901.pdf

European Honey Buzzard

Hugh Chittenden

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Have you ever seen a male European Honey Buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) in southern Africa? If so, lucky you!!

European Honey Buzzards are specialised raptors that feed primarily on wasp and bee larvae. They breed in the northern hemisphere and are mainly present in southern Africa between November and March.

Caroline Howes, who detailed the occurrence of (EHBs) in southern Africa, found that females and juveniles made up over 93% of

BELOW A male European Honey Buzzard. Males are usually easily distinguished from females by having distinctive grey faces © Dick Forsman, (September, southern Spain).



© Helmut Niebuhr



© Helmut Niebuhr

the sightings in the region. So, why is this? Why do we usually only see females and juveniles in southern Africa? Well, more on that later!

European Honey Buzzards are amongst the most diverse plumaged raptors in the world, presenting themselves in a wide array of different plumage colour variations! The images on the right show examples of plumage colour variation in European Honey Buzzard.



© Niel Cillie



© Hugh Chittenden



© Hugh Chittenden

The images on the left are of typically plumaged adult females and were taken in Mtunzini and the northern Kruger National Park.

Juveniles are easily distinguished from adults by having a bright yellow cere and dull olive eyes (not bright yellow). They make up over 40% of the birds seen in the region. The images on the right are of juveniles. The one at the top is a first-year individual (end February, Mtunzini). The one at the bottom (with less yellow to the cere and the base of the mandible), is a second-year returnee to southern Africa. The images were taken in Mtunzini and St Lucia in January.



© Hugh Chittenden



© Hugh Chittenden



Food and Feeding

The main diet of these raptors is wasp and bee larvae. They locate their prey by following the flight of these insects to their nests. To a lesser extent, they also feed on a variety of insects, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and even the eggs and nestlings of small birds!

The series of images above shows an adult female raiding wasp nests on the side of a palm tree (Polokwane, March). On the right, a young bird (orange eyes) is feeding on wasp larvae. Adults have bright yellow eyes (Polokwane, March).





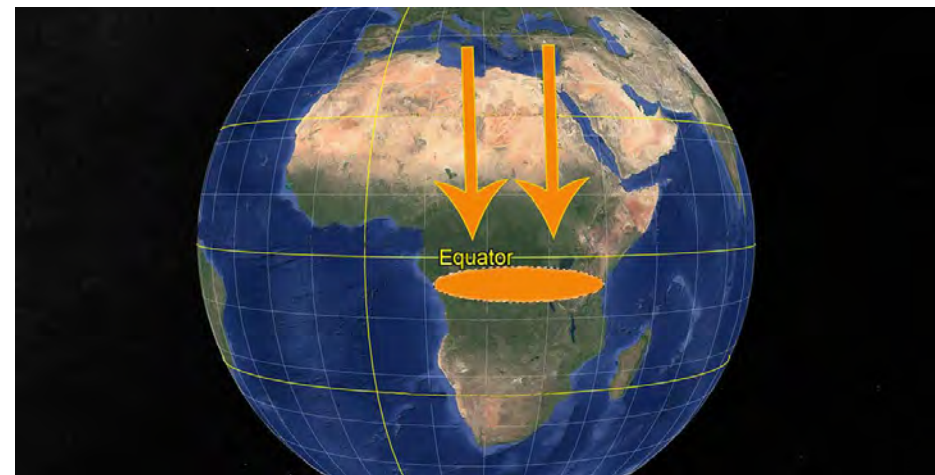
© Hugh Chittenden

Above, a young female can be seen extracting the larvae from a wasp nest (St Lucia, January).

The main overwintering region for female and juvenile European Honey Buzzards is shown opposite (top). Their winter distribution extends way beyond the equator, reaching the southern tip of the continent. The main overwintering region for males is shown opposite (bottom).

So, to answer the intriguing question about the absence of male European Honey Buzzards in southern Africa. Why do most males not fly further south while overwintering in Africa?

Both males and females migrate at similar speeds, and both tend to leave their respective African non-breeding sites at more or less the same time. This means that males reach their breeding territories a few days earlier than females.



The arrival time hypothesis states that the sex responsible for establishing the breeding territory (males in European Honey Buzzards) should spend the non-breeding period closest to the breeding grounds, allowing them to reduce intrasexual competition for territories.

Acknowledgements Niel Cillié helped enormously by locating European Honey Buzzard photos. I thank him for this. He and Helmut Niebuhr kindly allowed me to use their images, showing plumage variation. Dick Forsman is thanked for allowing me to use his male European Honey Buzzard photograph, and Derek Engelbrecht and Jody de Bruyn are thanked for the supply of photos of adult females feeding on wasp larvae.

Another African Skimmer resighting

Derek Engelbrecht

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Since 2017, I have studied the breeding ecology of African Skimmers at Letaba Estates east of Tzaneen. To this end, I have ringed a few adults and chicks and fitted them with colour rings to aid in individual identification. This aspect of the study has yielded fascinating data about the movements of these birds. Some of the ringed individuals have been resighted and photographed in Venda (Engelbrecht 2020), the Klaserie (Engelbrecht 2023), and Malalane Bridge on the southern border of the Kruger National Park (Engelbrecht 2024).



On the 23rd of November 2024, Jody de Bruyn and Richter van Tonder reported three African Skimmers at Letaba Estates, two adults and a juvenile. Jody zoomed in on the images and noticed that one of the adults had a colour ring combination of purple/yellow on the left leg and sent me the photo.

BELOW African Skimmer 4H29681 as a chick on the 13th of October 2020 © Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE African Skimmer 4H29681 as an adult on the 23rd of November 2024 © Jody de Bruyn..

I checked my database and this individual, African Skimmer 4H29681) was ringed as a chick on the 13th of October 2020 at Letaba Estates. This individual was one of a clutch of three eggs that were laid from 5–7 September 2020. During routine nest monitoring on the 26th of September, all three eggs were still present, but on the 29th of September, only one chick was found. It weighed 22.4 g at that stage, suggesting it was about 3 days old. Although I found the remains of eggshells, I never found the other two chicks. Either the eggs were predated just before hatching, or the chicks were predated soon after hatching. So, this individual was the only one of a clutch of three that survived.

The days elapsed between ringing and this resighting was 4 yr 1 m and 10 d, and the straight-line distance between the initial ringing site and the resighting locality is 0 km, but who knows where all it has been in the last 4 years.

References

- Engelbrecht, D. (2020). Remarkable resightings of African Skimmers in the Limpopo Province. *The Lark* 32:53–58.
- Engelbrecht, D. (2023). Resighting of a ringed African Skimmer. *The Lark* 50:81–82.
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Amur Falcons (*Falco amurensis*) feeding on armoured ground crickets

TEXT AND PHOTOS Ingrid Weiersbye-Porter

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Amur Falcons in flight are commonly seen clutching locusts, grasshoppers, and winged termites and devouring them...these are snatched in flight.

In response to rain on the 17th of March 2021, there was a mass

BELOW An adult male Amur Falcon feeding on one of the Armoured Ground Crickets.



irruption/emergence of Armoured Ground Crickets (Koringkriek in Afrikaans) in the Satara region of Kruger National Park, South Africa, identified as *Acanthopplus armiventris*.

The Armoured Ground Cricket is a flightless terrestrial giant armoured cricket, fearsome looking but harmless. Scores of Amur Falcons and Lesser Kestrels, likely before migrating northwards, were among the several species feasting...along with mainly rollers and hornbills. These Amurs were swooping low over

the road, snatching the insects off the tar and low vegetation, then carrying them to feeding perches.

The extremely hard spiny thorax was torn off giving access to the succulent soft underparts. The yellow fluid squirted upon capture is clearly not distasteful to birds.

BELOW Although they look dangerous, the crickets are harmless, but requires careful handling to reach the soft tissues.



Courtship and copulation of African Finfoot

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

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The courtship and copulation behaviour of the African Finfoot is poorly known (Engelbrecht 2024). In the only reference to courtship behaviour, Vernon (1983) described the courtship behaviour of a pair of African Finfoot on the Nahoon River in the Eastern Cape as relayed to him by someone else. The observer saw a female

emerging from fringing vegetation and swimming to the middle of the river while alternating between raising and lowering her wings and clapping with her bill. A male then emerged and

BELOW The pair of African Finfoot as seen during a courtship display. The female was leading the way, the male following closely behind.

escorted the female back to the fringing vegetation without performing a display or making a sound before she emerged a while later. According to the observer, this was repeated at least six times.

Here, I report on the courtship and copulation behaviour of a pair on the Blyde River, Limpopo Province, South Africa, on the 27th of September 2024. At 08:45, I first noticed a pair swimming downstream towards me. The female was in front, followed closely by the male. The pair criss-crossed the river several time, disappearing under overhanging vegetation and re-appearing a short while later. It was clear from the male's behaviour this

was a courtship ritual. Occasionally, he would slowly open and raise one wing, then the other. He was also constantly nipping at what appeared to be the base of the female's tail feathers, but it is also possible that the male was performing cloacal pecking rather than biting or pulling on the female's tail feathers.

The pair then disappeared underneath some bankside vegetation on the northern bank. They remained

BELOW The male slowly raised and lower one wing at a time, occasionally both wings, constantly nipping at the base of the female's tail feathers.





there for about a minute before a splash was heard, and the pair emerged again. I had the impression the female may have rebuffed the male's advances. They then crossed to the southern bank, where the same events transpired. This time, they were much closer to me, and I could see the female lunging at the male, after which he emerged out in the open. She appeared shortly afterwards, and the pair crossed the

river back to the northern bank, the male in tow, opening and closing his wings and nipping at the female's tail feathers. Again, they briefly took to the cover of the bankside vegetation but appeared within 20 seconds again. They then made their way upstream, the male following the female and displaying all the while. A short video clip can be seen [here](#). Once again, the pair took to cover, and despite the distance (they were now

about 200 m from where I was sitting), I could see they were copulating in the shallows. Copulation lasted 35 seconds, and there was a lot of wing flapping and repositioning as the pair constantly repositioned as they tried to keep their balance. By the end of it all, the female had made a complete 180° turn - from facing the bank to facing the river. The entire courtship and copulation spectacle lasted 15 minutes from when I

ABOVE The male was constantly nipping at the base of the female's rectrices.

first saw the pair until the pair separated after copulation. It is unknown how long the pair were engaged in the courtship behaviour before I saw them, nor can I be sure that they only copulated once during this time as it was impossible to



know what happened under the cover of the bankside vegetation.

Shortly after copulation, the pair swam a short distance together before the male briefly chased the female. The male then disappeared under overhanging vegetation and was not seen again, while the female bathed and preened herself for a few minutes. She then twice collected what appeared to be nesting material, which was delivered in some dense emergent vegetation. The female returned to where I was sitting and continued preening and sunbathing intermittently for 30 minutes.

ABOVE It is a really bad photo, but it is, as far as I know, the only footage of mating African Finfoots.

The observations reported here differ from those reported by Vernon (1983).

- At no stage did I see the female opening and closing her wings - only the male did. According to Vernon's source, only the female was seen opening and closing her wings.
- No audible sounds were heard during the courtship. Vernon's source reported bill clapping.



- Vernon's source gives the impression the male kept driving the female back to the bankside vegetation. I had the impression that the female was leading the way, and the male followed her wherever she went - a "courtship swim".

I cannot vouch for the observational skills of Vernon's observer, but it appears as if the observer had the roles of the sexes mixed up - which is not an unusual occurrence with African Finfoot observations (Engelbrecht 2024). These photos and the accompanying video footage provides unequivocal evidence of the roles of the sexes in the courtship of African Finfoot.

ABOVE Within minutes after copulation, the female started collecting nesting material and delivering it in some bankside vegetation.

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- Engelbrecht, G. D. (2024). African Finfoot (*Podica senegalensis*), version 2.0. In *Birds of the World* (B. Smit and G. D. Engelbrecht, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.afrfin1.02>
- Vernon, C. J. (1983). Display of the Finfoot. *Bee-eater* 10 (Supplement):12.

Black Coucal nuptial gift

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Nuptial gifts are objects, usually but not always food, given to a female by a male before or during copulation. On the 14th of December 2024, I observed a male Black Coucal delivering a nuptial gift - a caterpillar - to a female. The images were taken

at the [Emoyeni Grasslands](#) near Mtunzini.

1. The male arrives with a caterpillar in its beak.
2. He mounts the female and copulation starts, but the male has not presented his nuptial gift yet.
3. The male is ready to present the nuptial gift.

1



2



3



Interspecific alloparental care by an African Pygmy Kingfisher at a nest of African Paradise Flycatcher

Andrew Danckwerts and Rose-Ann Killian

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My family and I live on a farm in the Fish River valley, north of Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. A pair of African Paradise Flycatchers were breeding in a River Bushwillow tree near our kitchen window. This pair return every year and make their tiny cup-shaped nest with moss and spider webs.

BELOW The female African Paradise Flycatcher at the nest.



ABOVE The African Pygmy Kingfisher attempting to provision the African Paradise Flycatcher nestlings.

On the 21st of December 2024, we noticed that the pair was upset, and at closer inspection, we noticed an African Pygmy Kingfisher kept returning to the nest. At first, we thought that the kingfisher was trying to eat the nestlings. However, under closer observation, we realised that the kingfisher kept returning with food in its beak and trying to feed the nestlings. The two nestlings weren't particularly interested in being fed by this stranger. The parents continued to try and chase the attempting foster parent away from their brood by dive-bombing it.

Nevertheless, the kingfisher was quite determined to bring them other offerings. It would sit quite close to the nest and call and bob its head. This continued throughout the day. Eventually the kingfisher gave up as it

was no longer around after 36 hours of observations.

Editor's note: Interspecific allofeeding, although rare, is surprisingly widespread and has been reported in about 20 families and 80 species. What is interesting about this record, is that the African Pygmy Kingfisher is a cavity or hole-nesting species, and the African Paradise Flycatcher is an open cup-nesting species. Although this is the first known record of allofeeding involving the African Pygmy Kingfisher, interspecific allofeeding has been reported for another kingfisher, the Brown-hooded Kingfisher. In this instance, the kingfisher provisioned a Red-billed Wood Hoopoe fledgling.



Kleptoparasitic behaviour of Red-winged Starlings

Derek Engelbrecht

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Speckled Pigeons regularly breed on a ledge outside my office on the third floor of the campus of the University of Limpopo. On the 19th of November 2024, while working in my office, I heard an almighty commotion at the window. There was a Speckled Pigeon nest outside my window, and I suspected something was preying on the nest contents. I peered through a narrow gap and saw a pair of Red-winged Starlings harassing the Speckled Pigeon, trying to steal its nest material. The pigeon rebuffed their attempts repeatedly, striking with its wings. Nevertheless, the starlings managed to get a few twigs

before leaving the area. I didn't take much notice any further as the pigeon seemed to settle down on the nest.

The next day, the nest was completely destroyed, and I estimate about 80% of the nest material was gone too. It was then that I noticed two dead, recently hatched pigeon chicks. They must have died as a result of the starlings' actions, either being trampled or accidentally struck by their mother while trying to defend the nest.

BELOW The Speckled Pigeon nest before it was destroyed by Red-winged Starlings.



MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

Breeding: Nest

Red-winged Starling nest dimensions and materials used

The mass and dimensions of two nests on the campus of the University of Limpopo in October 2024 were:

Parameter	Nest #1	Nest #2
Maximum width of base (mm)	564	330
Nest depth (mm)	124	107
Cup diameter (inner) (mm)	60	56
Cup depth (mm)	65	58
Mass (g)	1250	857

The nests included twigs, rootlets, grass blades and inflorescences, dead leaves, cob clods (a mixture of plant matter and mud), small bones of rodents and little birds, bits of the nests of Little Swifts, and pieces of paper.

Derek Engelbrecht • faunagalore@gmail.com (received 15 November 2024).

Behaviour: Social and Interspecific Behaviour

Greater Blue-eared Starling and Broad-billed Roller nest competition

On the 28th of November 2024, I saw a pair of Broad-billed Rollers inspecting a nest cavity at the top of a wooden telephone pole on the Eiland road east of Letsitele. I stopped the car and watched them for a while. Shortly after I had stopped, I saw the rollers looking edgy and started uttering their harsh *grrraaad-grrraaad* call. I looked around for a raptor but then saw a pair of Greater Blue-eared Starlings flying in and chasing the Broad-billed Rollers away from the nest. The rollers perched on the overhead lines about 20–30 m away while the starlings inspected the nest at the top of the pole. At no stage did the rollers make any attempt to displace the starlings. The starlings were going in and out of the nest, but after about 2–3 minutes they left the scene. Only once the starlings left did the Broad-billed Rollers return to the nest.

Derek Engelbrecht • faunagalore@gmail.com (received 5 December 2024).



Interesting sightings

16 October 2024 - 16 December 2024

Share your interesting sightings seen within the Limpopo Province.

Please submit your sightings to thelarknews@gmail.com and include the date, locality and a brief write-up of your sighting. Photos are welcome but will be used at the discretion of the editors.

SABAP2 Out of Range; **Regional Rarity;** **National Rarity;** †Unvetted

COMPILED BY Derek Engelbrecht

NON-PASSERINES

African Marsh Harrier - 1 December 2024. A juvenile seen at Doornbult (Jody de Bruyn).

African Skimmer - 21 November 2024. Two adults and an immature bird seen at Letaba Estates (Johan Botma). *See note on page 75 of this issue.*

Black Cuckoo - 12 November 2024. One on the Randfontein road in the Wolkberg (Schalk and Annette van Schalkwyk).

Burchell's Sandgrouse - 3 December 2024. A few birds drinking at the



African Marsh Harrier © Jody de Bruyn

Makotopong Wetlands (Daniel Engelbrecht).

Common Ringed Plover - 3 November 2024. Two birds at Hout River Dam (Jody de Bruyn).

Diederik Cuckoo - 10 November 2024. Returning migrant. One heard calling in Bendor (Susan Dippenaar).

European Honey Buzzard - 17 November 2024. One seen at Rietgat (Jody de Bruyn); 21 November 2024. One seen in Welgelegen suburb (Daniel Engelbrecht).

Fulvous Whistling Duck - 23 November 2024. Three Fulvous Ducks at Hout River Dam (Daniel Engelbrecht).

Goliath Heron - 23 November 2024. The lone individual is still at Hout River Dam (Derek Engelbrecht).

Great Spotted Cuckoo - 9 November 2024. Returning migrant. One seen in Soetdorings (Leonie Kellerman).

Greater Flamingo - 4 December 2024. A large flock of 39 birds flying over the Chebeng grasslands (Daniel Engelbrecht).

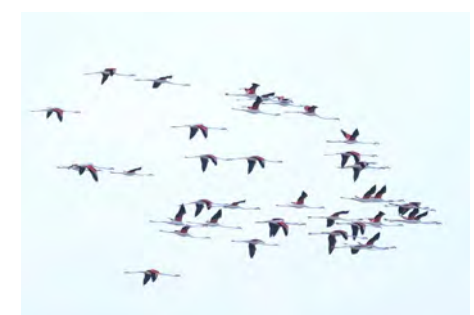
Greater Painted-snipe - 25 November 2024. Two at the Makotopong wetlands (Derek Engelbrecht).

Green Sandpiper - 26 October 2024. One at the Aloe Ridge Dam, Polokwane Game Reserve (Tarry Butcher).

Grey Plover - 1 December 2024. One seen at the Seshego Sewerage Treatment Plant (Jody de Bruyn).



Common Ringed Plover © Jody de Bruyn



Greater Flamingo © Daniel Engelbrecht



Green Sandpiper © Jody de Bruyn



Grey Plover © Jody de Bruyn

Jackal Buzzard - 16 October 2024. An adult seen in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

Red-chested Cuckoo - 24 October 2024. One heard in Bendor (Susan Dippenaar).

Saddle-billed Stork - 17 November 2024. One adult female seen at Rietgat Dam (Richter van Tonder).

Water Thick-knee - 17 November 2024. Seen at Rietgat Dam (Jody de Bruyn).

White-winged Tern - 23 November 2024. Seven birds seen at Hout River Dam and Sterkloop Wetlands (Daniel Engelbrecht).

Whiskered Tern - 23 November 2024. Seven birds at the Sterkloop Wetlands (Daniel Engelbrecht).

White Stork - 28 November 2024. Returning migrant. Two birds near Letsitele (Derek Engelbrecht).

Woodland Kingfisher - 18 November 2024. Returning migrant. Adult male returned to its nest in Welgelegen on exactly the same date as in 2023 (Derek Engelbrecht).

PASSERINES

Cuckoo-finch - 23 November 2024. A pair seen at Sterkloop Wetlands (Daniel Engelbrecht).

Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark - 23 November 2024. A pair building a nest is the first record of the species breeding on the Polokwane Plateau (Derek Engelbrecht).



Saddle-billed Stork © Jody de Bruyn



Whiskered Tern © Daniel Engelbrecht



Woodland Kingfisher © Derek Engelbrecht



Cuckoo Finch © Derek Engelbrecht

Melodious Lark - 7 October 2024. Seen at Soetdorings (Mike Buckham).

Sand Martin - 17 November 2024. Seen at Rietgat Dam (Jody de Bruyn).

BEST OF THE REST LIMPOPO PROVINCE

NON-PASSERINES

African Cuckoo - 25 October 2024. Returning migrant. At least three birds seen and heard calling at Nagude Farm (Derek Engelbrecht).

African Openbill - 23 October 2024. One seen at Nagude Farm (Derek Engelbrecht).

African Pygmy Kingfisher - 9 November 2024. Returning migrant. One seen at Nagude Farm (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Ayres's Hawk-Eagle - 2 December 2024. One seen between Klopperfontein and Punda Maria Rest Camp in the Kruger National Park (Andrew Pike).

Booted Eagle - 9 November 2024. One seen at Nagude Farm (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Broad-billed Roller - 6 November 2024. Returning migrant. Several seen outside Tzaneen (Richter van Tonder).

Osprey - 23 October 2024. One seen at Nagude Farm (Derek Engelbrecht).

Lesser Jacana - 12 November 2024. One at Nandoni Dam near Thohoyandhou (Samson Mulaudzi).

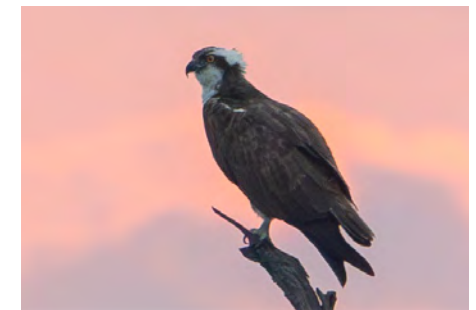
Palm-nut Vulture - 18 October 2024. One seen in riparian forest close to



African Cuckoo © Derek Engelbrecht



African Openbill © Derek Engelbrecht



Osprey © Derek Engelbrecht



Lesser Jacana © Samson Mulaudzi

the Levhuvhu River, Kruger National Park (Etienne Marais).

Pel's Fishing Owl - 1 November 2024. One on a tributary of the Sand River (Darren Pietersen).

Pennant-winged Nightjar - 26 November 2024. An adult male seen at Lissataba Private Game Reserve ([SA Rare Bird News Report - 28 November 2024](#)).

Saddle-billed Stork - 27 November 2024. An adult female seen at Nagude farm (Derek Engelbrecht).

Spur-winged Lapwing - 16 October 2024. A single bird present at Klopperfontein, Kruger National Park (Leoni Joubert). This is a new provincial record for the species and only the second record for South Africa.

Three-banded Courser - 19 October 2024. Three seen at Marakele National Park (Matt Lailvaux).

Whiskered Tern - 26 November 2024. Seen at Nagude Farm, Letsitele district (Edward Vorster).

Yellow-billed Oxpecker - 30 October 2024. Several seen on cattle near Club Ranch on the Limpopo River (Marna Buys).

Yellow-billed Stork - 9 November 2024. Seen at Nagude Farm (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).



Saddle-billed Stork © Derek Engelbrecht



Spur-winged Lapwing © Jody de Bruyn



Three-banded Courser © Matt Lailvaux



Whiskered Tern © Derek Engelbrecht

PASSERINES

Dusky Lark - 1 December 2024. Two seen at Bontle Campsite in the Marakele National Park (Gareth Hazell)

Orange-breasted Waxbill - 19 November 2024. A few seen at a muddy waterhole on the Mahonie Loop, Punda Maria, in the Kruger National Park (Steve Benbow).

South African Cliff Swallow - 20 October 2024. Seen at Nylsvley Nature Reserve (Steve Benbow). It is a passage migrant through the Limpopo Province.



Dusky Lark © Gareth Hazell



South African Cliff Swallow © Steve Benbow

VERSION 1.2. RELEASED 28 OCTOBER 2024



LIMPOPO RARITIES

Check out the latest official bird list for the Limpopo Province on the Limpopo Rarities group on Telegram or view it [here](#). Thanks to Daniel Engelbrecht, Jody De Bruyn, Derek Engelbrecht and Richter Van Tonder.

Mouse Free Marion

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

SPONSOR A HECTARE NOW



HELP SAVE OUR SEABIRDS

The Mouse-Free Marion Project is a partnership between the South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and BirdLife South Africa, which established the Non-Profit Company (MFM NPC) to help restore Marion Island to its once-pristine beauty by eradicating the invasive mice plaguing the island.

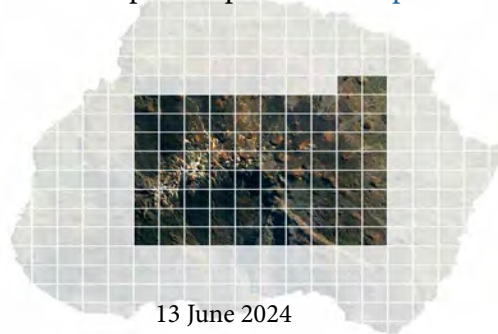
To help raise the necessary funds, please would you consider sponsoring one or more hectares of land on Marion Island.

At R1000, 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 in a single attempt.

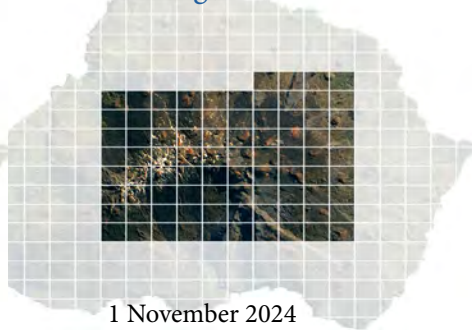
Be a part of history, and sponsor one (or more) hectares of this beautiful oceanic gem.

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



13 June 2024

Percent of target reached: 26.0%
Sponsored Hectares: 8012 ha
Sponsors: 1732



1 November 2024

Percent of target reached: 28.0%
Sponsored Hectares: 8453 ha
Sponsors: 1802

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™
The Mouse-Free Marion Project



ALBATROSSES ON MARION ISLAND

1. Grey-headed *Thalassarche chrysostoma*
2. Wandering *Diomedea exulans*
3. Sooty *Phoebastria fusca*
4. Light-mantled *Phoebastria palpebrata*

mousefreemarion.org

UPCOMING EVENTS



Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting and AGM

Date: 4 February 2025

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting

Date: 4 March 2025

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting

Date: 1 April 2025

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Club outing

Where? Mkhombo Dam

Date: 11 January 2025

Contact: Richter van Tonder

Cell: 082 213 8276



Shopping list: This is a rarity hotspot and this summer has seen Red-throated Pip-it, Caspian Plover, Pink-backed Pelican, Gull-billed Tern, Spotted Crake, Slaty Egret, Grey Plover, Osprey, Sanderling, Pectoral Sandpiper, Allen's Gallinule, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, Fulvous Whistling Duck, African Pygmy Goose, Red-winged Pratincole, and tens of thousands of Black-winged Pratincole. A must to get your year list off on a good start.

Club outing

Where? Van Waveren farm

Date: February 2025 (date to be confirmed)

Contact: Richter van Tonder

Cell: 082 213 8276



Shopping list: Following on our first visit to this farm in March 2024, we aim to surpass our tally of 150 species seen during that visit. An interesting mix of wetlands, grassland and savannahs ensures a rich diversity of species, including the likes of promises the likes of Cape Grassbird, Orange-breasted Waxbill, Banded Martin, and Black Stork.

All birds are equal

In 2025, the front covers of **The Lark** will be dedicated to Special Birds of the Limpopo Province and the back cover to others, some of which are unlikely to grace the front covers of publications.



Red-billed Oxpecker - Birdlife South Africa's Bird of the Year 2025 © Derek Engelbrecht.