

THE

# LARK

Travel

**Madagascar Part 3**



BBD 2025 report

**Team Wat-Kyk-Jy**

**Trip Reports**

**Mkhombo Dam**

**De Loskop**

**van Waveren farm**

Courtship behaviour of the Magpie Mannikin • Notes on the behaviour and breeding biology of Temminck's Courser • Bathing behaviour of Cape Longclaw and Ant-eating Chat  
• Unusual nest material of a Karoo Thrush • Escape strategy of the Greater Honeyguide.

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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DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

**15 APRIL 2025**

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

Cover page theme 2025: Limpopo Specials

COVER Böhm's Spinetail  
© Jody De Bruyn.

# CONTENT

The Lark 58  
March/April 2025

**Editorial** 4

**Regulars**

**Roberts 8 online** 47

Request for information and media contributions.

**Birds in Art** 51

Crested Francolin

**Reflections** 57

By Bountiful Baobabs... the Incredible Nyala Drive and the Treasures of Thulamela

**Bird Briefs** 75

Courtship behaviour of the Magpie Mannikin • Notes on the behaviour and breeding biology of Temminck's Courser • Bathing behaviour of Cape Longclaw and Ant-eating Chat • Unusual nest material of a Karoo Thrush • Escape strategy of the Greater Honeyguide.

**Interesting Sightings** 91

**Upcoming events** 99

## Featured

### Madagascar Part 3

5

In this final instalment of a 3-part series, **Daniel Engelbrecht** returns to the eastern rain forests of Madagascar.



### Wat-Kyk-Jy BBD Report

17

**Richter van Tonder** tells us about their day during BBD 2025.



### Mega Mania @ Mkhombo

29

Mud, sweat, megas - and stuck cars. **Willie van der Merwe** fills us in about the first club outing for 2025.



### De Loskop impromptu

37

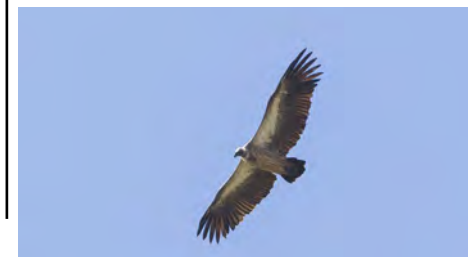
Good rains and a flooded De Loskop Dam means you can expect the unexpected. A few of us made a spur of the moment decision to go and see what's on offer. **Minkie Prinsloo** reports.



### Van Waveren's farm

43

**Audrey Morris** reports on the club outing to this farm that always delivers a "wow" moment.



# For a lark ...



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# Editors' chirps

What a start to the year! Most of us haven't seen this much rain in a season in Polokwane, and the weather has, for the most part, been unusual. But with such unusual weather patterns come unusual sightings. We've been treated to a glut of local and regional rarities in the first two months of the year. Some of these include Lesser Yellowlegs, Red-throated Pipit, Pink-backed Pelican, Gull-billed Tern, Spotted Crake, Corn Crake, Black Coucal, and Black-necked Grebe to name only a few. This is also a boom time for Dwarf Bitterns and African Crakes, which are popping up everywhere, even at some dams in the suburbs. Just like the birders were spoiled for choice in the first part of the year, we, as the editors of *The Lark*, were also spoiled for choice with the material for this issue. Thank you to everyone who contributed. A special thank you to Daniel, whose 3-part trip report to Madagascar concludes in this issue. I'm sure everyone enjoyed it and has learnt something new about the birds and that country. We also feature the trials and tribulations of team Wat-Kyk-Jy's BBD quest in 2024. To those who couldn't make the club outings, don't worry; you can read here what you missed out on. With so much material for this issue, our popular Bird Briefs section is a little skinny this time around, but the quality of the observations is still of the same high standard. Once again, we hope these notes inspire our readers to submit some of the interesting sightings they have seen. Remember, sharing is caring ...

The new Birdlife Polokwane committee was elected during our AGM in the February club meeting. Congratulations to all the committee members - new and old!

Finally, the Red-billed Oxpecker is Birdlife SA's Bird of the Year for 2025 - a very popular choice. We'll feature this species in forthcoming issues.

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





Mystical  
MADAGASCAR  
Part 3



Birding Africa

TEXT AND PHOTOS Daniel Engelbrecht



Scaly Ground Roller

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. In this, the final part of my trip to Madagascar, I head east and back to the forests again.

**Day 10, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2023:**  
**Isalo National Park – Ranomafana National Park**

After a fantastic night featuring a vocal White-browed Owl, it was time to hit the road eastwards once more. The drive from Isalo to Ranomafana National Park took most of the day. However, the constantly changing scenery was a highlight for me. We passed through grasslands, mountain passes, massive monoliths, and, eventually, lush rainforests. I only managed a single lifer on this day, a large flock of Malagasy Black Swifts.

The road snaked its way down the steep forested valley before reaching the small town of Ranomafana. The forests around the town are protected and form part of the 41,000-hectare

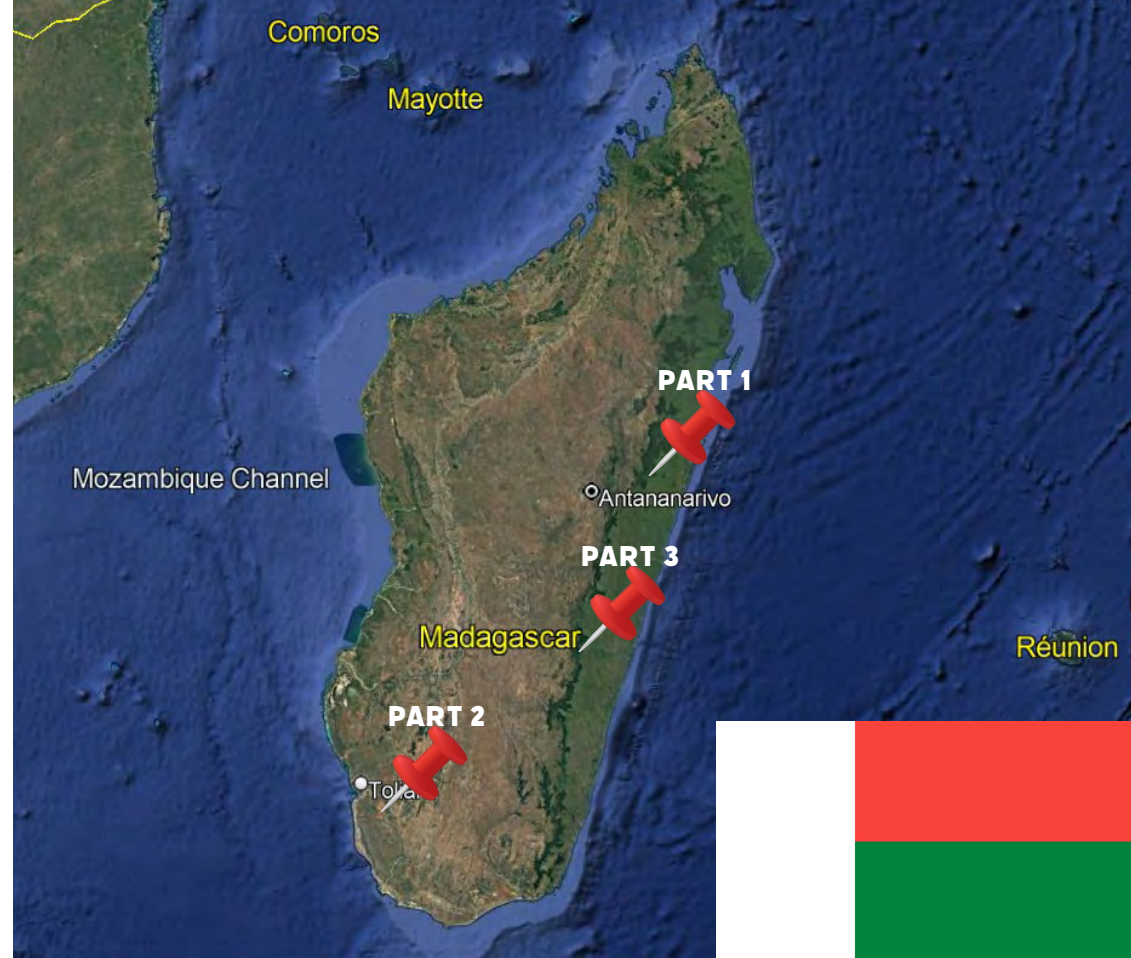
Ranomafana National Park. Our arrival just before sunset meant I would only experience these forests the next day; I couldn’t wait.

**Day 11, 29<sup>th</sup> November 2023:**  
**Ranomafana National Park**

As usual, we were out on the forest trails just after sunrise. Our plan for the morning was to bird the lower-altitude forests along the Soarano Trail. The topography here was far more mountainous than around Andasibe (Part 1), and we were

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 view from my accommodation in Ranomafana.





in for quite a walk. Initially, we saw many of the same species we had seen previously, with bird parties producing views of Tylas, Red-tailed, Crossley's, Hook-billed, Rufous, and White-headed Vanga, along with Madagascar Cuckooshrike, Ward's Flycatcher, Madagascar Starling, Rand's Warbler, Spectacled Tetraka

and Nelicourvi Weaver. The activity was constant, and after a while, one of our main targets showed well - the scarce Pollen's Vanga. Ground rollers were also a feature with both Scaly and Pitta-like Ground Roller making an appearance while vocal Greater Vasa Parrots flew overhead. Lemurs were well represented, with the critically endangered Golden Bamboo Lemur (part of the reason for establishing this national park) being the highlight. Red-bellied Lemur and Common Brown Lemur were also seen.

LEFT Pollen's Vanga is a scarce inhabitant of the Eastern Rainforests and a top target at Ranomafana.

BELOW The view from the bridge along the Soarano Trail.



We spent most of the morning birding these lower-elevation forests (900 m.a.s.l.) and transitioned to the higher-elevation forests (1,200 m.a.s.l.) in the afternoon. We birded along the Vohipara Trail, where we encountered Dark Newtonia, Velvet Asity, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, and Blue Coua, and after a heart-racing cat-and-mouse game, our

main target – Brown Mesite. The rain set in during the last hours of the day, and we retreated to our accommodation; what a day it had been.

BELOW It goes without saying that the photographic opportunities of Brown Mesite were limited.



Common Brown Lemur



Rufous-bellied Lemur



Golden Bamboo Lemur

**Day 12, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023:**  
**Ranomafana National Park**

We returned to the Vohipara Trail this morning to stake out a Brown Emutail at its nest. This cryptic warbler proved impossible to see, and unlucky for us, the nest was no longer in use. All we got was a single response to the playback and then nothing. This was an annoying defeat, but I tried not to let it detract from the spectacular birding here. We saw Common Sunbird-Asity

(incredibly well), Pitta-like Ground Roller, Common and Green Jery (I haven't mentioned the Jery's enough in these reports; they're great little birds but hard to compare to ground rollers), Forest Fody, White-throated Oxylabes, and the super skulking Madagascar Yellowbrow – probably the most attractive of the tetrakas.

BELOW Common Sunbird-Asity - one of my favourite birds in Madagascar.



We heard Madagascar Forest Rail and Rufous-headed Ground Roller and saw no less than four Pollen's Vangas in one of the bird parties.

ABOVE The rainforest in Ranomafana National Park.

BELOW The tiny Rufous Mouse Lemur is one of the smallest primates.





ABOVE Unlike its counterpart the Brown Emutail, Grey Emutail performed well.

The rain was back again in the afternoon. However, as this was our last day of birding before the return to Antananarivo, I was determined to stick it out and try for some of the wetland species along the Amboditanimena Trail. It proved to be successful and yielded close-up views of Grey Emutail (the marsh counterpart of the now no longer spoken of Brown Emutail), as well as flushed views of Madagascar Snipe and,

after a long wait in pouring rain, the endangered Meller's Duck.

### **Days 13 and 14, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2023: Ranomafana National Park – Antananarivo**

Birding on this trip had now ended for all intents and purposes,



ABOVE Rice paddies between Antsirabe and Antananarivo.

and the entirety of the next two days were spent on the road as we undertook the journey back to Antananarivo with an overnight stop in Andasibe.

### **Days 15, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023: Departure**

As I watched Antananarivo's rice paddies and distinctive architecture gradually disappear below me, I had a moment to reflect on an incredible adventure in a part of the world that has always been high on my bucket list. Madagascar is a unique place that is spectacularly diverse in every way, from its people to its landscapes and, of course, its

biodiversity. The trip yielded just over 100 endemics, exceeding my expectations. I am incredibly grateful to Birding Africa for allowing me to visit this part of the world. I would urge anyone with the means to visit Madagascar. So many of the island's iconic species are under severe threat of extinction, and their continued persistence depends on visitors.

I landed in Johannesburg, did some much-needed washing, saw my family, and boarded my flight to Brazil the next day.

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# Wat-Kyk-Jy

## 2024 Birding Big Day Report

Richter van Tonder

### Team informations

*Team name: Wat-Kyk-Jy (established 1996).*

*Team members: Richter van Tonder, Jody de Bruyn, Rowan van Tonder, and Marcia van Tonder.*

*Centre point: Near Woodbush/Houtbosdorp*

*Target: That magical 300, always, and if it is reached, we then try to beat our previous best score.*

*On the day score: 328! Our second best!*

Building up towards BBD on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2024, the preceding five days we experienced a heat wave with midday temperatures averaging 38°C. Luckily it dropped to a maximum of 29°C on the day. The morning started off cool, but as the day progressed, the wind picked up dramatically. Jody, Marcia and I tried to do as much recce work as would allow; from the middle of November up until the Friday before the big day when Rowan (our 4<sup>th</sup> member from Pretoria) joined as well and focused on the Polokwane Game Reserve.

We realised again the importance of scoping out the region along our route to be prepared for what to find and where to find it, including backup spots if needed. Some of our regular areas were blocked off, and if we didn't check it out before BBD, we would've been in trouble.

We started at midnight. At best, we all probably got about 4 hours of 'sleep' before we started. At 0:01, we (Richter, Rowan, and Marcia) picked up Jody and set off to do some owl hunting and anything we could hear or see at that time. Our first species for the day was a large flock of Western Cattle Egrets roosting



ABOVE Some of the nocturnal creatures we found included a Red Toad and the highly venomous Stiletto Snake © Jody de Bruyn.

LEFT A Southern White-faced Owl on the aptly named 'Owl Road' © Jody de Bruyn.

Southern White-faced Owl, Western Barn Owl, Marsh Owl, and Pearl-spotted Owlet in no time and, to our surprise, an African Hawk-Eagle! We also got Rufous-cheeked Nightjar on this road. In terms of owls and nightjars, we literally smashed all our targeted species. On our way to the usual gathering haunt of all the teams competing in this area, we stopped at a few spots in Polokwane. Because of our recce work, we got Great Spotted Cuckoo and Greater Painted-snipe at specific spots at night. From midnight to just before our dawn chorus site at 4:15, we managed to get 45 species, 5 species more than last year at the same

in a tree. We also got Yellow-billed Duck on a small dam nearby. This is one bird that we seem to dip on regularly, but this year they were everywhere. Next the 'Owl Road.' We were a little concerned about the overcast conditions and the moon being a no-show. But we needn't have worried. Here we found





Buttonquail here. In this hour we advanced to 190.

We reced a new spot on the way to our next stop, and boy, did it deliver. We got all our targeted waders and at 9:58, we reached the 200 species mark with a new bird for our BBD list, Grey Plover! We

LEFT Dawn on "The Rock" in the Polokwane Game Reserve  
© Jody de Bruyn.

BELOW A new spot on our route delivered the goods, including a BBD lifer for our team, Grey Plover!  
© Jody de Bruyn.

time. One of our best time scores thus far. We had some time to have a quick breakfast of coffee and rusks. As usual, everybody checked in at the communal BBD 'Dawn Chorus Koppie', affectionately called 'The Rock'. There were some old and new faces. Again, it did not disappoint. We added an additional 45 species to our list.

The Polokwane Game Reserve really is a gem when it comes to birding in a relatively small area. I will advise anyone to visit here if they are keen birders and love nature in general. We managed to get to 164 on our list before leaving the reserve at 8:14, 14 more than last year. At this stage, the wind began to

pick up! Birds of note were: Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Jacobin Cuckoo, Short-clawed Lark, Levaillant's Cuckoo, Bearded Woodpecker, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Brown-backed Honeybird, and Shaft-tailed Whydah. We dipped on Green-winged Melba again (2<sup>nd</sup> year running). As Derek Engelbrecht calls it: "Welcome to the Melba Club."

We then covered sections of Polokwane City before heading to our next leg of this race. We decided to include the Sterkloop Wetland, due to it being reced in the week and promised a lot of duck species and a possible Cuckoo-finch. But we only managed Maccoa Duck. We got lucky and flushed Common



also got Banded Martin breeding in a sandbank and a Sand Martin doing a fly-by.

Our next stop was at Vencor Feedlot and Abattoir (including the area across the road). These sites, in our minds, are a very crucial area on our route. We picked up our possible raptors and storks but dipped on the local Booted Eagle. We also got our only African Spoonbill here.

Before leaving Polokwane, we stopped at the sewage works in Polokwane. This is a good place to get warblers. We managed three extra ones. This stage was covered from 10:55 to 11:05, and we managed to stretch our total to 217. With the wind quickly picking up, we ended this leg with the same

number of species as last year at this stage. Birds of note for these 2 hours were Common Buttonquail, Maccoa Duck, Marsh Sandpiper, Orange-breasted Waxbill, Lilac-breasted Roller, Yellow-billed Kite, Pied Avocet, Grey Plover, Little Stint, Marsh Warbler, African Spoonbill, Terrestrial Brownbul, Abdim's Stork, Garden Warbler, Black-crowned Night Heron, and Intermediate Egret.

The Sebayeng wetlands were our next stop via the Solomondale/Rita Road. At this point, we were racing through the midday hours with some needed refreshments and pick-me-ups handed out by Marcia. On our way there, we got Lesser Kestrel, which is not common

this time of the year in our area. These arid areas with open veld, croplands and wetlands are critical along our route because of where it is situated, and the diversity found in and around the area. We covered this part in about 1.5 hours and pushed the total to 235. Birds of note were Lesser Kestrel, Gorgeous Bushshrike, Ant-eating Chat, Black-chested Snake Eagle, Yellow Canary, Buffy Pipit, Yellow-billed Stork, Pink-billed Lark, Temminck's Courser, Southern Pochard, Knob-billed Duck, and, to our surprise, Cape Shoveler.

We then gunned it for Randfontein, Veekraal, Silvermist, Haenertsburg, and Georges Valley. The time it took was between 13:09

and 14:55, and in this hour the total moved to 259.

We were looking good on the total number of species at this point. As we approached Haenertsburg, the temperature dropped to 20°C and the wind blew moist air over the mountain, resulting in misty conditions. Birds of note were: Lazy Cisticola, White-necked Raven, Drakensberg Prinia, Broad-tailed Grassbird, African Yellow Warbler,

LEFT Orange-breasted Waxbill  
© Jody de Bruyn.

MIDDLE Horus Swift  
© Jody de Bruyn.

BELOW Thick-billed Weaver  
© Jody de Bruyn.





ABOVE Knysna Turaco  
© Jody de Bruyn.

African Firefinch, and Wailing Cisticola.

We then chased for proper forest sections which included the likes of the popular Forest Drive area and Rooikoppies. With the wind and cold temperatures, we knew it was going to be tough! The cicadas were also singing, and we had difficulty hearing forest birds. This is where we missed some of the forest usuals. We dipped on about four species. We managed to bump

our total up to 287 (2 species behind our record-breaking total of 2021 at this stage) between 14:55 and 15:36, before heading to Tzaneen. Birds of note were: Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Olive Thrush, Olive Woodpecker, Orange Ground Thrush, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Chorister Robin-Chat, Brown Scrub

Robin, Grey Cuckooshrike, African Rail, Buff-spotted Flufftail, White-starred Robin, and Red-chested Flufftail.

Tzaneen and some of the Lowveld sections further east were next in our sights. We were basically on target at this stage as we moved along swiftly to our next stop. This leg included places like Macadamia, Lushof, Ledzee Road, Pierre Homan's farm, Letaba Estates, and Taganashoek environs. We entered Tzaneen with temperatures at around 27°C, not too bad, and the Lowveld was still bursting with activity. When we left Tzaneen to go into the Lowveld proper, we were at 295. At this stage, we needed to be close to 300 to go for a 330-ish score. We ended this leg at the Lufafa Hatchery farm, around 19:00 and standing on 325. If we could manage to get our last targeted species, we'll hit 330 and a new record. We added around 30 species for the Lowveld section. Not bad at all. Our 300<sup>th</sup> bird was a Broad-billed

Roller we logged on the way to the Ledzee Road. Birds of note were: Magpie Mannikin, Blue-spotted Wood Dove, Striped Kingfisher, Bearded Scrub Robin, Broad-billed Roller, Yellow-throated Longclaw,

BELOW Ever wondered why it is called a Yellow-throated LONGclaw?  
© Jody de Bruyn.





African Green Pigeon, Croaking Cisticola, Red-headed Weaver, White-crested Helmetshrike, Retz's Helmetshrike, Great Egret, Square-tailed Nightjar, Water Thick-knee, and, another new bird for our BBD list, two White-winged Terns! This brought our BBD list to 400 birds since we started as a team in 2012. All on the same route.

What was left was Agatha Forest, where we normally find Bat Hawk, but this time around, it was a miss. It was now around 20:10, and we managed to pick up African Wood Owl and Spotted Eagle-Owl at this location. Now, on 327, we were

White-winged Tern © Jody de Bruyn.



ABOVE Birding in the Haenertsburg grasslands  
© Jody de Bruyn.

two away from our record and three away from a new team record. We tried our hardest for three more. First at George's Valley. But the area was too dry, and the grass too recently burnt for the African Grass Owl. We decided to head back to Polokwane to try again for the Freckled Nightjar we dipped on. This time, with the earlier evening and a moon, we got it at 22:20. We ended on 328!

All in all, it was an amazing day's birding and reaching that magical 300 again just makes it so much more special. Thank you to Marcia, who was again our scribe and source of sustenance. I say it every time, but it must be mentioned that I will not

easily exchange these for anyone. We have been birding this road together for more than 10 years now and we are gelling brilliantly together. We all instinctively understand each person's mannerisms and ticks by now. We are still learning new things about our route and ourselves. We managed to be a little bit more efficient this time, and with all the birds we dipped on, we are very excited for the next round. Is 340 on the cards...? Onward and upward!

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# Mega Mania at Mkhombo

Johan Janse van Vuuren



On Saturday morning, 11 January 2025, at 04:00, a group of ten brave Birdlife Polokwane birders set out to a dam that is currently a hot spot in the birding fraternity, namely Mkhombo Dam in Mpumalanga. The time you see is correct; you did not read wrong, and remember the early bird catches the worm. We decided to brave the rainy weather to hunt for two mega specials showing there at the time, namely the Red-throated Pipit and the Lesser Yellowlegs. These two birds are rarely seen in southern Africa and the opportunity was there to target them. According to

the Roberts birding app, these birds were, to date, only recorded at three to four different spots in southern Africa.

We travelled via Mokopane and a very wet Roedtan and Springbok Flats area to reach the dam at approximately 06:30. We heard it was wet, but we saw a jaw-dropper scene on arrival at the dam. Water and mud were everywhere, and we were thankful we all travelled in 4x4 vehicles. Mkhombo Dam is a special birding hotspot for birders from Gauteng and Mpumalanga, and this was evident by the number of birders already there and the cars still streaming in.

Lesser Yellowlegs © Jody de Bruyn



There was no time for the long-awaited coffee because just as we had stopped and changed into our wet weather gear, i.e., gumboots, an alert came through that the Lesser Yellowlegs was spotted. So, with gumboots on, we set off through water and mud to where a group of people were standing with binocs facing the sky. We barely arrived when the Lesser Yellowlegs passed above our heads before returning and performing a fly-by as if showing its yellow legs off. Cameras were frantically clicking away and shouts of “Is it him, is it him?” were heard.

Unfortunately, it continued until it was out of sight. How amazing was this? It was one mega special bird to be seen in South Africa, and we saw it within the first few minutes. Adrenaline levels were high, and now for number two – the Red-throated Pipit.

We then walked around one side of the dam towards the inflow

BELOW Flocks numbering hundreds of Black-winged Pratincoles circled above  
© Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE Mega-tick #2 - the Red-throated Pipit  
© Jody de Bruyn.

area where the pipit was hanging out. After a long trek that nearly took an hour and a half (birding pace), we had no sooner arrived at the pipit's summer hangout when somebody softly asked the now quite biggish group to stand still. Barely 20 meters in front of us on the track, the Red-throated Pipit was foraging. Cameras were again clicking away as the bird walked towards us for a while, then turned around and walked away. As the attention got a bit hectic, the bird

flew off into the thick grass closer to the water's edge. What a sighting!

It was time for a coffee and breakfast break, so we started walking the nearly two kilometres back, passing several cars that were pushed just a little bit too far and got stuck in the mud. By the time



ABOVE Always a joy to watch,  
a Black Heron on the hunt  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

we left, some of the vehicles were still stuck, and we wondered what happened to them and if they were eventually pulled out.

During the first walk of approximately 4 km, the following birds were inter alia spotted: Marsh Sandpiper, African Spoonbill, Lesser Moorhen, Whiskered Tern, Common Tern, Zitting Cisticola, Ruff, Common Greenshank, Little stint, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, and lots of Red-knobbed Coots, Western

Yellow Wagtails, and Black Herons, to name just a few.

A late but well-deserved breakfast and coffee were enjoyed in light rain next to the dam. A couple from our group decided to do one more walk and were rewarded with a good sighting of the Lesser



ABOVE One of the highlights  
- no fewer than 10 Western  
Yellow Wagtails in a small  
tree © Derek Engelbrecht.

Yellowlegs, resulting in some great photos.

We decided to leave at approximately 11:00 before the mass exodus of cars would have churned the muddy track even more, making it undrivable. On the way out from the dam, we saw ten Western Yellow Wagtails in one bush and Scaly-feathered Weavers, too. Close to Roedtan, we also had a couple of sightings of Lesser Kestrel.

A very successful outing was had, with approximately 90 birds ticked, including the two mega-lifers. I suggest that those of you who want to try to tick off the

Red-throated Pipit and the Lesser Yellowlegs get to Mkhombo Dam as soon as possible, as these birds might leave anytime soon. Also, ensure you get the correct route and spot from Richter van Tonder where to find these special birds.

Thanks to Richter for all his arrangements and everybody who joined the outing.

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# DE LOSKOP

*impromptu*

Minkie Prinsloo

Birding in 2025 kicked off with a great start! Following excellent rains in early January, our club had an impromptu outing to the A13 Farm at De Loskop near Dendron on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January. Early in the morning, 15 of us set off for the farm, and I must say, it was really good seeing all the familiar faces after the long holiday season again.

As we turned off the tar road onto the gravel road, it was immediately evident that there was a lot of water in the area as we slipped and splashed the 3 km on our way to our destination. Nevertheless,

our species list immediately started to give the impression that it was going to be an awesome day of birding. We opened the day's proceedings with species like Thrush Nightingale, Common Scimitarbill, European Roller, Red-chested Cuckoo, and White-crowned Shrike – all good species to start the list.

BELOW Excellent rains in early January caused flooding of the *Vachellia* woodland, creating ideal habitat for rallids and other waders  
© Derek Engelbrecht.



Our first stop was at a small pond below the dam wall at De Loskop, where our list quickly grew with species like Cape Shoveler, Lesser Moorhen, Little Grebe, Dwarf Bittern (the first of many), Red-billed Teal, Quailfinch, and Western House Martin. As we were standing in the road chatting, we added African Crake and Southern Pied Babbler to the list. Our list quickly reached the 50-species mark, and it was not even 07:00 yet.

From here, we moved to the inflow of the dam, where we had excellent views of a pair of African Crakes, we even had a group of Red-billed Buffalo-Weavers flying by. We waded down the road, yes, waded! This part of the outing definitely required gumboots. It was well worth the walk as we added Icterine Warbler, Black Crake, and another Thrush Nightingale to the

RIGHT A pair of African Crakes put on quite a show for us © Jody de Bruyn.





ABOVE There were plenty of Dwarf Bitterns  
© Derek Engelbrecht.



LEFT A Corn Crane was flushed, offering a couple of us a fleeting glimpse as it flew off © Jody de Bruyn.

list, a lifer for a couple of members. We returned to the vehicles and moved to the southern shores of the dam to get closer to the open water.

The water level was very high, and even with your gumboots on,



ABOVE We were excited to find a regional rarity - Black-necked Grebe. We counted five individuals  
© Jody de Bruyn.

you could not get close to the open water, but this was still worth the visit. We first refreshed ourselves with a well-deserved cup of coffee before heading out on our long wade along the 'shore.' The list continued growing with species like Red-knobbed Coot, Spur-winged Goose, Cape Penduline Tit, many Dwarf Bitterns, Olive Tree Warbler, Blue-billed Teal, Maccoa Duck, and, to our great surprise, Black-necked Grebe. We continued working along the shallows and flooded grass, flushing one Dwarf Bittern after another, and

then, a Corn Crane! Unfortunately, we were unable to flush it again.

After this, we called it a day and started heading back home with a list of more than 90 species and lifers for many of the group members. This was a very nice outing. Thank you to all who were involved.

Author e-mail: [wildlifestudio1@gmail.com](mailto:wildlifestudio1@gmail.com)

# Van Waveren

## Trip Report

TEXT Audrey Morris

PHOTOS Jody de Bruyn



European Honey Buzzard

At 5:30 on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2025, four cars with eager birders left the golf club, making our way to the Van Waveren Farm on the R101 close to the Shell Ultra City. It was a treat to travel such a short distance to see birds. In no time, we were at the farm and eagerly started looking for birds.

There was quite a chilly breeze blowing just before daybreak and those without jackets were suffering from frozen fingers! Coffee was needed to warm up those cold hands, so we stopped for coffee and a snack close to the apple orchards.

The farm has several dams, so we travelled quite a distance

but stopped regularly to enjoy the waterbirds. It was interesting to note how much longer the grass was than last year on our outing in March, as well as how much more water there was in the dams. We even saw a herd of zebra, kudu, and impala.

Our last stop was at a dam close to the entrance to the farm. We walked through fairly tall grass to get there but we were rewarded by seeing a Lesser Moorhen.

We left the farm at around 12:30 after a most enjoyable morning of birding. Thank you to Richter van Tonder and Jody de Bruyn for organising the outing and everyone willing to share their knowledge.

Author e-mail: [wgmail.com](mailto:wgmail.com)



African Wattled Lapwing



Black Stork



Banded Martin



Cape Grassbird



Cuckoo-finch



The birds (and birders) at  
van Waveren farm



Gabar Goshawk



Short-clawed Lark



Little Bittern



Spur-winged Goose



Northern Black Korhaan



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Derek Engelbrecht  
[roberts8revision@gmail.com](mailto:roberts8revision@gmail.com)

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](mailto:roberts8revision@gmail.com).

### Yellow-billed Stork

- Photos showing diet
- Large numbers at a roost
- Nests, eggs, and/or chicks

### 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

### Oxpeckers (Red-billed and Yellow-billed)

- Different age classes
- Photos showing foraging and diet
- Photos showing behaviour, interactions, birds at nests.

## 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](mailto: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](mailto:roberts8revision@gmail.com).

Regulars

# Birds in Art

**Crested Francolin**

**Text and Artwork**

**Willem Van der Merwe**

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



Crested Francolin

In this issue, I bring you one of my favourites: a Crested Francolin (*Bospatrys*) *Ortygornis sephaena*. Francolins used to be classified in one genus, *Francolinus*, but this has been broken up, and some species also got name changes to spurfowl or partridges. As it is, the francolins, in the old, broad sense, constitute a large group of partridge-like birds that live in Africa and Asia, ranging from rainforests to deserts and displaying an amazing diversity of subtle camouflage plumage patterns. By relationships, the francolins that were renamed spurfowl appear to be closer to quails, while the rest are closer to chickens.

The Crested Francolin is a species often seen here in South Africa. Its distribution stretches into northeast Africa, but one of its subspecies, *Ortygornis sephaena rovuma*, is sometimes classified as a separate species, Kirk's Francolin. It is relatively tame but difficult to see except when quite close, its plumage in various shades of brown blending in with the dry twigs and grass of its favoured bushveld habitat. Although it appears drab from afar, close-up views allow one to appreciate the wonderfully decorated plumage with lines, blotches, and fine barring. Its crest

is actually not very noticeable; it raises its long crown feathers only rarely. However, it has the habit of raising its tail when excited, like a bantam cock. This is its most distinctive feature. However, as can be seen closely, the dark cap bordering the light eyebrow and the fine streaks below are also good identifying features.

### Loudmouth partridges

This bird is unquestionably one of those with the loudest calls relative to their size. Indeed, when you're in the bush and one suddenly starts calling close to you, you will get a massive fright! It is a deafening, harsh call with a ringing quality, almost as loud as a gunshot. This call is another way to identify it,

even over a great distance. It is part of the bushveld atmosphere, to be heard mainly in the mornings and sometimes later in the day. The male and female call together in

BELOW An agitated male raises his crest and cocks his tail like a bantam chicken © Warwick Tarboton.



a raucous but meticulously synchronised duet used primarily to delineate their territories. They don't have large territories; you will encounter individuals, couples, or small family groups every few dozen metres in suitable habitat. Rarely will male francolins fight each other over territory.

Francolins are pretty omnivorous. They typically scratch in the soil to unearth bulbs, roots, and invertebrates, but they will also pick seeds and fruits off the ground and actively hunt insects and millipedes.

Crested Francolins lay from four to nine eggs per clutch. Bushes or tufts of grass conceal the nest. The chicks



LEFT A male noisily proclaiming his territory, one of the characteristic sounds of the Bushveld  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

accompany their parents from the time of hatching; like many other partridges, they become able to fly when not yet fully grown – at half adult size or less. I love coming across francolin families, even if I scare them off and I can see the little ones flying behind their

parents to the nearest tree or bush for cover!

Fortunately, Crested Francolins are still very common over large areas in South Africa and further north and are not threatened at present.

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# Reflections

*Reflections*

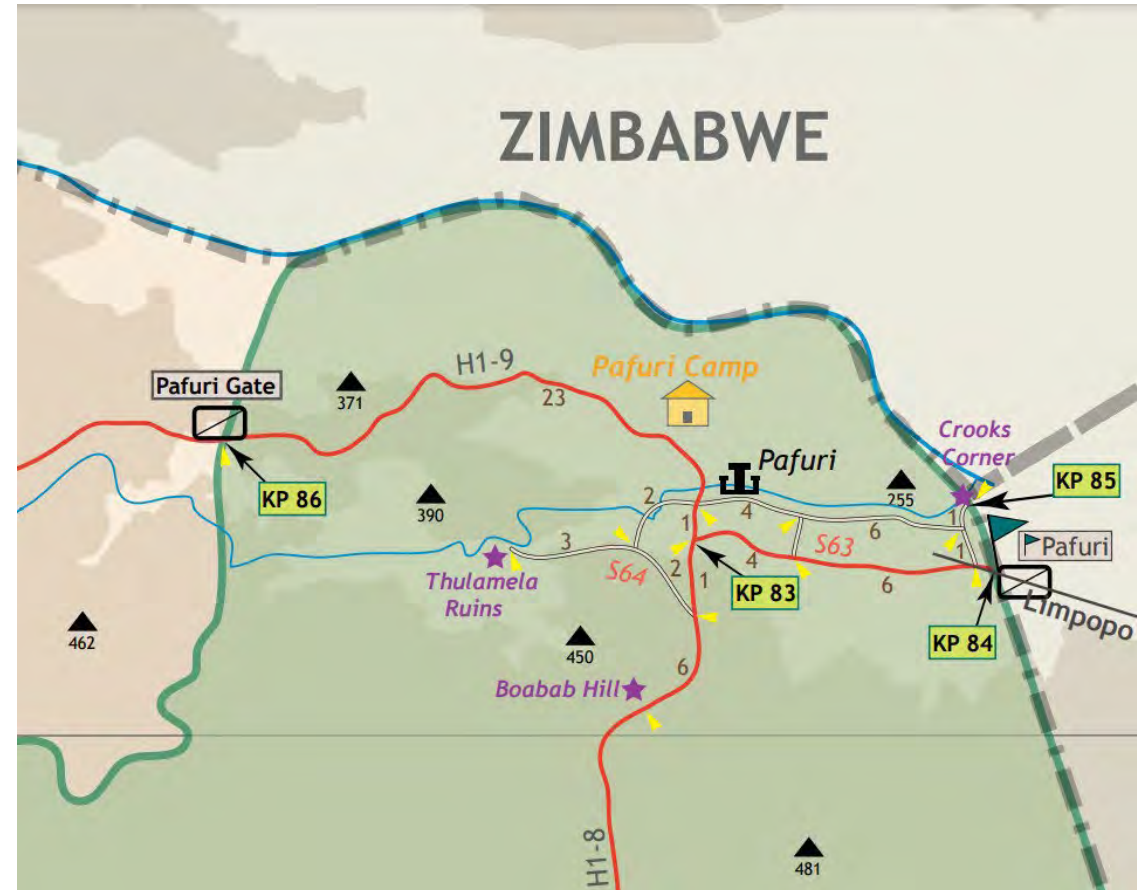
Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

## By Bountiful Baobabs... the Incredible Nyala Drive and the Treasures of Thulamela

Chris Patton

One of the most mesmeric things to do in all of Kruger is to travel along the H1-8 tarred arterial road to the Pafuri region and to experience the change in atmosphere once one passes the historic landmark of Baobab Hill and the road descends into the Limpopo Basin. This change in atmosphere is especially pronounced if you can do this drive at night, as can be achieved by securing a place on the SANParks' Honorary Rangers Extreme Birding weekends, which operate out of Punda Maria

Camp, over 2 or 3 weekends at the end of January and beginning of February each year. I have been blessed to lead birders on over 20 such weekends when I still lived up north, and despite the ungodly hour (it's usually between 03:30 and 04:00 when the four 10-seater open safari vehicles that get allocated to Punda Maria will descend at staggered intervals into the Limpopo Valley and the Levhuvhu Floodplain) the atmosphere of the air and the adrenaline of the birders on board are always the wake-up boost that everyone needs as they prepare for a dawn chorus at Pafuri.



ABOVE Map of the far north of Kruger featuring the Nyala Drive and Pafuri Area © Infomap..

Approaching Pafuri on the H1, the section between the Klopperfontein Dam turnoff (the S61– see *The Lark* 47 and 48 for articles Past Sacred Mountains and Klopperfontein) is mostly through dense mopane thickets, and while there are a few rocky outcrops that offer some interesting possibilities, the birding is not nearly as prolific as what lies ahead. But as one passes Baobab Hill the air becomes

heavier; cicadas pulse, and birdlife will become far more abundant in diversity and sheer numbers.

In this edition's *Reflections* article, I will focus my memories on the sections of road to the west



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

of the H1-8, and this starts with the turn off to the S64 gravel road, known as Nyala Drive, that ends in a return loop at the entrance to Thulamela. In truth, this more southerly section of Nyala Drive is often overlooked in favour of the more popular riverine drive, but after a kilometre or two along both roads, they converge into one road that leads to Thulamela. Nyala Drive is named after both the antelope (shown in the photo) and the tree of the same name (*Xanthocercis zambesiaca*), both common in the area.

While perhaps 19 times out of 20 I would have taken the river road ahead of the southerly stretch of the S64, the one memory I have of this stretch is from January 2014 on a Punda Extreme weekend. There had been some flooding restriction to our route for the day, so we travelled the more southerly route for a change and found a possible Ayres's Hawk-



ABOVE Nyala Drive is named after both the antelope and trees of the same name that thrive in the area © Derek Engelbrecht.

Eagle perched in a baobab in full leaf. I say “possible”, because there was some debate on the truck we were on. Most felt that the streaking was too bold and heavy to be the larger African Hawk-Eagle, but some felt the bird was too elongated to be an Ayres's and was more likely a particularly heavily streaked African Hawk-Eagle. At the time I think I was more in the latter camp, feeling the bird just wasn't quite a squat enough shape to be an Ayres's, but I also understand why some felt more inclined to feel it was indeed an Ayres's Hawk-Eagle.

No matter which access route you take onto Nyala Drive, one of the most prominent birds will be the Meves's Starling, although when I first travelled to the Pafuri area in the 1980s, they were still known as Long-tailed Starlings. As I wrote above, most times I explore the western part of the Pafuri region, I have travelled along the river road

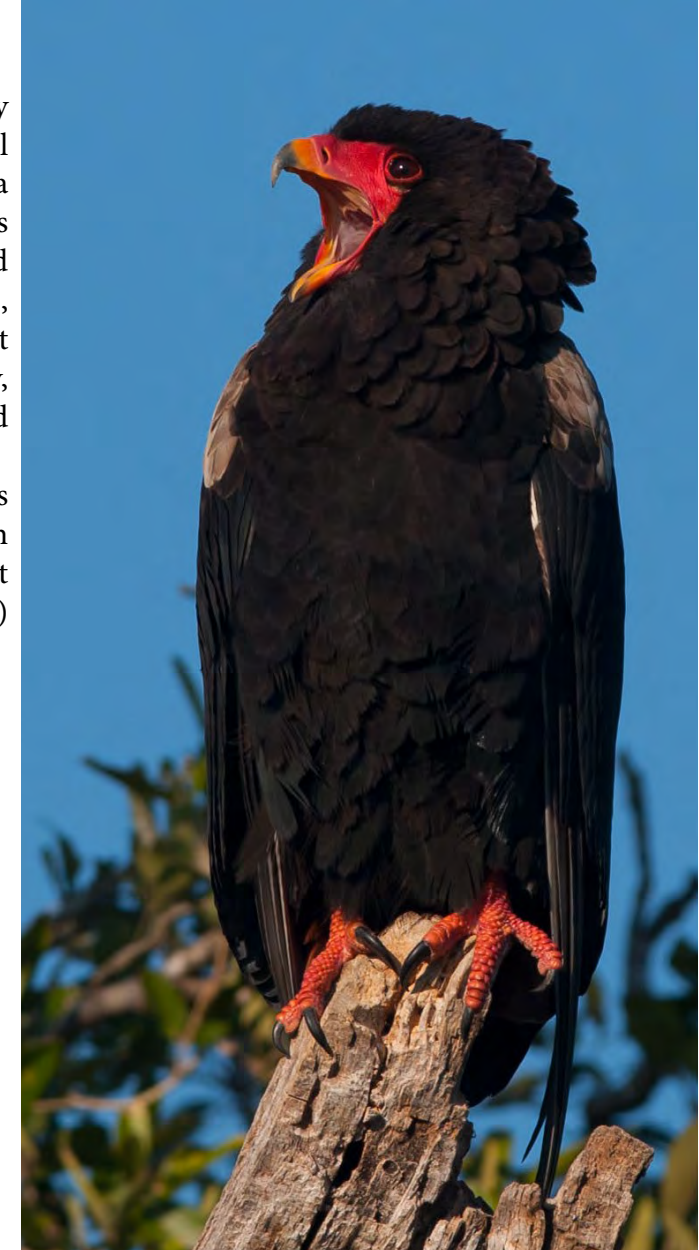
before it converges with the more southerly S64 access road, and it never disappoints, always teeming with birds... I call it the river road, but there are not any river viewpoints, and it is more about travelling through riverine forest. Readers can get a sense of the layout of the land in this aerial shot of the Levhuvhu River, where you can just make out the gravel road on the left of the photo.

There are a lot of similarities between the S64 and the S63

Pafuri River Road east towards Crooks' Corner and the Pafuri Border Post, which I will describe in more detail in pending editions. In terms of my personal memories of this section, the stretch has a lot of large riverine trees and is the haunt of large raptors that both roost and even nest in the area. In early mornings, before the air has warmed up to enable these big birds to use thermals to soar and search for prey, they can be seen on their nests, or sunning

themselves in the early morning sun. These will include some red data listed species such as Bateleurs, White-backed and Hooded Vultures, and Martial Eagles, but also Wahlberg's, Tawny, African Fish Eagle, and African Hawk-Eagles.

Some of my serious birding colleagues in Kruger (mostly ex, but one stalwart remains)



ABOVE A Bateleur yawning while soaking up the morning sun © Derek Engelbrecht.

LEFT The Levhuvhu River upstream of the Pafuri Bridge showing the exuberant riverine forest © Joep Stevens.



ABOVE A Bateleur on its nest on Nyala Drive © Chris Patton.

used to annually do the BirdLife South Africa Birding Big Day at the end of November/start of December under the name of 'the 4 Gauls'. One weekend at the end of the 1990s I was there at the same time, with a couple of friends, doing our own birding effort. We ran into 'the Gauls' along the riverine section of the S64 and traded a few quick exchanges of what we'd each seen. They were very excited to share that they'd just got a Thick-billed Cuckoo and to give us directions where we might find it. This was my first encounter with this species, and while it would only be about

10 years later when I would have quality sightings of this species near the Pafuri Border Camp (again, wait for a future edition), it was nice to tick the species off for the first time.

After the river road converges with the other S64 access road, the river and riverine forest are on the northern side of the road, but on the southern side, there is the looming presence of an imposing hill. The aerial photo below shows the walls of the former Iron Age



ABOVE An aerial view of the walls of Thulamela in the foreground, with the Levhuvhu River in the background © Joep Stevens.

settlement called Thulamela, which visitors can explore through guided tours.

Thulamela was the headquarters of an iron-age kingdom that thrived around 500 years ago and was only rediscovered as recently as 1991. For those travelling along Nyala Drive, the road flanks the base of the hill on the right of the accompanying aerial photo of the walls of the settlement, and the steep slopes have heavy undergrowth which are rich in birds. With the road flanking the Thulamela hillside, Red-faced Cisticolas, Spectacled Weavers,

Violet-backed Starlings, Red-faced Mousebirds, Black-collared Barbets, and Orange-breasted Bush-shrikes will be some of the more vocal species. Also, very vocal, particularly in the early morning are parrots, and the raucous activity of both Brown-headed and Brown-necked Parrots in both the riverine forest and the hillside woodland surrounding Thulamela.



ABOVE Brown-necked Parrot can often be seen on Thulamela Hill © Derek Engelbrecht.



LEFT Crested Guineafowl can be found rustling through the leaf litter on the slopes and in the floodplain of Nyala Drive © Derek Engelbrecht.

The steep rocky slopes of Thulamela and the surrounding hills are a favoured haunt of Gymnogene (I am not a fan of their more unwieldy and mundane official African Harrier-Hawk name and prefer to use the old name) and there's a good chance you might see

one when on Nyala Drive using their double-jointed legs to search nooks and crevices for food. Crested Guineafowl are another charismatic species that is regularly seen on this route.

The road that skirts around the base of Thulamela Hill and Nyala Drive now ends in a loop, much like the head of a needle, around a grove of large trees. This is an excellent place to stop and park and listen to activity and scan the surrounding landscape, firstly because the trees offer excellent shade, and it gets excruciatingly hot in the Limpopo Basin, but mainly because there are great birds to be seen looking south

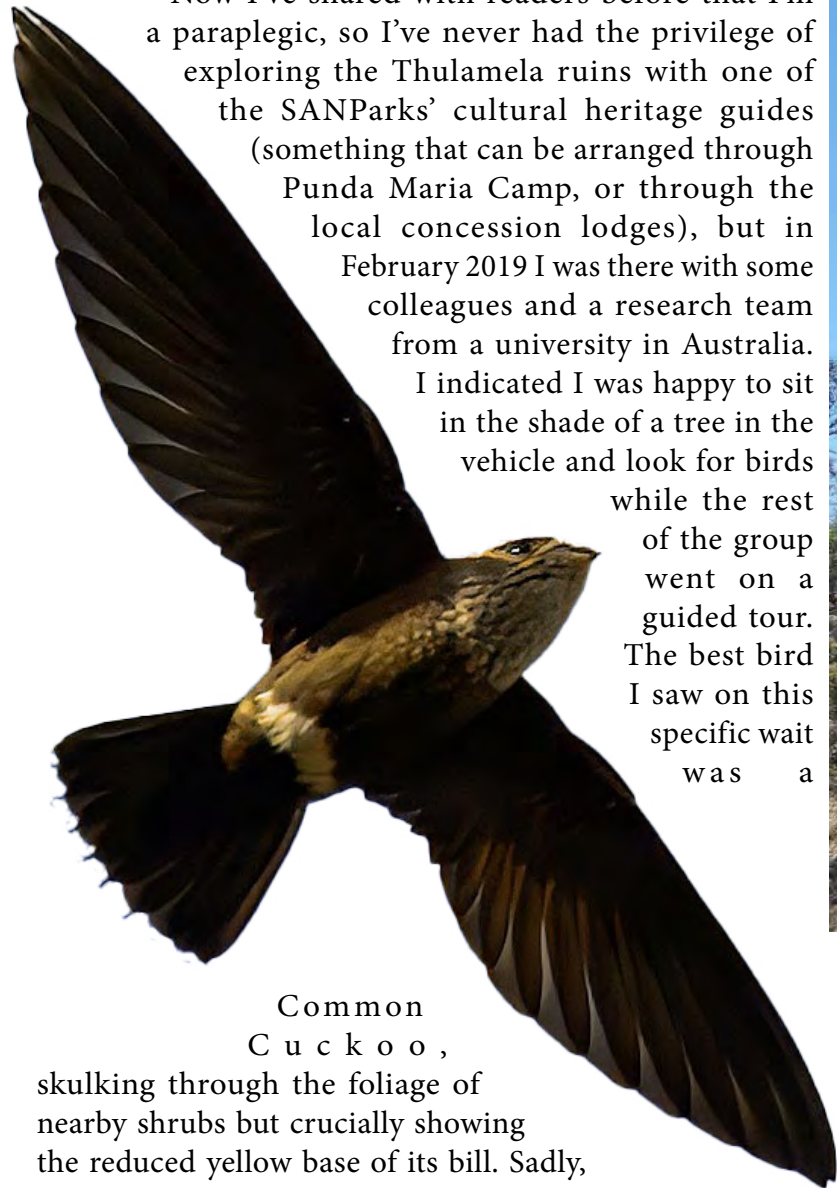
and west to the sheer cliff faces of the Matshitshinadzudzi Hills. Birds to look for here include Verreaux's Eagle, which nest on the cliffs and can often be seen soaring near the cliffs. It's a long distance, but these birds are so large and imposing that one can still pick them out (see the image of a pair on a rock fig tree against the cliff face below). It is also one of the few accessible places in the Park where one can reliably find African Black and Alpine Swifts.

BELOW A pair of Verreaux's Eagle on the cliff face viewable from the loop at the end of Nyala Drive © Chris Patton



Now I've shared with readers before that I'm a paraplegic, so I've never had the privilege of exploring the Thulamela ruins with one of the SANParks' cultural heritage guides (something that can be arranged through Punda Maria Camp, or through the local concession lodges), but in February 2019 I was there with some colleagues and a research team from a university in Australia.

I indicated I was happy to sit in the shade of a tree in the vehicle and look for birds while the rest of the group went on a guided tour. The best bird I saw on this specific wait was a



Common

C u c k o o ,

skulking through the foliage of nearby shrubs but crucially showing the reduced yellow base of its bill. Sadly, I wasn't quick enough to get a decent photo, so you'll all have to believe me that this was the more paradoxically uncommon Common Cuckoo, and not an African Cuckoo...

ABOVE Mottled Spinetail  
© Derek Engelbrecht.



One of the features of Nyala Drive is the number of baobab trees along the route. Both Mottled and Böhm's Spinetails can be seen, but the former is now far more unreliable, for reasons I will describe in more detail when I write about the Pafuri Bridge in one of the forthcoming issues of *The Lark*. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, it was not uncommon

ABOVE The many stately baobabs in the vicinity of Nyala Drive are key to the regular sightings of spinetails in the area © Joep Stevens

to sight both species, and Böhm's are still a regular sight. The spinetails aside, several other birds have a relationship with baobabs, and the density of these trees in the area explains their reliable



presence along Nyala Drive... Broad-billed Rollers are one, Brown-necked Parrots another, but so too is the Mosque Swallow, which uses baobab cavities for nesting, and encountering a number of this species on Nyala Drive, particularly around the Thulamela Hill is a feature of the route and will offer some nice photographic possibilities.

Nyala Drive didn't always end at the foot of Thulamela. For many years it continued further

along the southern riverbank of the Levhuvhu. It ended at an excellent river viewpoint where waterbirds like White-crowned Lapwing, African Pied Wagtail, African Openbill, Striated and Goliath Herons, and Giant Kingfisher would invariably be seen. Still, my overriding memory from one of my early trips there with my parents and brother in the 1980s was watching an African Finfoot dabble in the river from the riverbank above.

Sadly, in the 2000 floods of the Levhuvhu River on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, the sediment washed down the river was so thick and deposited in waves that it made the route inaccessible without major construction clearing work. A quarter of a century later, it is a great pity it was never cleared up and restored to return Nyala Drive to how it had been before. Those who remember the original route always feel a little short-changed. In particular, the closure removed

access to some regular Pel's Fishing Owl roosts that allowed visitors to see these birds from their vehicles. But there will be plenty of Pel's activity in future editions about the Bridge, the S63 river drive, and Crooks' Corner, so until next time I bid readers adieu.

Author email: [chris.patton@sanparks.org](mailto:chris.patton@sanparks.org)

ABOVE Mosque Swallows gather in numbers along Nyala Drive  
© Chris Patton.

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# Courtship behaviour of the Magpie Mannikin

TEXT AND PHOTOS Lana Hoffman

email: [lanahoffman61@gmail.com](mailto:lanahoffman61@gmail.com)

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 2024, I observed the courtship display of the Magpie Mannikin on three occasions in our garden in Levhubu, Limpopo Province.

In the first courtship ritual (Series 1), a female was sitting on a branch when a male alighted close to her, facing the opposite direction.

He raised his body and assumed an exaggerated bowing position with his bill almost touching his belly (1a). He then swung around, facing the same direction as the female, and "sunk" low so that his belly touched the branch they were on while adopting a slightly hunchbacked appearance, enhanced by raising

the feathers on his mantle ever so slightly (1b). He opened his beak and started "wagging" his tongue from side to side while looking at her sideways (1c). While rolling his tongue, the male approached the

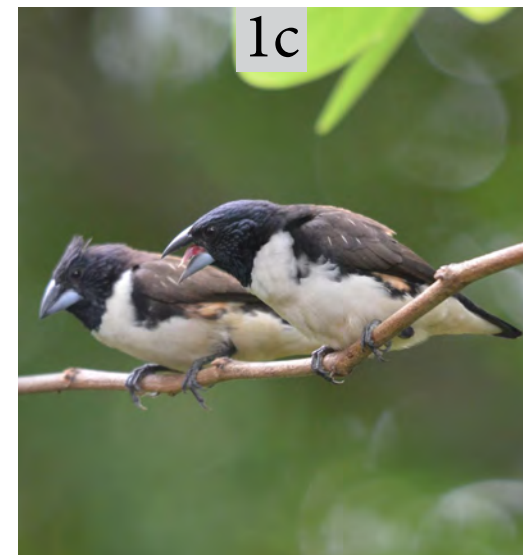
female by shuffle-hopping towards her, but she rejected his advances by shuffle-hopping a little further along the branch (1d and 1e). Despite all the male's efforts, it all came to nothing as the female flew off.



1a



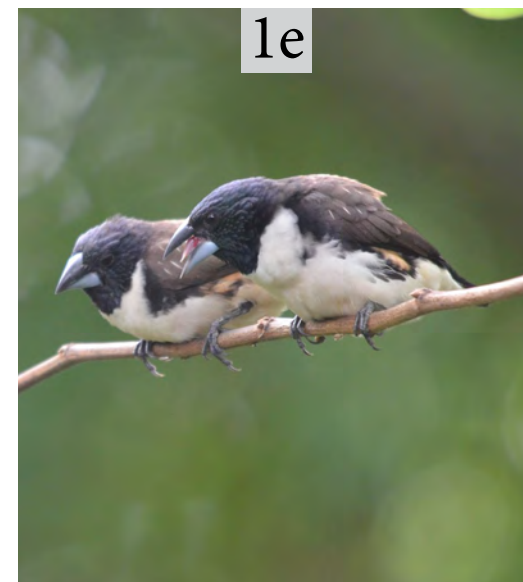
1b



1c



1d



1e

In the second observation, I started observing when the male was already shuffle-hopping towards the female and his tongue was wagging, but this male was not crouched as low as the first male was (See 2a–2c).

2a



2b



2c



The third courtship ritual followed the same pattern as the first one: the male alighted facing the opposite direction towards the female while wagging his tongue and looking at her sideways and from below (3b and

3c), and again the female shuffle-hopped further down the branch.

I also didn't hear any vocalising, but the noisy soundscape at the bird feeder may have masked any vocalisations.

In none of the observations described here did the courtship ritual culminate in copulation.

3a



3b



3c



# Notes on the behaviour and breeding biology of Temminck's Courser

## *Cursorius temminckii*

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

email: [faunagalore@gmail.com](mailto:faunagalore@gmail.com)

In this note, I summarise my field notes on various aspects of the natural history of Temminck's Courser. Breeding data was mainly collected in 2005 and 2006 while I was studying their breeding biology in the Polokwane Game Reserve. Based on my observations and the data I collected, I also challenge some statements and correct errors in the literature. I used the sections and headings as they appear in the [Roberts 8/Birds of the World](#) species accounts to fill in missing information or to supplement existing information.

Temminck's Courser is an Afrotropical endemic, occurring in arid and semi-arid savannahs from West Africa through to East Africa and south to eastern South Africa. Its movements are complex and poorly understood. While it is mainly regarded as nomadic, some populations are seemingly resident

with local movement in response to changes in vegetation cover and density, and some are thought to be partial, seasonal or intra-African migrants, possibly trans-equatorial migrants, although unequivocal evidence for the latter is lacking and not universally supported, e.g., Dowsett et al. (2008).

Unravelling the mysteries of its movements is complicated by several factors:

1. slight plumage differences between the different subspecies,
2. the degree of feather wear (e.g., older feathers are more washed-out),
3. co-existence of different putative subspecies at certain times of the year,
4. individuals matching the description of the nominate subspecies from the Sahel in North Africa purportedly over-summering on their wintering grounds in South Africa, and

5. Frequent dust-bathing (see [ML631576178](#)) resulting in the plumage of individuals resembling the colour of the substrate in the general area, i.e., substrate colour-matching.

It should also be mentioned that with improved access to many "remote" parts of Africa, data collected by citizen scientists (e.g., SABAP2 and eBird) has, in many instances, dispelled long-held views of, amongst others, the spatio-temporal distribution and movements of species, including Temminck's Courser. Advances in camera and sound recording technology have also improved our knowledge of seasonal and age-related plumage variation and the behaviour of species. To this end, I wish to encourage photographers and recordists to upload their media to digital libraries such as the [Macaulay Library](#), [Xeno-Canto](#), or [iNaturalist](#).

### General Behaviour

#### *Foraging*

Prey are collected on the surface, by digging, or at the base of a grass tuft where new growth emerges following a fire.

#### *Temperature Regulation*

Given the open terrain the species typically inhabits, birds are exposed to full sun for most of the day. They

show a range of physiological and behavioural strategies to offload excess heat, including perching on elevated objects such as rocks, dung piles (see [ML631565372](#)), or the bases of low anthills, standing in the shade of a bush, or raising the crown and dorsal to allow air to reach the skin, holding the wings slightly away from the body, closing the eyes to slits, and panting – often for hours at an end.

#### *Agonistic Behaviour*

Temminck's Coursers are usually rather timid and will avoid any potential threat by first running away and, if pressed hard, taking flight. For example, I once observed a pair of Crowned Lapwings approaching an incubating adult. The courser sat tight until the lapwings were only a few metres from the nest before it ran off. The lapwings took no notice of the nest. On another occasion, a Pied Crow was circling above an active nest. The adult first response was to crouch, but soon slipped off the nest and ran away in a crouched manner to about 30 m before it stood up and re-assessed the situation. It is interesting that in both instances the attending parents temporarily "abandoned" their nests, relying on the excellent camouflage of the eggs to escape detection by potential predators.



ABOVE It's all systems go in this heat-stressed individual: crown and dorsal feathers raised, panting, and the wings held slightly away from the body.

### *Social and Interspecific Behaviour*

Reports of a so-called aerial display flight and flight display call (Evans and Balmford 1992, Barlow 2002), need confirmation. Evans and Balmford (1992) write: "... each flight lasts 1–3 min, bird flying at c. 20 m height in a large circuit over its (presumed) nesting territory, calling every 2–5 s, a short, grating but slightly piping note, before descending in a shallow glide to land near take-off point." Barlow (2002) writes: "Sound recordings of the high, arching aerial displays of birds sallying far out and returning to the group were also made." In my opinion, nothing is in the description of these so-called territorial display flights and calls that rule out typical flight calls uttered when individuals are disturbed. When breeding birds

or foraging groups are flushed, they usually take off and fly in large, irregular circles above the source of the disturbance and call their typical *err-err* and piping *poo* calls. They usually continue circling for as long as the source of disturbance is present but soon return to the point where they take off once the threat has left the area. Clive Barlow kindly sent me the recording he refers to in Barlow (2002), and, having listened to it, it's my opinion that the call matches the typical *err-err* and piping *poo* contact calls of birds in flight. I have spent several weeks in

the field with Temminck's Courser and have never knowingly observed a type of flight that may be construed as a display flight. Furthermore, I have not been able to trace any reference to territorial display flights and display flight calls by any other courser species, so it seems strange that only one of the courser species would have such a display flight and call. In light of the uncertainty highlighted here, it is my opinion that the existence of display flights and display calls in Temminck's Courser needs confirmation.

### *Roosting*

It is difficult to establish their roosting behaviour, but when encountered at night, they are usually in open fields, and individuals are usually within a few metres of each other.

### *Breeding*

#### *Second/Later Broods*

If a nest is lost during incubation, pairs re-lay within a few days, in one instance between 4 and 7 days after the eggs were lost to predation. I have not found any evidence of replacement broods if the chicks are predated, nor of repeat-brooding attempts at the same site within a season, presumably due to the transient nature of its preferred breeding habitat, namely burnt veld.

### *Nest*

No nest is constructed, but comfort movements by the attending parent and their habit of constantly throwing small stones, bits of dung, small sticks or other plant material towards the eggs, especially at the end of an on-bout but also during short breaks, sometimes result in the formation of a faint outline towards the end of the incubation period. Using this faint outline as the 'nest rim', one nest I measured had a diameter of 80 mm.

### *Eggs*

The eggs are as described in the literature and exceptionally well camouflaged in the burnt environs the species typically breeds in. To further enhance camouflage and disrupt the outline of the nest, the eggs are usually laid amongst antelope droppings. The eggs are almost round, as shown by the mean egg elongation index estimate approaching 1.0, namely  $1.2 \pm 0.06$  SD (range 1.1–1.3,  $n = 14$  eggs). The mean egg mass and dimensions of 14 eggs in 7 nests were:  $26.4 \text{ mm} \pm 1.2 \text{ SD} \times 22.5 \text{ mm} \pm 0.4 \text{ SD}$  (range 24.2–28.5 mm x 21.9–23.0 mm,  $n = 14$  eggs). The fresh egg mass, i.e., the mass of eggs weighed within 3 days of laying, was 7.0 g and 6.7 g ( $n = 2$  eggs). Using the mass and dimensions of these fresh eggs, I



ABOVE Temminck's Courser often lays its eggs near antelope droppings - a disruptive camouflaging strategy.

calculated an egg weight coefficient ( $K_w$ ) (as described by Hoyt 1979) that can be used to calculate an estimated egg mass for Temminck's Courser eggs using their dimensions. The egg weight coefficient for Temminck's Courser eggs is 0.52278, and the estimated egg mass =  $7.0 \text{ g} \pm 0.4 \text{ SD}$  ( $n = 12$  eggs), representing 10% of the mean mass of an adult (mean = 69.9 g, Rose et al. 2020).

**Incubation**

The eggs are laid at daily intervals, and the onset of incubation appears variable. At one nest, incubation commenced after the second egg was laid, although the parent shaded the first egg for long periods during the day. At another nest which was

not followed from laying, the chicks hatched exactly 24 hours apart, suggesting incubation commenced after the first egg was laid.

The exact duration of the incubation period is still not known – it varies between 19 and 26 days in the literature – but was at least 21 days at one of the nests I monitored regularly. Both sexes incubate, although the role of the one sex, probably the male, is merely supplemental and typically lasts between 4 and 25 minutes.

However, at one nest, only one bird incubated, probably a female. I concede that despite observing the activity at this nest further than usual, my presence in the nesting area may have affected the partner's behaviour. Nevertheless, when the chicks in that nest hatched, both parents fed the young.

Incubation shift lengths usually last 75–120 min, but I have recorded longer stints lasting 6–8 hours. Such long on-bouts are interrupted by short off-bouts (1–3 mins) during which the individual preens, stretches its legs and wings, tosses objects

toward the nest, and forages within a few metres from the nest.

Incubation off-bouts depend on the ambient temperature. During cool weather ( $< 20^\circ\text{C}$ ), the eggs are sometimes left unattended for long periods, e.g., 90–147 minutes, but during very hot weather ( $> 30^\circ\text{C}$ ), the eggs are attended almost constantly. At high ambient temperatures, the parents would crouch over the eggs most of the time to shade them

BELOW When it is very hot, typically above  $30^\circ\text{C}$ , the eggs are shaded for long periods to prevent them from overheating.



rather than performing contact incubation.

The embryos can be heard peeping about 2–3 days before hatching. In the days prior to hatching, incubation is near-constant, presumably because of the greater vulnerability of embryos to extreme temperature fluctuations at this stage of their development.

### Hatching

During hatching, the parents are highly agitated and often attempt to assist the hatchling by pushing it with its bill or attempting to remove the eggshell before the chick is free from the eggshell (see [ML631574404](#)).

The newly hatched chicks' eyes are open and they can lift their heads almost immediately. It starts shuffling within an hour, squats after about 4 hours, and stands or walks short distances within 8–9 hours. They are surprisingly strong walkers: two chicks had moved ~60 m from their nest site 2 days after hatching.

The downy feathers of the newly hatched chick are initially wet and flush with the body, so the chick appears black, like the eggs, and is therefore well-camouflaged. The feathers dry within 1–2 hours, but it takes ~5–6 hours before the downy feathers have their fluffy, 'burnt-grass' appearance.

The chick is remarkably well-camouflaged with its mottled black, white, buff, golden brown, and rufous plumage dorsally. The chin, throat and belly are whitish, but the breast is dull rufous. Something I noticed and that is not described in the literature is that, like a Three-banded Courser chick, the chicks of Temminck's Courser also has a fringe of wispy, white, downy plumes, which may help to disrupt the outline of the chick.

Newly hatched chicks are offered their first meal within minutes of hatching, usually lepidopteran larvae (see [ML631575587](#)), but also small beetles and spiders. Parents appear to encourage the chicks to move by holding prey out of their reach. As the chicks grow, the prey items get larger, and the prey base gets more diverse and includes, amongst others, grasshoppers.

### Young Birds

Chicks are brooded regularly for the first 4–5 days, but brooding up to 8 days during inclement weather has been observed. Despite quickly showing signs of heat stress, e.g., panting, when left exposed during hot weather, I have not recorded any deaths related to heat stress.

### Annual Reproductive Success

The breeding success is relatively high for a ground-nesting species. Of



ABOVE A newly hatched chick. Note the fringe of wispy, white downy plumes, a feature that has not been reported in any of the literature to date.

23 eggs laid in 12 breeding attempts in the Polokwane Game Reserve, 18 hatched, i.e., the hatching rate = 78.3%. The success rate between hatching and fledging was 83% (of 12 hatchlings, 10 chicks fledged). I was unable to follow three nests to an outcome, i.e., death or fledging of the chicks, but of the nine breeding attempts I was able to follow to an outcome, 10 chicks fledged from 15 eggs laid, giving a crude breeding success rate of 67%.

There is still much to learn about the natural history of Temminck's Courser, but notes like these fill the gaps and improve our knowledge of this and other species.

### References

Barlow, C. R. (2002). First nest record for Bronze-winged Courser *Cursorius*

*chalconotus* in Senegambia. Bulletin of the African Bird Club 9(2):134–135.

Dowsett, R. J., D. R. Aspinwall, and F. Dowsett-Lemaire (2008). The Birds of Zambia. Tauraco Press & Aves, Liège, Belgium.

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# Bathing behaviour of Cape Longclaw *Macronyx capensis* and Ant-eating Chat *Myrmecocichla formicivora*

TEXT AND PHOTOS Dawid H. de Swardt

email: [dawie@nasmus.co.za](mailto:dawie@nasmus.co.za)

**B**irds perform various self-maintenance activities to keep their feathers in good condition. Depending on the species, these may include bathing in standing water, 'showering' in wet vegetation, dust bathing, and preening, to name but a few. Such information is lacking for many species. For example, no bathing behaviours are known for Cape Longclaw (Chittenden 2005) or Ant-eating Chats (Dean 2005).

On Saturday, the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2024, SABAP2 surveys were done in pentads south of Jagersfontein in the Free State during which the following observations on the bathing behaviour of Cape Longclaw were observed. There had been good rain during the night, and there were puddles of water in the veld and the road verge.

On the side of the road near the farm Swartkoppies farm (-29.9629, 25.5069), I came upon a Cape

Longclaw walking towards a largish puddle on the side of the road. When I first noticed it, its feathers were already wet and it was stopping every now and then to shake them dry (Fig. 1). It then walked into the pool of water and started bathing (Figure 2–3; also [ML628136084](#), [ML628136070](#)). Bathing involves splashing the water with its wings and holding its head above the water level with its body immersed in the water. This individual was joined by another (see [ML628136087](#)).

Figure 1. The Cape Longclaw standing near the pool shaking its feathers. It returned to bath again.

Figures 2 and 3. The bathing action of the Cape Longclaw. It splashes water over its body by fluttering its wings and occasionally dipping its head in the water.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

# MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

## Breeding: Nest - Structure and Composition

### Unusual nest material of a Karoo Thrush

In early December 2024, I walked out of my house in Randburg, Gauteng Province, to admire my green lawn and garden after some good recent rains. A shallow cement furrow next to the pool still had some water pooled in it, quite shallow, with right next to it a row of wild garlic (*Tulbaghia violacea*). I noticed a Karoo Thrush on the edge of the furrow ferociously plucking at a clump of the wild garlic. At first I thought it was after a snail or some other grub, but then it came away with a bulb in its beak, and the leaves still attached. Even more surprising, the bird quickly dipped the bulb in the shallow water, three times, to be exact, then flew away with the wild garlic and the leaves trailing to the side. I stood thinking about this for a few moments, wondering whether the garlicky smell was selected intentionally as an aromatic pesticide to protect the nest against bugs. I was just about to continue digging out 'surings' (*Oxalis* spp.), which I was doing earlier in the morning just about where the thrush grabbed its wild garlic, when the thrush – assuming it was the same one – returned, grabbed a bunch of surings with their bulbs on I had just left there while working, and off it went, same direction as before.

Must be an interesting nest!

Annalie van der Schyff • [annalie@avds.co.za](mailto:annalie@avds.co.za) (received 28 December 2024).

## Behaviour: Predation - Response to Predators

### Escape strategy of the Greater Honeyguide

A Little Sparrowhawk was pursuing a Dark-capped Bulbul in my garden, resulting in birds scattering in all directions. I was amazed to see a female Greater Honeyguide taking refuge in a nest box in the garden during the commotion. It remained there for about four minutes after matters calmed down. On another occasion, a juvenile found itself in an open, disused aviary in my garden. As I tried to catch it to ring it, the bird also took refuge in one of the disused nest boxes in the aviary.

Derek Engelbrecht • [faunagalore@gmail.com](mailto:faunagalore@gmail.com) (received 15 February 2025).



Figure 4

Figure 4. Ant-eating Chat bathing in a puddle of water near the Tierpoort Dam south of Bloemfontein.

A similar observation of an Ant-eating Chat was made a few years ago on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 2020 near the Tierpoort Dam area south of Bloemfontein. A chat was observed standing next to a water puddle on the farm road, walking towards the puddle, lowering its chest into the water, and performing a bathing action lasting a few seconds (Figure 4).

These records are the first to describe the bathing behaviour of these two species.

### References

Chittenden, H. N. (2005). Cape Longclaw *Macronyx capensis*. In Roberts Birds of

Southern Africa (P. A. R. Hockey, W. R. J. Dean, and P. G. Ryan, Editors), Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town, South Africa. pp. 1098–1099.

Dean, W. R. J. (2005). Ant-eating Chat *Myrmecocichla formicivora*. In Roberts Birds of Southern Africa (P. A. R. Hockey, W. R. J. Dean, and P. G. Ryan, Editors), Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town, South Africa. pp. 956–957.



## Interesting sightings

16 December 2024- 15 February 2025

Share your interesting sightings seen within the Limpopo Province.

Please submit your sightings to [thelarknews@gmail.com](mailto: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 Crake** - 2 January 2025. At least three birds at the Tom Naude Dam (Mark and Julia Friskin); 19 January 2025. A few seen at De Loskop (Birdlife Polokwane club outing); 19 January 2025. A pair at BBB Farm (Mark and Julia Friskin).  
**African Goshawk** - 10 February 2025. At least two birds displaying in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).  
**African Swamphen** - 26 January 2025. Seen at Soetdorings (Minkie Prinsloo).



African Crake © Derek Engelbrecht

**Allen's Gallinule** - 4 January 2025. Seen at the Flora Park Dam (Richter van Tonder).

**Black-crowned Night Heron** - 2 January 2025. At least two seen at the Tom Naude Dam (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Black-necked Grebe** - 19 January 2025. At least 5 individuals at De Loskop (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

**Black Sparrowhawk** - 4 January 2025. One at the Polokwane Bird Sanctuary (Richter van Tonder).

**Black-winged Pratincole** - 25 January 2025. Seen at farm Derdekraal near Haakdoring (Jody De Bruyn).

**Booted Eagle** - 27 January 2025. One seen on the campus of the University of Limpopo (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Blue Crane** - 5 February 2025, A small flock seen on farm Zoetkopjes near Roedtan (Delmarie Hansen)

**Corn Crake** - 19 January 2025. One flushed at De Loskop (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

**Dwarf Bittern** - 2 January 2025. At least four birds at the Tom Naude Dam (Jody de Bruyn); 19 January 2025. Several seen at De Loskop (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

**European Honey Buzzard** - 18 January 2025. Seen at Soetdorings (Minkie Prinsloo); 28 January 2025. One seen in Magoebaskloof (Julia and Mark Friskin); 31 January 2025.



Black-necked Grebe © Jody de Bruyn



Blue Crane © Delmarie Hansen



Corn Crake © Jody de Bruyn



Dwarf Bittern © Jody de Bruyn

One near the cricket club (Derek Engelbrecht); 8 February 2025. One at van Waveren farm (Jody de Bruyn).

**Great Egret** - 2 January 2025. One at the Tom Naude Dam (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Greater Flamingo** - 5 February 2025. At least 5 seen on a flooded field on farm Zoetkopjes near Roedtan (Delmarie Hansen)

**Great Spotted Cuckoo** - December 2024/January 2025. There appears to be an influx of this cuckoo into the Polokwane suburbs this season, with multiple reports from all over (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Greater Painted-snipe** - 26 January 2025. Seen at Soetdorings (Minkie Prinsloo).

**Harlequin Quail** - 15 February 2025. Seen near De Loskop (Richter van Tonder).

**Jackal Buzzard** - 21 January 2025. An adult seen in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Lesser Flamingo** - 5 February 2025. Seen at Platdoorns farm (Wilma Moreby).

**Lesser Moorhen** - 2 January 2025. Seen at the Tom Naude Dam (Jody de Bruyn); 19 January 2025. Several seen at De Loskop (Birdlife Polokwane club outing); 22 January 2025. Seen at Vencor (Mark and Julia Friskin).



Great Egret © Derek Engelbrecht



Greater Flamingo © Delmarie Hansen



Great Spotted Cuckoo © Derek Engelbrecht



Little Bittern © Derek Engelbrecht

**Little Bittern** - 9 February 2025. Several birds breeding at De Loskop (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Pink-backed Pelican** - 24 January 2025. One seen on the Nyl River at Platdoorns farm near Haakdoring (Johan Viljoen).

**Southern Bald Ibis** - 19 January 2025. One seen at the Makotopong Wetland (Prince Molokomme).

**Southern Carmine Bee-eater** - 26 January 2025. Seen at farm Dalmeny near Mara Research Station (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Spotted Crane** - 9 February 2025. One at De Loskop (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Squacco Heron** - 18 January 2025. Seen at Soetdorings (Minkie Prinsloo).

**Wahlberg's Eagle** - 6 February 2025. One seen in Welgelegen on a few occasions (Derek Engelbrecht).

**White-backed Duck** - 4 January 2025. Several seen at Tom Naude Dam (Mark and Julia Friskin); 9 February 2025. Two seen at De Loskop (Jody de Bruyn).

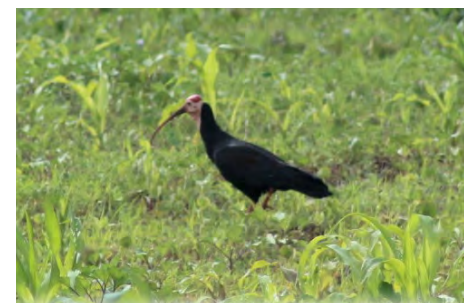
**Yellow-billed Stork** - 2 January 2025. Two birds at the Tom Naude Dam (Mark and Julia Friskin).

**Whiskered Tern** - 9 February 2025. At least 20 individuals at De Loskop (Richter van Tonder).

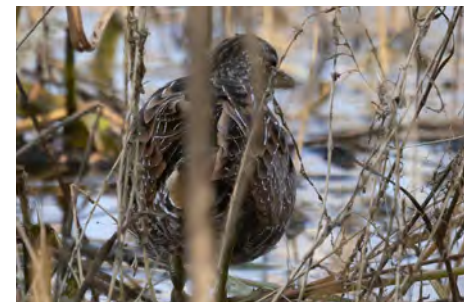
**White-necked Raven** - 27 January 2025. -Two seen on the campus of the University of Limpopo (Derek Engelbrecht).



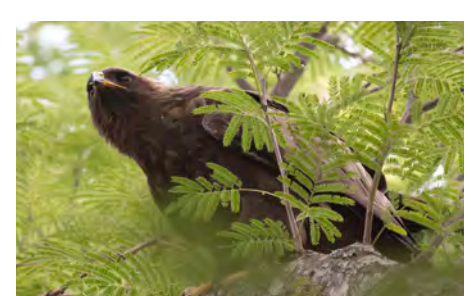
Pink-backed Pelican © Johan Viljoen



Southern Bald Ibis © Prince Molokomme



Spotted Crane © Derek Engelbrecht



Wahlberg's Eagle © Derek Engelbrecht

## PASSERINES

**Brimstone Canary** - 1 February 2025. One seen at Hout River Dam (Mark and Julia Friskin).

**Common Whitethroat** - 15 February 2025. Seen between De Loskop and Mogwadi (Richter van Tonder).

**Quailfinch** - 4 February 2025. A few individuals flying over Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Red-billed Buffalo Weaver** - 15 February 2025. On Bylsteel road at Hoogebult farm (Minkie Prinsloo).

**Red-collared Widow** - 8 February 2025. An adult male seen at Van Waveren farm (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

**Thrush Nightingale** - 19 January 2025. Two heard and seen at De Loskop (Birdlife Polokwane club outing); 19 January 2025. One at Soetdorings smallholdings (Minkie Prinsloo).



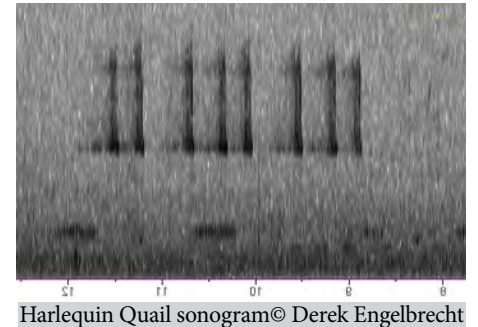
**Caspian Plover** - 19 December 2024. One seen near the Boyela waterhole in the Kruger National Park ([SA Rare Bird Report - 20 December 2024](#)).

**Fulvous Whistling Duck** - 11 February 2025. Several seen at Nylsvley Nature Reserve (Julia and Mark Friskin).

**Harlequin Quail** - 25 January 2025. An irruption at Blouberg Nature Reserve (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Rufous-bellied Heron** - 11 January 2025. One seen at Vogelfontein (Ezandrie Scherman).

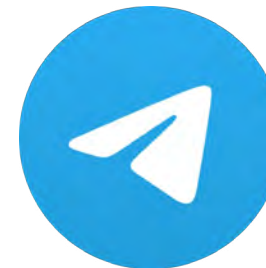
**Striped Crake** - 17 January 2025. One was found dead on the farm Chester near Tuinplaas in the Settlers District (Retha Weir).



## PASSERINES

**Dusky Lark** - 10 January 2025. One seen at Nylsvley Nature Reserve (Elandré Scherman).

**Icterine Warbler** - 8 February 2025. One heard and briefly seen at Nagude near Letsitele (Marc Freeman).



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.

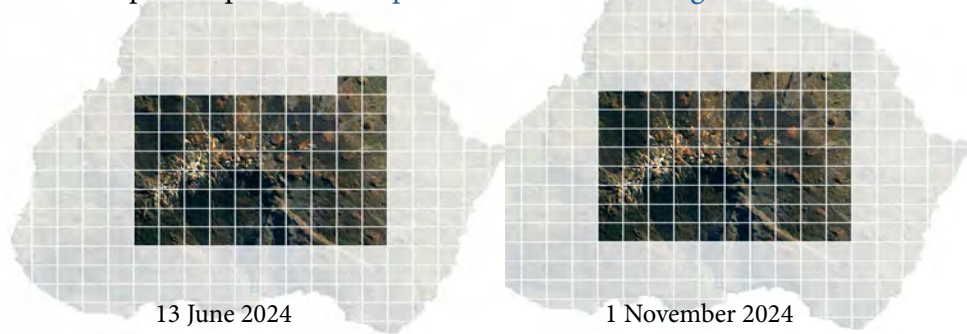
To help raise the necessary funds, please would you consider sponsoring one or more hectares of land on Marion Island.

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



A colour-banded Wandering Albatross broods its downy chick on Marion Island © Michelle Risi



**Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™**  
The Mouse-Free Marion Project  
[www.mousefreemarion.org](http://www.mousefreemarion.org)



# UPCOMING EVENTS



## 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

## Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting and AGM

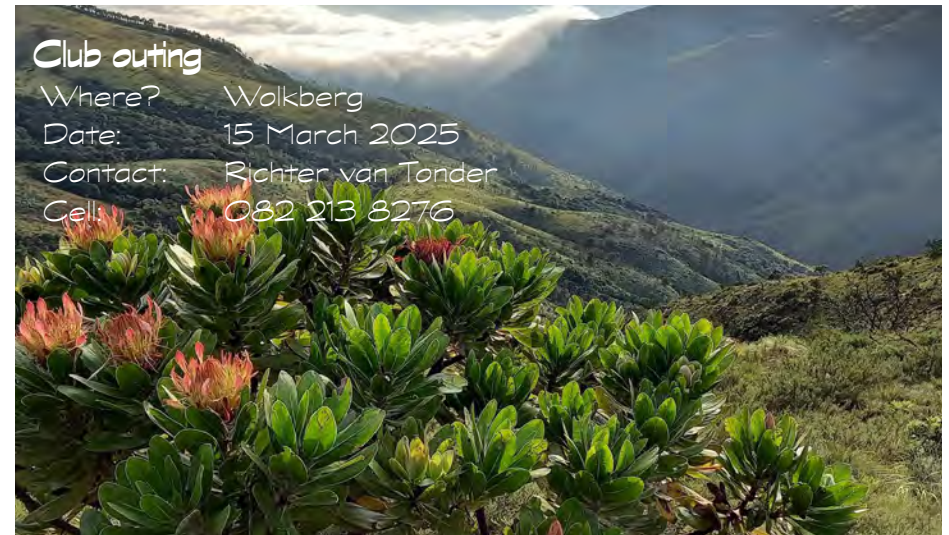
Date: 6 May 2025

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

### Club outing

Where? Wolkberg  
Date: 15 March 2025  
Contact: Richter van Tonder  
Cell: 082 213 8276



**Shopping list:** Special birds and scenic beauty, this popular outing is a must if you want to see some of our highland birds. Birds on offer include Buff-streaked Chat, Malachite Sunbird, Gurney's Sugarbird, Cape Bunting, Long-billed Pipit, Striped Pipit, Bushveld Pipit, Red-winged Francolin, African Black Swift, Jackal Buzzard, Flappet Lark, Red-throated Wryneck, Cape Rock Thrush, and Short-toed Rock Thrush. And who knows, there is an outside chance we might still get a Tree Pipit!

### Club outing

Where? Moorddrift farm  
Date: 12 April 2025  
Contact: Richter van Tonder  
Cell: 082 213 8276



**Shopping list:** Following on two very successful visits to Moorddrift in 2023 and 2024, we moved this year's outing to a slightly warmer time of the year. Moorddrift always springs a few surprises, but those who will join the outing can look forward to a variety of water-birds and bushveld birds. On one of the coldest days of the year in 2024, and in mid-winter, we managed to see 110 species, so a big total is on the cards for 2025. It's also the right time of the year to pick up some of the last migrants heading north, so who knows ...

# 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.



Temminck's Courser chick © Derek Engelbrecht.