

THE L A R K

Special feature

Mopane

Conservation

African Penguin reprieve

Local Birding

Wolkberg

Moordrift



Lesser Honeyguide parasitising Black-collared Barbet • Lesser Moorhen: a breeding record and feeding behaviour • Red-winged Starling - some observations • Black-crowned Night Heron predated a Red-billed Teal duckling • A Nylsvley stand-off: Swainson's Spurfowl and African Crake crossing paths

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 JUNE 2025

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

Cover page theme 2025: Limpopo Specials

COVER Meves's Starling © Daniel Engelbrecht.

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Highland birding is always special and this year's outing to the Wolkberg was no exception. **Minkie Prinsloo** reports.



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Traditionally a winter outing, the team moved this year's outing to autumn, but did the change pay dividends? **Willem Van der Merwe** gives us a rundown.



A reprieve for our beloved African Penguins 23

Birdlife South Africa and **SANCCOB** scored a victory in the fight to save this iconic species from extinction - but the fight for its survival continues.

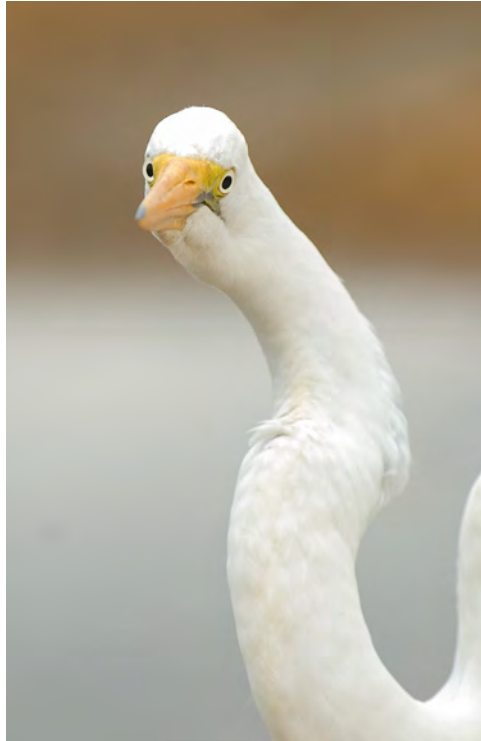


Celebrating the mopane 53

Boring, endless, monotonous - think again! **Derek Engelbrecht** and **Pietman Muller** teamed up to reveal some of the unseen treasures of this remarkable tree.



For a lark ...



A kinky egret © Derek Engelbrecht

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Editors' chirps

In the first of the year's two winter issues, some good news is sure to warm the heart and bring the promise of hope for the continued survival of the African Penguin. In a major victory for the conservation of the African Penguin, the Pretoria High Court issued a court order stipulating no-fishing areas around African Penguin breeding colonies for 10 years (see page 23). As a bird club affiliated to Birdlife South Africa, we can be proud of their and SANCCOB's tireless pursuit to protect this iconic species. This demonstrates the value of being a member of BLSA, because your membership fees made it possible, and this win means YOUR voice was also heard. As a club, we express our appreciation and thanks to BLSA and SANCCOB for their efforts to protect the African Penguin and the DFFE for their quick response to implement the court's directives. But as the saying goes: 'A battle was won, but not the war', and it is imperative to continue our support of these organisations. Long live the African Penguin!

In this issue, you can read the trip reports of two club outings, one to the highlands and one to the floodplains. We also decided to feature the oft-maligned mopane tree as a Special Feature. Some may question why we feature a tree in a primarily bird and birding-related outlet. As you'll see from the article, this remarkable tree and the many critters associated with it form the basis of a unique ecosystem that supports a range of bird species, but also other animals, and it is also important to the livelihoods of millions of people within its range. We hope you enjoy the reading, and look forward to seeing you amongst the mopanes in the future.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this issue, and a special word of welcome to a new contributor, Martin Potgieter, who shares his field experience with a breeding pair of Lesser Moorhen. Thank you, Martin. To all our readers, we hope you enjoy this issue, and we look forward to receiving your contributions to the next issue.

Raelene and Derek





Wonderful Windy Wolkberg

Minkie Prinsloo

© Julia Friskin

As you all know, our club has several outings every year to various locations. One that is on the list every year is the Wolkberg outing, and as every other year, it did not disappoint. This year, our outing was

held on the 15th of March, and 13 club members gathered at 5:30 to leave from our gathering spot.

For those of you not familiar with our area, situated about 60 km east of Polokwane, the Wolkberg Mountain range is the northernmost

part of the Drakensberg Mountain range, and at 2,200 m above sea level, it is the highest mountain range in Limpopo, with Iron Crown being the highest point. It consists of a couple of habitat types, such as montane grassland, savannah and forest that

ABOVE Looking west towards the hills and dales of Mimosa valley in the Wolkberg © Julia Friskin.



White-necked Raven, Malachite Sunbird, African Olive Pigeon, Black Saw-wing, a group of 30+ European Bee-eaters, Cape Bunting, and Buff-streaked Chat. The Great Spotted Cuckoo generated a SABAP2 out-of-range alert and was a lifer for two members. Other lifers for some members were Wailing- and Lazy Cisticola, Nicholson's Pipit, and Cape Bunting.

LEFT The highlands is where Gurney's Sugarbird can be found - never far from proteas
© Jody De Bruyn.

BELOW Nicholson's Pipit, another upland special
© Jody De Bruyn.

in turn support plant species such as Silver Sugarbush (*Protea roupelliae*), Common Sugarbush (*Protea caffra*), Highveld Cabbage Tree (*Cussonia paniculata*), and the endemic Dolomite Aloe (*Aloe dolomitica*).

The overall weather on the day was cold and windy, but as we were in the mountains, when moving down into the sheltered low-lying valleys, the wind did not bother us as much, but as soon as we climbed a ridge or proceeded further up the mountain, the wind was ice-cold. At the end of

our outing at around 11:15, clouds also started to drift in, and it looked like some rain was likely to fall.

With the weather not being as good as hoped for, the birding was a bit quieter than on some of the previous trips, and unfortunately, we dipped on the Tree Pipit that we usually find on this outing. We still saw some fantastic birds such as Great Spotted Cuckoo, Lazy Cisticola, Gurney's Sugarbird, Wailing Cisticola, Greater Double-collared Sunbird, Nicholson's Pipit,





OPPOSITE TOP Seeing a family of Buff-streaked Chats was a great treat © Jody De Bruyn.

ABOVE Mocking Cliff Chat © Jody De Bruyn.



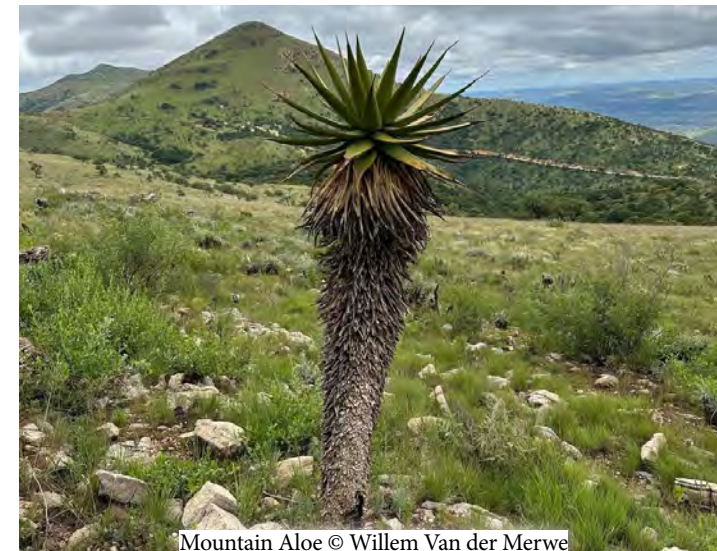
OPPOSITE BOTTOM The mountains offer opportunities to get eye level views of the impressive White-necked Raven © Jody De Bruyn.



The Robust Double Ghost Orchid © Willem Van der Merwe



Cape Bunting © Jody De Bruyn



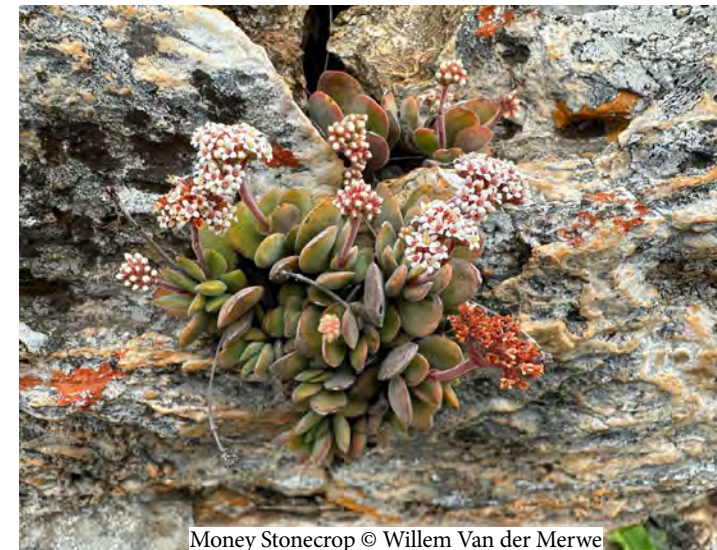
Mountain Aloe © Willem Van der Merwe



Pin-tailed Whydah © Jody De Bruyn



Malachite Sunbird © Jody De Bruyn



Money Stonecrop © Willem Van der Merwe

With the Wolkberg being such a diverse and beautiful area, this outing always provides something for everyone. You have spectacular scenery of mountains, gorges, and even a waterfall with the recent rain. For the plant enthusiasts, in addition to the species mentioned above,

other beautiful flowers include Primrose Gentian (*Ecochaenium grande*), Money Stonecrop (*Crassula swaziensis*), Double Ghost Orchid (*Habenaria falcicornis*), and Blushing Gerbera (*Gerbera viridifolia*). The wind did not even slow down the butterflies with species like African

Plain Tiger (*Danaus chrysippus*), African Yellow Pansy (*Junonia hierta*), Dark Blue Pansy (*Junonia oenone*), Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*), Citrus Swallowtail (*Papilio demodocus*) and Narrow Green-banded Swallowtail (*Papilio nireus*), to name a few.

If you haven't had the chance to visit the Wolkberg mountains of the Limpopo Province yet, consider joining us on our next club outing to this wonderful area. I can guarantee you won't be disappointed.

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A sizeable group of birders, from total newbies to highly experienced, set off early on Saturday, the 12th of April 2025, for the Moorddrift Dairy Farm, close to Mokopane, previously known as Potgietersrus or Potties to locals. The farm has pastures with cows and extensive wild veld, with various large mammals, including blesbok, impala, kudu, warthog, giraffe, and more. Even upon entering the farm from the turnoff next to the highway, we saw our first major bird species - Common Ostriches (Volstruis)! The rest of the day rewarded us with many more sightings. The veld was looking very lush and green, and the clouds parted from time to time to let the sunlight through, to the benefit of our coterie of photographers.

On earlier outings to this farm, we went later in the year, well into the winter, and were always daunted by the freezing weather. This year, we shifted the outing to early autumn, which was much more tolerable, though there was still a sharp wind blowing in the early morning. We started our birding adventure on the shore of the farm's main dam. The wind was actually a boon here! Our first special was the Whiskered Tern (Witbaardsterretjie), and

Autumn Diaries

MOORDDRIFT

Willem Van der Merwe

African Fish Eagles © Jody De Bruyn



when they were flying into the strong wind, from our perspective on the ground, they were moving quite slowly, clearly showing their neat white, black, and grey plumage. This is one of only a few tern species that are fairly regularly seen on inland waters, but a reliable sighting here. There were also White-winged Terns (Witvlerksterretjies), but I didn't see them.

We walked along the shoreline for a few more bird sightings. Waterside regulars here included

African Jacana (Grootlangtoon), Pied Kingfisher (Bontvisvanger), African Pied Wagtail (Bontkwikkie), Reed Cormorant (Rietduiker), White-breasted Cormorant (Witborsduiker), African Darter (Slanghalsvoël), Black Crake (Swartriethaan), Red-knobbed Coot (Bleshoender), Egyptian Goose

ABOVE Whiskered Terns were one of the first specials seen on the outing © Jody De Bruyn.



ABOVE Some of the shorebirds seen on our walk along the dam: Hamerkop and Black Heron © Jody De Bruyn.

RIGHT Black-crowned Night Heron © Jody De Bruyn.



(Kolgans), and quite a large flock of Glossy Ibis (Glansibis), always a treat. As always, the grassland near the dam yielded the African Wattled (Lelkiewiete) and Blacksmith Lapwings (Bontkiewiete). Also present were Zitting Cisticolas (Landerykloppie). This tiny bird is the most widely distributed cisticola, being found across Africa, southern and western Europe, east through south and eastern Asia to North Australia! They can be easily recognised by their 'tsik-tsik-tsik' calls as they fly high over the grasses. It is said that those in southeast Asia have a faster, 'drier' call than the ones

we have here! Interestingly, we also encountered the Zitting Cisticola's close relative, the Desert Cisticola (Woestynkloppie), in the same grassland. This one has a more restricted distribution, in dry but not true desert regions of sub-Saharan Africa. It usually occurs in drier, more open grassland, but here it co-occurred with the Zitting Cisticola in the same grassland! A bird sat out in the open for quite a long time, giving us exceptional views. It is paler and

BELOW The tiny Desert Cisticola
© Jody De Bruyn.



ABOVE A female Cardinal
Woodpecker showed well
© Jody De Bruyn.

more washed-out in colour than the Zitting Cisticola but has a very short tail similar to the other cisticolas called 'Kloppoppies' in Afrikaans. The Desert Cisticola, in particular, makes the 'knocking' sound with its wings as it displays, giving the group their Afrikaans name.

Another bird of the short grassland, that is almost impossible to see but that can be ID'd on its 'chinking' calls, is the Quailfinch (Kwartelvinkie). I don't know if any of us saw them this time, but some of us at least heard them. Another grassland bird easily heard was the Rufous-naped Lark (Rooineklewerik). The lovely, long-

tailed Namaqua Doves were also foraging in the open areas.

After spending time around the dam, we headed into the hills above the dam. Here, the vegetation is open, broadleaved woodland typical of the bushveld of the Potties region. This part gave us great woodland specials such as Yellow-bellied Greenbul (Geelborswillie), Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird (Geelblestinker), Black-backed Puffback (Sneebul), Southern Black Tit (Swartmees),



Pearl-spotted Owlet © Jody De Bruyn



Chinspot Batis © Jody De Bruyn



Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird © Jody De Bruyn

Orange-breasted Bushshrike (Oranjeborsboslaksman), Black Cuckooshrike (Swartkatakoeroe), and a Pearl-spotted Owlet (Witkoluil) that was being mobbed by the Yellow-bellied Greenbul! We also met at various times in the woodland/bushveld some Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill (Geelbekneushoringvoël), Southern Red-billed Hornbill (Rooibekneushoringvoël), Common Scimitarbill (Swartbekkakaar), Acacia Pied Barbet (Bonthoutkapper), Cardinal Woodpecker (Kardinaalspeg), Emerald-spotted Wood Dove (Groenvlekduifie), Cape Starling (Kleinglansspreeu), Grey-backed Camaropteras (Grysrugkwêkwêvoëls), Yellow-breasted Apalis (Geelborskleinjantjie), Grey Tit-Flycatcher (Waaierstertvlieëvanger), and Chinspot Batis (Witliesbosbontrokkie). Associated with the large mammals were Red-billed Oxpeckers (Rooibekrenostervoël). For some of our novices, seeing

some loudly-performing Burnt-necked Eremomelas (Bruinkeelbossangers) up in a thorn tree was a special treat. Unfortunately, we didn't meet any helmetshrikes (helmlaksmanne) - we got both White-crested (Withelmlaksman) and Retz's (Swarthelmlaksman) here on previous occasions.

After birding in the hills, we returned to the dam, but this time to a quieter spot around the

headwaters of the main dam. Here we encountered a few more species, with good sightings of a Squacco Heron (Ralreier) well away from the water in an open thorn-tree 'parkland'! We also got Little Egret (Kleinwitreier), Black-crowned Night Heron

BELOW A Red-billed Oxpecker taking a ride on its host © Jody De Bruyn.





(Gewone Nagreier), Striated Heron (Groenrugreier), Black Heron (Swartreier), Three-banded Plover (Driebandstrandkiewiet), Grootwitreier (Great Egret), Brown-throated Martin (Afrikaanse Oewerswael), Malachite Kingfisher (Kuifkopvisvanger) and Hamerkop.

Raptors for the day - but all seen rather distantly - were Wahlberg's

Eagle (Bruinarend), African Fish Eagle (Visarend), and Black-chested Snake Eagle (Swartborsslangarend).

After finishing at the farm a bit before noon, some of us headed a short distance away to find a few more species. We stopped at a road on a bridge going over a stretch of river, where we saw a few more ducks: Red-billed Teal

(Rooibekeend), Hottentot Teal (Gevlekte Eend), and Southern Pochard (Bruineend), as well as Little Swifts (Kleinwindswael) swooping over the water and under the bridge, where they likely had nests. The surrounding bushveld also gave us African Grey Hornbill (Grysneushoringvoël) and Violet-eared Waxbill (Koningblousysie).

ABOVE A group of Burnt-necked Eremomelas put on a spectacular display © Jody De Bruyn.

All in all, we tallied about 135 species over the day! The dairy farm is set to become a regular, guaranteed-to-be-rewarding birding venue for our club.

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MEDIA RELEASE

Conservation organisations commend fast action by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment

Cape Town, 2 April 2025

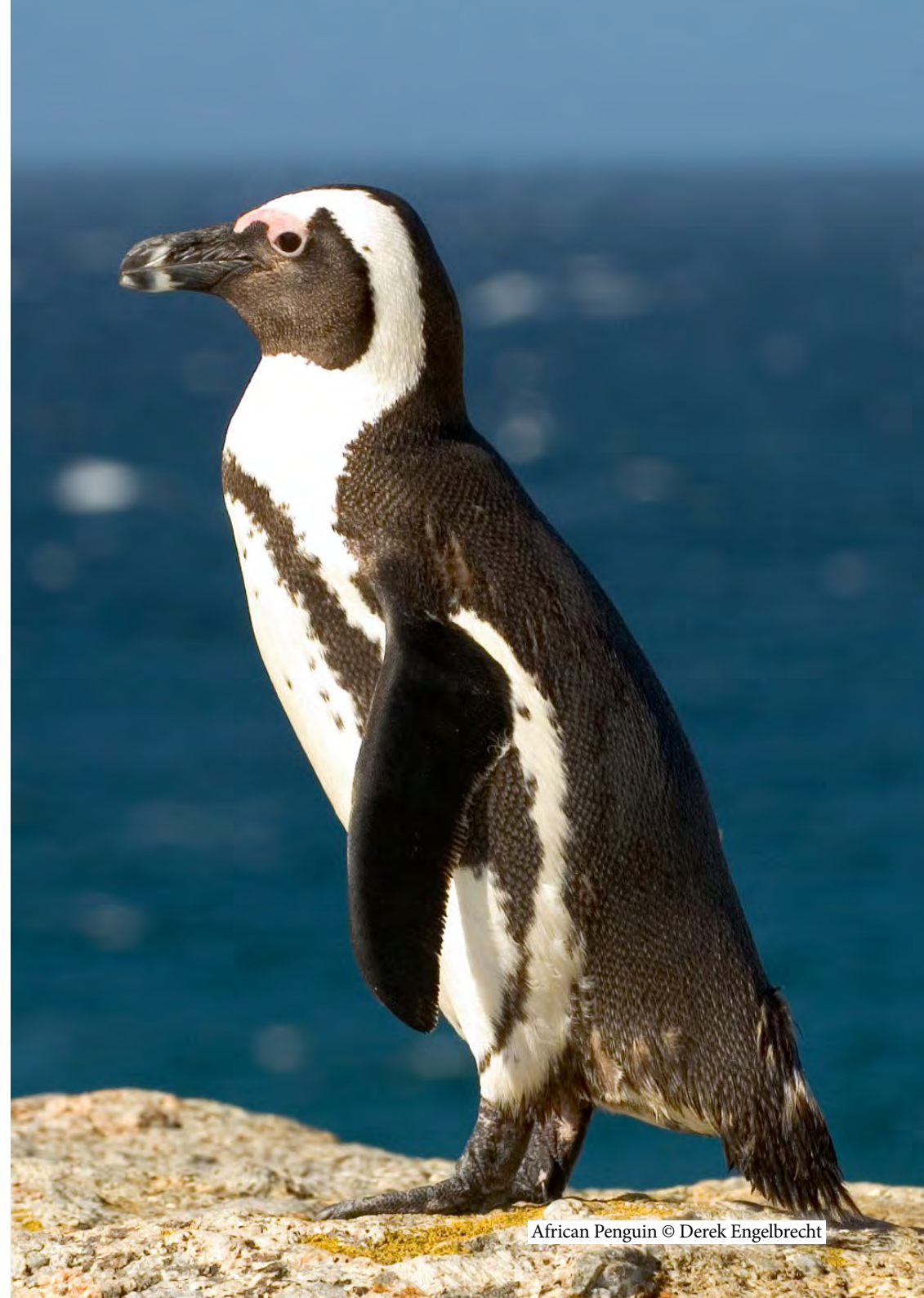
BirdLife South Africa and SANCCOB commend the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) for its efficient response to the recent court order by issuing permit conditions enforcing revised closed fishing areas to protect penguins.

On 18 March, the Pretoria High Court issued a [court order](#) stipulating areas around African Penguin breeding colonies that would be closed to fishing for sardine, anchovy and redeye round herring for the next ten years. The court order reflects a settlement agreement between the commercial purse seine fishing industry, DFFE and the two conservation organisations (SANCCOB and BirdLife South Africa). Accordingly, the department

had two weeks to implement the changes to the fishing permits to reflect the revised closures. The department implemented the changes within three days and issued the revised permit conditions which were sent to fisheries rights holders on Thursday 20 March.

The effect of the closures will not be immediate, which is why the closures will be in place for 10 years. Compliance by the fishing industry to the closures will be monitored by the DFFE. In the past, compliance by the purse-seine fishery with experimental closed areas has been good so it is expected that the new closures will be respected.

“We appreciate and commend the speed at which DFFE worked to implement these changes: the urgent need to have meaningful closures to



African Penguin © Derek Engelbrecht

protect penguin foraging areas was a key consideration in our decision to settle”, said Dr Alistair McInnes, Seabird Conservation Programme Manager at BirdLife South Africa.

“The challenge now is to assess the penguins’ responses to the closures. The conservation sector remains committed to assisting DFFE and managing authorities: CapeNature, City of Cape Town, Robben Island Museum and SANParks with monitoring the penguin colonies” said Nicky Stander, Head of Conservation at SANCCOB.

BirdLife South Africa and SANCCOB, in collaboration with Nelson Mandela University, CapeNature and SANParks, have so far installed Automated Penguin

Monitoring Systems (APMS) at four of the six colonies with fisheries closures.

“These systems will help us to limit disturbance to this Critically Endangered species while gathering important data such as the weight of the birds before and after foraging trips and how long they spend at sea during these foraging trips, affording critical insights into the health and condition of the colonies” explains Dr McInnes.

Other monitoring will include annual censuses of the penguin population, monitoring breeding success, and using GPS devices to track their movements. This work will be undertaken in partnership with other NGO scientists and government agencies.

For more information about the APMS, please go to:

<https://www.penguinalert.org/>

For further information and photographs, please contact:

Kurt Martin: kurt.martin@birdlife.org.za, or

Robyn Fraser-Knowles: robyn@sanccob.co.za



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.





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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.

Great Egret

- Photos showing diet
- Nests, eggs, and nestlings
- Different age classes

Western Barn Owl

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

Abdim's Stork

- Nests and nestlings
- Behaviour
- Typical habitat

Blue Swallow

- Foraging
- Typical habitat
- 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 Finfoot](#)
[Gurney's Sugarbird](#)
[East Coast Akalat](#)

[Monteiro's Hornbill](#)
[Levaillant's Cisticola](#)
[Lowland Tiny Greenbul](#)

Regulars

Birds in Art

Fork-tailed Drongo

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



Fork-tailed Drongo

In this issue, I will feature the Fork-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis*.

Drongos are a group of birds that occur mainly in Africa and Asia. The word 'drongo' comes from a Malagasy name for one species but is now applied to the entire family. They have proven good at crossing ocean stretches, colonising the Indonesian Islands, New Guinea, and Australia from Asia, and dispersing to Aldabra, the Comoros, and Madagascar from Africa. Drongos evolved into different species and subspecies on various islands. Though most species occur in the tropics, some have spread northward to Iran and Siberia in Asia, and, in Australia, the Spangled Drongo's *D. bracteatus* distribution also spreads far to the south of the Tropic of Capricorn.

There are five currently recognised drongo species in Africa. Of these, the Fork-tailed Drongo is the one most people encounter. It is a bold, conspicuous bird that hunts in open savannah regions all over sub-Saharan Africa. Other drongo species in Africa all live in forests, making them harder to see. In Asia, most species are rainforest dwellers, while only a few hunt in more open habitats. The group probably originated in Asia, spreading to

Africa about 15 million years ago and Australia about 6 million years ago. Interestingly, some drongos spread from Africa back to Asia - these are the Black *D. macrocercus*, Ashy *D. leucophaeus*, and White-bellied *D. caerulescens* drongos. It is amazing that these managed to keep up with the competition from the other drongo species that were already there. Apart from the Ashy Drongo, which varies from dark to light grey, the drongos are predominantly black, some with white bellies.

As far as drongos go, the Fork-tailed Drongo is a fairly typical drongo in appearance, but some drongo species lack the forked tail, while others exaggerate it, with splayed or recurved tail tips. In a few species, there are extensions to the tail feathers in the form of long streamers, or 'racquets', consisting of bare shafts with paddle- or spear-like tips. A few drongo species have crests on their heads as well. Despite this variety, all living drongos are classified in the same genus, *Dicrurus*.

Drongos are excellent fliers. They use their forked tails much as swallows, spreading and flexing them to help them execute rapid twists and turns in mid-air. They also have long, elegantly pointed wings,

and their flight mode is light and seemingly effortless. They have short legs and feet in contrast to the long wings and tails.

Drongos hunt mostly flying insects. They will sit on a perch, spying on the environs, and swoop out at promising prey items. This attachment to an open perch site makes them very easy to see and photograph. Watching them for a while is rewarding, marvelling

at their fast and expert aerial manoeuvres. If successful with a sortie, they return to the perch and beat the insect against it, killing it, expelling its entrails, and/or rubbing off its sting or stinging hairs. Larger items might be held down in the claws and dismembered by the bill.

BELOW Fork-tailed Drongos often use larger animals as beaters to flush prey © Derek Engelbrecht.





ABOVE Fork-tailed Drongos can often be seen mobbing birds of prey. Here, a Martial Eagle seems to say "Dive-bomb me once more ..."
© Derek Engelbrecht.

They will 'chew' the hard parts in their bills before swallowing them. Fork-tailed Drongos may, in addition to flying insects, also catch ground-

dwelling insects, spiders, millipedes, and worms. They may even dip into water to catch small fish with their bills! Occasionally, they catch small birds like white-eyes, mannikins, or canaries. They may also feed on nectar from flowers like those of aloes, or eat fruits from trees or bushes. Though they hunt mostly by day, they are known to hunt moths and other nocturnal insects before dawn or after dusk.

Fork-tailed Drongos have harsh, raspy voices, emitting a variety of different shrill screeches. These loudly proclaim their lordship and authority over their territories. They will sometimes mimic the calls of other birds. Some drongo species even mimic mammalian predators like cats. But they will also mob larger predatory birds or animals. They use their flying speed and skill to aid them in this. They will fly up and swoop at the predator in a high-velocity, gravity-assisted dive. In India, drongos are sometimes called 'king crows' for their behaviour of fearlessly driving away the much larger crows. Smaller birds take advantage of this. They build their nest near those of drongos, trusting in the drongo security system!

Amazingly, drongos can abuse their value as sentinels. While they typically warn of a predator's

presence by alarming loudly, they occasionally give the alarm when there isn't any predator nearby. And not only do they use their drongo alarm calls, they even mimic the alarm calls of other birds and animals. Their motivation is that some individuals will drop their food when alerted of a predator and head for shelter. If a drongo can fool an animal or a bird that is gathering food, into thinking that a predator is near, then the drongo can swoop in and take the food dropped as its dupes fly or scurry for shelter! Drongos have been observed using this strategy on meerkats, Sociable Weavers *Philetairus socius*, starlings, and babblers. It has to be noted that this only works for as long as their 'dupes' actually *trust* the drongos! Therefore, it is in the drongos' interest to be honest most of the time when giving alarm calls, or else the ruse is discovered and no longer works. Interestingly, *small* groups of babblers may accept a drongo's presence for its use in warning them of danger, but a larger group will chase the drongos away, instead trusting in their members to give more reliable alarm calls.

But drongos can also benefit in a more benevolent way from other birds, such as when participating in bird parties. These informal

gatherings consist of several bird species, forming a large 'hunting party' that systematically goes through a tract of savannah or forest. The party will include birds focusing on different prey items and using different hunting strategies, so insects that escape from one will likely be caught by another. When joining such a party, drongos will put aside their aggression and "I work alone" attitude and allow two or three other drongos, apart from other bird species, to hunt with them. Their other hunting tactics include

attending grass fires to snatch up small animals fleeing the flames and smoke, or using large birds or grazing mammals as beaters to stir up insect prey while walking through the grass. Drongos occasionally use the animals as perches. In some parts of the world, drongos are tamed by throwing pieces of meat into the air, which they catch, and can thus be accustomed to human presence.

BELOW An incubating Fork-tailed Drongo on its nest
© Warwick Tarboton.



Fork-tailed Drongo nests are shallow, flimsy cups made from twigs and roots, bound together with cobwebs and placed in the fork of a tree branch. Their eggs vary greatly in appearance: the ground colour is white through cream to pink, speckled in various colours. The egg variation is a strategy to try to outwit the African Cuckoo! The Fork-tailed Drongo is the only currently known host of this cuckoo, meaning the cuckoo lays its eggs in the drongos' nest, who unwittingly raise the little cuckoo chick instead of their own. The drongos try to combat this by having eggs varying from female to female. The egg variability makes it easier for a drongo mom to pick out the eggs of a cuckoo laid in her nest ... but the cuckoos have evolved to produce different kinds of eggs as well, and a female cuckoo will specifically seek out a drongo nest with eggs that look like her own. This is now a kind of evolutionary arms race, producing matching variations in both species. Cuckoo parasitism doesn't seem to have much of a negative impact. Fork-tailed Drongos remain abundant, while the cuckoo is relatively scarce - certainly encountered far less frequently than the drongos are. It has been determined that the drongos can recognise the cuckoo

eggs about 94% of the time ... the cuckoo's survival depends on the other 6%!

Despite the abundance, conspicuousness and familiarity of Fork-tailed Drongos (not to mention the other rarer drongo species), they are surprisingly poorly known. Much of their behaviour, such as courtship, has not yet been intensively studied. This is a golden opportunity because even casual birdwatchers might glimpse something that turns out to be new to science. There is also much to learn about drongo diversity and taxonomic relationships. Within the basic drongo template there are many subtle variations such as the gloss of the feathers, or details such as crests or tail extensions; these variations seem to evolve rapidly and lead both to differences in closely-related species and similarities in more distantly-related ones. In Africa and Madagascar, the three recognised species, the Fork-tailed, Velvet-mantled *D. modestus*, and Madagascar Crested Drongo *D. forficatus*, form part of a complex grouping of species not easily distinguished or classified, that spread into and diversified in different regions of both savannah and forest.

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Reflections

REFLECTIONS

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

A Passage to Paradise – Pafuri Gate to the Levhuvhu River Bridge

Chris Patton

Pafuri Gate is Kruger's smallest and least-used visitor entrance/exit gate. In fact, in my more than quarter of a century working for SANParks and over 4 decades of visiting the Park, I have only passed through the gate twice in my life, and visited it from within the Park one other time. But I have crossed the Levhuvhu River to bird in the floodplain on the river's northern bank, and beyond into the mopane woodland in search of specials, several times, and it is on that I will base most of this edition's memory sharing...

The only times that I entered the Park through Pafuri Gate were once when there was community unrest on the roads outside of Punda Maria Gate, making it unsafe to access Punda Maria Camp from the nearby gate, and another time when I was travelling to the Park from working in Mapungubwe beforehand. I guess as Kruger lovers we want to get into the Park as soon as possible, and that most of the other gates are closer to most visitors' starting points, and there are often road issues with the provincial road running through rural Limpopo Province to the west



ABOVE Map of the far north of Kruger featuring the Pafuri area © Infomap..

of Pafuri Gate that may require diversion.

I should point out that the section of Kruger National Park between the Levhuvhu and Limpopo Rivers is a contractual park - the Makuleke Contractual Park, and my birding memories are exclusively limited to the publicly accessible tar arterial road, the H1-9 that runs through the section taking its users to the Pafuri area and south to the

rest of the Park. There are two private lodges in the Concession that do have traversing rights into various secondary roads (The Outpost Lodge, and Return Africa's Pafuri Camp in the concession area that both have some skilled birding staff, who will take their patrons on



ABOVE Pafuri Gate
© Dries de Wet.

birding expeditions to waterholes, the Limpopo River floodplain and into other unique habitats that can turn up many wonderful birds. The Pafuri wetlands are incidentally a RAMSAR site).

However, the reason one needs to travel along the H1-9 as a casual Kruger visitor is the specials that can be seen along its route, particularly Arnot's Chat, Racket-tailed Roller, and Three-banded Courser. But more on them later, let's start at the gate itself. In fact, let's start to the west of the Gate. On the one time I was entering the Park at Pafuri Gate,

driving along the tarred provincial road R525 from Tshipise, the tar had been washed away at an ephemeral stream crossing, and travellers were required to leave the tar just for a short distance to go on a makeshift dirt track that crossed across the dry riverbed. During that crossing, a Crimson-breasted Shrike burst from cover and flew alongside our vehicle, before disappearing into some foliage. Another time on

one of the Punda Extreme Birding Weekends I have written about before and organised by the West Rand Honorary Rangers, some of the participants on the truck that I was the on-board bird expert for had entered the Park at Pafuri Gate and found a flock of Southern Pied Babblers either at the gate, or just outside the gate, I can't remember which.

The reason I share these arid A-typical birds of Kruger is that being a considerable distance downstream along the Limpopo River, (which of course emerges within the Kalahari Basin away in southern Africa's arid

west) over the aeons sand from the arid savannah Kalahari has been washed down the Limpopo and deposited in the floodplain of the Limpopo River basin. The Pafuri region is also the area in Kruger with the lowest annual rainfall. So, despite the subtropical exuberance of the Pafuri region, and the magnificent riverine gallery forest that lines the banks of the Limpopo and its

BELOW The H1-9 will be dry and barren for much of the year, like in this scene from October 2008
© Dries de Wet.





ABOVE After good rain, the H1-9's mopane woodland can be lush and green like this scene from February 2014 © Dries de Wet.

tributaries, and periodic lush grass in the floodplain, the Pafuri area is curiously an area with habitat properties most like the arid savannah of the Kalahari. There may not be the camel thorns so typical of Kalahari, but umbrella thorns and shepherd trees, both characteristic Kalahari species, are common in the Pafuri area. Thus, it is no surprise that the bulk of all the records of arid bird vagrants/rare visitors to Kruger are recorded in the Pafuri area and things like Crimson-breasted Shrike, Southern Pied Babbler, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Meyer's Parrot, Kalahari Scrub Robin, and

Black-cheeked Waxbill are some of the typical Kalahari bird species one can search for in the far northern reaches of Kruger. The Meyer's Parrot is interesting because there are reports of hybridisation between Meyer's and Brown-headed Parrots, and parrots showing characteristics of both species being seen near Pafuri Gate.

But I've digressed...The first time I passed through Pafuri Gate,

I was on my own and was welcomed to the Park by a Shikra who briefly ghosted into the trees adjacent to the parking area. The second time, I was a passenger and remained in the vehicle, while my colleague went into the reception building to sort out our entry permit. As I sat waiting in the bakkie, I was able to get what I feel is a cool shot of a foraging flock of White-crowned Helmetshrikes flitting their way through the roadside trees, and a less satisfactory shot of a female Black Cuckooshrike. But both are birds that get the birding adrenaline going, not being species that one regularly sees



TOP I was very pleased with the pose of this White-crested Helmet-shrike as I waited at the Gate for my colleague.

RIGHT This Female Black Cuckoo-shrike was less photogenic, but still, something to arouse the birding adrenaline.

in Pretoria, where I was living at the time.

But when it comes to birding adrenaline, the mopane woodland along the H1-9 is all about searching for specials. African Golden Oriole and White-breasted Cuckooshrikes are reportedly options, but I have not seen them myself in this stretch of the Park, having had better luck on the Mahonie Loop (see Lark 45 from January 2023). But Arnot's Chat and Racket-tailed Roller are the primary targets. I've had more frequent encounters with the chat, and sometimes not too far from the bridge, as soon as one gets into the mopane woodland proper, but we (I've always been on board one of the Punda Extreme open vehicles with other birders and a driver) had to travel a little bit further to get a return on the rollers, maybe about 10 km from the bridge where the route is quite undulating with steep hill-slopes on either side of the road. These



TOP An adult male Arnot's Chat in mopane woodland on the H1-9
© Derek Engelbrecht.



RIGHT Pride of the H1-9 must be Racket-tailed Roller
© Jody De Bruyn.

sightings were either late January or early February.

The other special regularly seen along this stretch of road is the Three-banded Courser. My personal experience is usually at night, if our vehicle gets to the bridge earlier than the ideal time for absorbing the dawn chorus from the bridge. Travelling a little north along the H1-9 in the nocturnal hours, if you are savvy enough to secure a place on a Punda Extreme weekend, offers an excellent chance of seeing this species amongst the profusion of Water Thick-knees, Square-tailed Nightjars, and Bronze-winged Coursers. Sightings during the day are not impossible either, so carefully scan the undergrowth and shadows under all roadside thorn trees in the floodplain in the kilometre or so immediately north of the bridge.

I've spoken about the lure of the mopane woodland and a little about birding in the Levhuvhu Floodplain. Still, this route's other dominant botanical feature is the plethora of baobab trees. One of the most stately and closest to the road is about 3 km from the Levhuvhu River bridge. There is a roadside baobab that is infested (in a good way) with Red-billed Buffalo Weaver and Red-headed Weaver



ABOVE Three-banded Courser
© Linda McClure.



ABOVE The roadside baobab on the H1-9 with Red-billed Buffalo-weaver and Red-headed Weaver nests is always a hive of activity © Neil De Wet.

nests. Mosque Swallow is regularly seen at this tree, but the weaver nests seem to be a community hub for other seed-eating birds. It is one of only a handful of places in the Park where I have seen Cut-throat Finch.

Some of my other reflections from the H1-9 tend to focus on the few hundred metres north of the Bridge because it is such a prolific floodplain habitat. Meve's Starling will probably be the commonest bird but listen out particularly for Burnt-necked Eremomela and

Grey Penduline Tit that love the cornucopia of umbrella thorns, while in the late summer the migrant warblers will be starting to crank up their volumes in preparation for their long-haul flights back to their northern breeding grounds. We've had close encounters with Thrush Nightingale, Icterine Warbler, Common Whitethroat, and Marsh Warbler.



RIGHT The regal pose of an immature Martial Eagle just north of Pafuri's Levhuvhu Bridge © Chris Patton.



ABOVE An adult African Cuckoo-Hawk enjoying the early-morning sun while scanning © Derek Engelbrecht.

While those diminutive and cryptic songsters are difficult to see clearly and indeed photograph, far more prominent are raptors, and any dead trees make prominent perches for several species. Reminiscing about my memories from this stretch of road, two memorable sightings emerge. One of a regal-looking immature Martial Eagle, and one of an African Cuckoo-

Hawk. These are just some of the birding delicacies that delight visitors to the Pafuri area, which I will pick up and expand upon in the next edition when I focus

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A celebration of the

mopane  **e**

Derek Engelbrecht and Pietman Muller



Woodpecker, Racket-tailed Roller, and Three-banded Courser, to name but a few, have a close association with mopane woodlands. Let's begin with some background on the mopane tree.

The species' generic name, *Colophospermum*, is derived from Latinised Greek words meaning 'oily seed', referring to the strong turpentine smell of the resinous seeds. Colophony (or rosin) is a resinous substance obtained from

LEFT Sandstone islands rise above a sea of rufous-brown mopanes in the winter landscape of the Limpopo River valley near the Mapungubwe National Park
© Derek Engelbrecht.

BELOW The mopane seed resembles a tiny human brain. The amber-colored sticky resin is clearly visible
© Derek Engelbrecht.

If variety is the spice of life, then it is understandable why mopane veld is so often labelled bland, dreary, and boring. True, mopane tends to be the dominant tree where it occurs, often forming near-monospecific stands stretching for many kilometres. However, within the endless mopane (there is a book entitled *Beyond the Endless Mopane* by Chris Harvey), a fascinating ecosystem evolved that never ceases to amaze. To get insight

into the ecology of this ecosystem, a prerequisite is to slow down and unwind to allow the mopanes to start revealing their secrets. And once you have done so, you too will become an advocate for the unsung charm of mopane veld. Since this is primarily a birds and birding-related publication, it may seem strange to sing praises of a tree, but more about them later. For now, let's begin by saying some birds such as Arnot's Chat, Lilian's Lovebird, Bennett's



the gummy exudate of some trees. Although wind seems to be the primary method of seed dispersal, the resin also causes the seeds to stick to the feet of animals and get carried away from the parent plant in this manner. The specific epithet and vernacular names are the Tswana name for the species.

This hardy tree is widely distributed throughout the hot, low-lying arid and semi-arid valley bottoms and adjacent plains in the savannahs of south-central Africa. It is found in central and southern Mozambique, south-central Malawi, southern Zambia, southeastern Angola, northern

Namibia, northern Botswana, Zimbabwe, and north-eastern South Africa. In South Africa, it is found mainly between the Soutpansberg and the Limpopo River, and south through the Lowveld as far south as the Olifants River. However, there are pockets of mopane south of the Olifants River in the Klaserie and as far south as the Timbavati region in Mpumalanga.

Mopanes are mainly found within an altitudinal range of 300–1,000 m elevation (range 200–1,200 m) and mean annual rainfall of 400–700 mm (range 50–1,000 mm). Although generally considered sensitive to severe frost, the species is

known to occur in areas experiencing severe frost in parts of Zimbabwe (at temperatures as low as -5°C).

Within its distribution, it is often dominant on heavy-textured and clay-rich depositional soils of valley bottoms

and other clay-rich soils such as those found on termitaria and along drainage lines. Its shallow root system allows mopane to occupy soils many other woody species cannot. As such, it fills an important ecological role in providing ecological resources such as cover, food, and nesting sites where few other tree species occur.

Mopane trees range in size from imposing 14–26 m tall trees, known as ‘cathedral mopane’, to woodland trees in the 5–14 m range, and smaller scrub mopane of 2–5 m tall trees. Various factors determine the size of mopane, including soil



LEFT The unassuming flower of the mopane tree
© Derek Engelbrecht.



RIGHT Mopane offers it all to its inhabitants: shade, shelter, a place to roost and nest, browse, and a place to while away the day, like these two leopards are doing
© Derek Engelbrecht.



conditions, browsing pressure, and fire.

The mopane is a versatile tree, and it is important to the livelihoods of many people within its range. It provides welcome shade during the heat of the day in summer, when the valley bottoms so often frequented by mopanes can be unbearably hot. In some communities, people are cautioned to stay away from a mopane during a thunderstorm because “lightning hates it”; the tree is said to be struck more often than any other tree. The wood is used to [construct huts](#), maize granaries, kraals, fences, chicken pens, utensils such as

ABOVE Arnot's Chat is closely associated with mopane woodlands. The species nests in cavities and this female is delivering food to her brood in one of the cavities of a mopane
© Derek Engelbrecht.

mortars, pestles and spoons, and in the past was used to make parquet blocks for floors, as railway sleepers, mine props, and disselbooms, i.e., the main cart-pole of an ox or horse cart. In Ovamboland, a twine is made from the bark. It is also gaining popularity in the [musical instrument](#) industry due to its “exceptional tonewood quality”. Mopane, together



with African Rosewood (*Copaifera demeusii*), is the source of Angola Copal, a clear to golden coloured, translucent, semi-fossilized resin used as incense, a varnish, and has various applications in arts and crafts. The wood is used to make high-quality charcoal, fuel for an open fire, while the resulting ash is often used as a fertilizer. Various parts of the tree are used in traditional medicines and ceremonies. The gnarled roots are often used as [decorations](#) in bonsai gardens, especially in Japan, as a base for epiphytic orchids in displays, or as a feature in tropical fish tanks or terrariums. Mopane woodland

ABOVE A handsome snake closely associated with mopane woodlands is the eastern bark (mopane) snake (*Hemirhagerrhis nototaenia*)
© Ruan Stander.

also provides fodder for browsers, especially in winter (the dry season) when the tannins have leached out and the leaves are more palatable.

Despite its durability, mopane timber has never been commercially exploited for furniture-making because the trees host heart rot fungi, e.g., *Fulvifomes (Phellinus) rimosus*, that causes gradual decay of the

heartwood, leading to the formation of cavities in the trunk. This ‘flaw’, from a human perspective, creates the cavities that are used for nesting, roosting, and shelter by a myriad of invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals.

Associated with mopane are important food sources for humans and animals, namely the mopane worm and the mopane psyllid. A third, the mopane stingless bee (*Plebeina armata*), also known as the mopane fly or sweat fly, produces small amounts of honey, but they are arguably better known for their most annoying habit of swarming around people’s faces in their search for moisture, hence the name sweat fly. Here we will discuss the other two main food sources.

Mopane worms

Mopane worms are the edible larvae of the Mopane Emperor moth (Saturniidae: *Gonimbrasia belina*). Mopane worms have a high nutritional value and are considered a regional delicacy. It is collected by rural communities and prepared as a relish to supplement the diet or sold to markets elsewhere. It currently retails at outlets in Polokwane for ~R400/kg, making it considerably more expensive than the other

regional delicacy, biltong, which sells for ~R300/kg! As such, it is important in the local economy as it offers rural communities a source of income, albeit highly seasonal and often erratic. At least 34 species have been recorded eating mopane worms (Table 1).

The mopane worm has five instars, i.e., development stages, during which the caterpillar increases in size from ~5 – 10 mm to a whopping 60 – 111 mm and weighs ~9 g. There is a clear correlation between the instar's size and the bird species that prey on it. The smaller instars are mainly consumed by small bird species, e.g., leaf gleaners such as Long-billed Crombec and Grey Penduline Tit. The larger instars (stages 3–5) are targeted by birds that are large and aggressive enough not to be deterred by the worms’ wild lashings, body armour of spines and prickles, and the slimy green exudate it “vomits” as defence and include hornbills, starlings, rollers, and even Secretarybirds. The list of bird species preying on mopane worms is almost certainly incomplete, and we encourage readers to share their photos of mopane worm predation by birds with us.



ABOVE A mature live mopane worm © Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE The dried product © Derek Engelbrecht.

Table 1. List of species observed feeding on the various instars of the mopane worm (*Gonimbrasia belina*). Data from Styles (1995).

Family	Species	Instar stage				
		1	2	3	4	5
Bucerotidae	African Grey Hornbill			✓	✓	
	Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill				✓	✓
Bucorvidae	Southern Ground Hornbill					✓
Burhinidae	Spotted Thickknee					✓
Cisticolidae	Tawny-flanked Prinia	✓				
Coraciidae	Lilac-breasted Roller					✓
	Purple Roller			✓	✓	✓
Cuculidae	Diederik Cuckoo		✓			
	Levaillant's Cuckoo			✓		
Dicruridae	Fork-tailed Drongo		✓	✓		
Indicatoridae	Greater Honeyguide	✓	✓			
Laniidae	Red-backed Shrike					
	Southern White-crowned Shrike		✓	✓		
Leiotherichidae	Arrow-marked Babbler		✓			
Lybiidae	Black-collared Barbet			✓		
	Crested Barbet			✓	✓	✓
Macrosphenidae	Long-billed Crombec	✓	✓			

Mopane psyllid

The mopane psyllid (*Retroacizzia mopanei*) (order Hemiptera) is a sap-sucking, flying insect related to leafhoppers. Like the mopane worm, its lifecycle includes an egg stage and five nymphal instars, the final instar reaching about 3 mm long. The eggs are laid in the dry season, between July and September, presumably to avoid the eggs getting washed off the leaves during rain. In one study, it was estimated that as many as

4,581,460 eggs may be laid per tree! The nymphs are usually found on the underside of mopane leaves, feeding on phloem sap. The nymph secretes a waxy, sweet-tasting, protective shield, called a lerp, which dries to form a small, conical, semi-translucent shield, ~4 mm long and 2.5 mm high, that adheres firmly to the leaf and protects it from desiccation and, to a lesser extent, predation. The sweet shields, which are meant to protect the nymphs, also

Table 1 continues.

Family	Species	Instar stage				
		1	2	3	4	5
Malaconotidae	Grey-headed Bushshrike			✓	✓	
	Orange-breasted Bushshrike			✓	✓	
Muscucapidae	Spotted Flycatcher	✓				
Musophagidae	Grey Go-away-bird					✓
Oriolidae	Black-headed Oriole			✓	✓	
Passeridae	Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	✓	✓			
	Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow	✓	✓			
Picidae	Bearded Woodpecker			✓		
	Cardinal Woodpecker	✓				
	Golden-tailed Woodpecker		✓			
Ploceidae	Red-billed Buffalo Weaver			✓		
Pycnonotidae	Dark-capped Bulbul		✓			
Remizidae	Grey Penduline Tit	✓				
Sagittaridae	Secretarybird					✓
Sturnidae	Glossy Starling					✓
	Wattled Starling			✓	✓	✓
Turdidae	Kurrichane Thrush			✓		

make them irresistible to predators, including cattle and humans. In rural communities, people relish these sweet offerings, known as mopane bread, maphote, or maboti. Historically, people collected the lerps in large amounts, pounded it, and stored it for consumption during lean times. It is said that when the pounded lerps are mixed with milk, it makes for a delicious meal. Mopane bread has an energy value of ~250 calories/100g, about

the same as red kidney beans or a slice of whole wheat bread.

During the dry season, the firm attachment of the lerp to the leaf begins to weaken, making it easier for predators such as weavers, starlings, hornbills, helmetshrikes, and monkeys to dislodge it. Interestingly, once a bird succeeds in dislodging a lerp, it appears to show little interest in the exposed nymphs, instead moving onto the next lerp. At this



ABOVE LEFT A nymph secreting its lerp © Pietman Muller.

ABOVE RIGHT An exposed 5th instar nymph, the rudimentary wings just visible © Pietman Muller.

LEFT A leaf with some lerp and a few exposed nymphs © Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE A Vervet Monkey with a sweet tooth is relishing the sweet lerp of the mopane psyllid © Pietman Muller.

time, huge bird parties, or rather bird festivals, can be seen as birds move from tree to tree in a frenzy as they relish in the sweet offerings on the mopane trees. When the adults emerge, thousands of lerp fall to the ground where especially [White-crested Helmetshrikes](#) eagerly consume them, but also species less nimble in trees such as Cape Turtle Doves and Red-billed Spurfowl, while Fork-tailed Drongos and Southern Black

Flycatchers hawk the flying adults in mid-air. This is the only time DE has seen [drongo super flocks](#) forming, sometimes numbering 40+ individuals swarming through and around a tree where the adults emerge. Using our records and those in the literature, we have



ABOVE A male Red-headed Weaver eyeing a few lerps on a mopane leaf © Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE Large numbers of Greater Blue-eared Starlings (top) and White-crested Helmetshrikes (bottom) gather to feed on fallen lerps in Shingwedzi Rest Camp in the Kruger National Park © Pietman Muller.



ABOVE Fork-tailed Drongos hawking the flying adults of the mopane psyllid © Pietman Muller.

Table 2. List of species observed feeding on the lerps and flying adults of the mopane psyllid (*Retroacizzia mopanei*).

Family	Species
Bucerotidae	Southern Red-billed Hornbill
Columbidae	Mourning Collared Dove
Estrildidae	Black-faced Waxbill
Macrosphenidae	Long-billed Crombec
Muscicapidae	Arnot's Chat
	Southern Black Flycatcher
Paridae	Southern Black Tit
Phasianidae	Red-billed Spurfowl
Ploceidae	Lesser Masked Weaver
	Red-headed Weaver
Pycnonotidae	Dark-capped Bulbul
Sturnidae	Burchell's Starling
	Greater Blue-eared Starling
	Meves's Starling
Vangidae	Retz's Helmetshrike
	White-crested Helmetshrike



ABOVE A Red-headed Weaver and Lesser Masked Weaver searching for lerp capsules on the ground
© Derek Engelbrecht.

assembled a list of 16 bird species confirmed as feeding on the lerps or adults of the mopane psyllid (Table 2).

If you have not been a mopane enthusiast when you started reading this article, we hope we have piqued your interest in this remarkable tree. The next time you find yourself amidst the endless mopane, slow down and admire the intricate web of interdependence of the biodiversity of this unique ecosystem. There is still much to be discovered and many novel observations that can be made, and we would love to hear about them.

Acknowledgements Thanks to [Ruan Stander](#) for sharing his photo of the Eastern Bark Snake.

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To experience more about the uniqueness and diversity of the mopane woodlands of the northern Kruger National Park – and some eye-watering photography – Pietman's coffee table book entitled **Unique and Diverse – Northern Kruger through my lens**, is a must and can be ordered directly from him by emailing him - pietman@amanabdy.co.za



For Pietman Muller the love of nature was already sparked very early on, urging him to buy his first camera at the age of 21. However, it was only two years after he transitioned to digital in 2007, that he really started taking nature photography seriously, winning and receiving honourable mention in several competitions and having pictures published in magazines, even achieving front page! Two photographic articles on birds of prey were recently published in African Birdlife Magazine and he contributed several articles on northern Kruger to two different Kruger supplements to Weg/Go.

Through life-long dedication, endless patience and persistence, Pietman accumulated an astounding photographic treasure trove of northern Kruger, revealing surprising insights into an array of little-known secrets of the seemingly boring mopane woodland which covers large tracts of the vast plains in this region. The unrivalled uniqueness and diversity of this unrecognised jewel in the crown of Kruger are seen through the sensitive, trained eye of a son of the bushveld, having developed a deep understanding of the fascinating cycles within this intricate system and the joys, but also tribulations, they bring about. The reader's perception of northern Kruger will be forever changed.

Unique and Diverse – Northern Kruger through my lens | Pietman Muller

Unique and Diverse – Northern Kruger through my lens



Pietman Muller

Lesser Honeyguide *Indicator minor* parasitising Black-collared Barbet *Lybius torquatus*

TEXT AND PHOTOS Julia Friskin

email: juliafriskin@yahoo.com

A pair of Black Collared Barbets successfully raised four chicks at the beginning of the 2024/2025 summer season in our garden in Polokwane, having already excavated the hole during winter.

The juveniles and adults often returned to the nesting log after fledging to roost. It was quite surprising how they remained a close-knit family.

A few weeks later, the adults showed signs of breeding again and chased away any other birds near the nest with harsh calls. During this time, I was aware of a Lesser Honeyguide in a nearby tree, but I thought it had not been successful in entering the hole due to the attentive barbets. Then again, they are masters in distraction!

After the incubation, chirping was heard within the hole. Gradually, over time, I noticed that the chirps were lessening, and the adult Barbets were not very active around the nest, to the point that I thought they had

stopped feeding the chicks. The nest was very quiet during the day, but in late afternoon, a churring noise indicated life within. The barbets returned to roost each evening. Also, they seldom called their duet in the mornings, as they did with their first brood. I sensed something was very different this time around.

BELOW A Black-collared Barbet chick from the first brood peering through the entrance hole.



On the 5th of February 2025, I noticed something “lodged” in the hole, and the two adult barbets were very agitated. I decided to look closer and saw that it was a dead chick, with its tail protruding out of the hole. I can only presume the adults had managed to pull the chick by its tail feathers, up to the entrance, where it got stuck. Rightly or wrongly, I pulled the chick out, by its tail feathers, and saw that it was indeed a barbet chick by the yellow markings on its wing feathers and its recognizable beak. The chick had been dead for some time as it had no flesh and was skeletal.

A couple of days later, on the 7th of February, my suspicions were confirmed when a chick appeared at the entrance to view the outside world - looking very different from a Black-collared chick! It was indeed a Lesser Honeyguide - ready to fledge.

RIGHT One of the adult Black-collared Barbets feeding the Lesser Honeyguide chick.



Lesser Moorhen: a breeding record and feeding behaviour

Martin Potgieter

email: potgiemp@telkomsa.net

A pair of Lesser Moorhens (*Paragallinula angulata*) with chicks were photographed on a small dam in the Weenen Nature Reserve in March 2023. Although fairly common north of 26°S and in north-eastern KwaZulu-Natal, they are regarded as vagrants further south and in other parts of South Africa (Fig. 1). This was only the 5th record as per SABAP2 (South African Bird Atlas Project 2) data for pentad 2850_2955 (as of March 2023), for this species in the Weenen Nature Reserve.

Since 2012, my wife (Melanie) and I have tried to visit the Weenen Nature Reserve at least once a year to conduct SABAP2 surveys of the two pentads that cover the reserve. In November 2013, we found a Lesser Moorhen pair at the old irrigation dam (-28.860710°, 29.974782°) in the west of the park. During another visit in February 2016, we again encountered a pair of Lesser Moorhens at the same site. During these visits, the dam was quite full,

with lots of emergent vegetation around the edge.

A couple of drier seasons followed, during which the dam level dropped sharply, with the closest vegetation quite some distance from the water's edge. This meant the habitat was no longer favourable for Lesser Moorhen, which requires fairly dense emergent grasses and well-vegetated fringes (Dean 2005). As a result, we did not encounter any Lesser Moorhen here again until our most recent visit in March 2023.

Lesser Moorhen has only been recorded on 4 out of 134 full-protocol cards in pentad 2850_2955 (which covers a portion of the Weenen Nature Reserve) (Table 1), a reporting rate of just under 3% (see [SABAP2](#), as of March 2023).

Although an intra-African migrant, it is likely that some Lesser Moorhens overwinter in patches of suitable habitat in South Africa (Dean 2005), and it is therefore interesting that there is an ad hoc report of it at this location in July

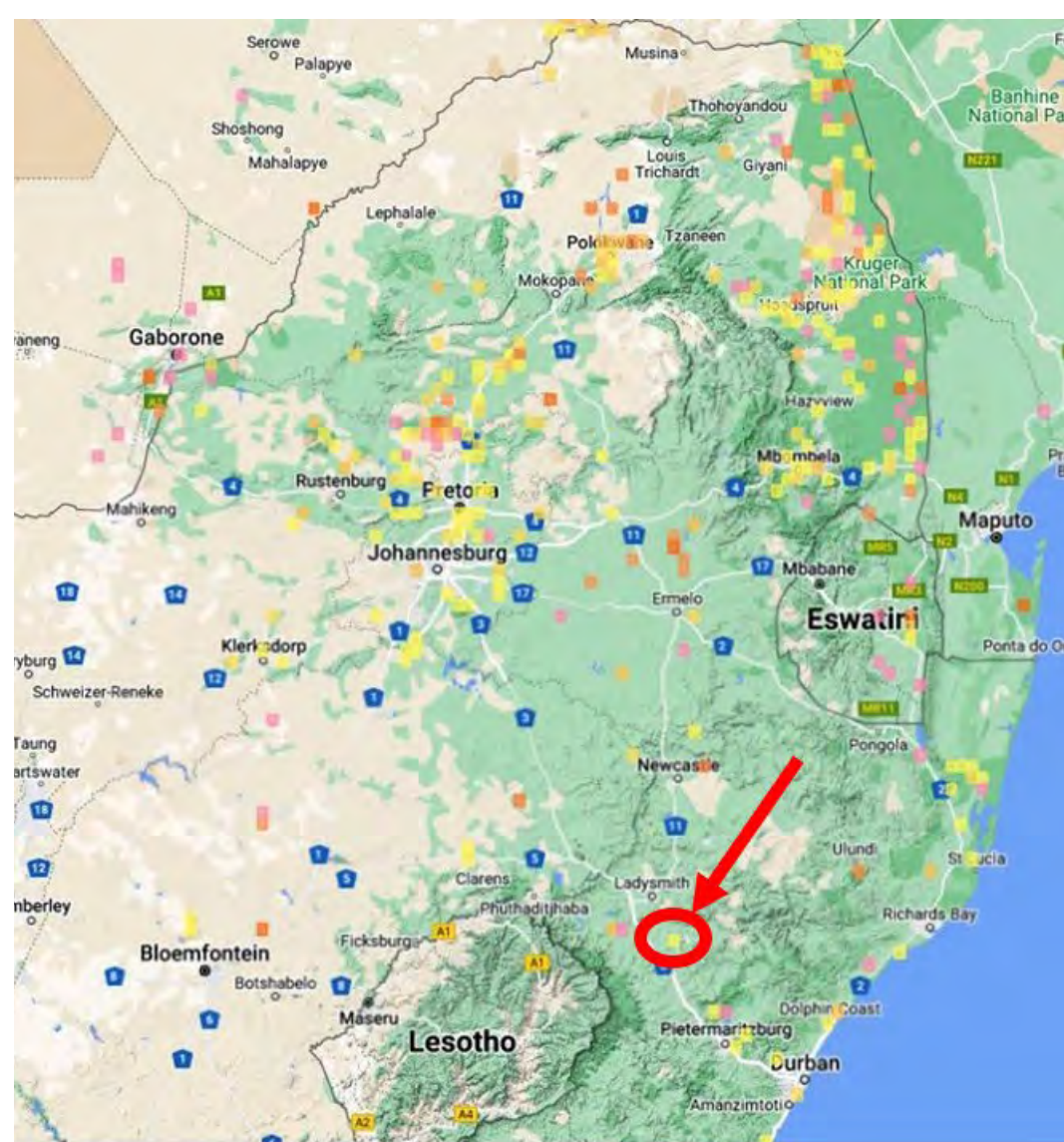


FIGURE 1. SABAP2 Lesser Moorhen distribution map extracted 2023/03. The arrow indicates the location of pentad 2850_2955.

TABLE 1. SABAP2 Lesser Moorhen monthly record summary for pentad 2850_2955.

Common name	Genus_Species	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	protocol cards	Rep Rate
Lesser Moorhen	<i>Paragallinula angulata</i>	0	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	134	2,99%

Full Protocol
Ad-hoc

2013, which suggests that the birds overwintered there that year.

After good rainfall in the preceding months, the dam was filled to capacity when we visited it on Saturday, 11 March 2023. The dam was well vegetated with water lilies, emergent grasses, sedges and knotweed (most likely *Persicaria lapathifolia*). The water also extended deep into the fringing vegetation.

At first, the dam seemed relatively deserted, with only a few Little Grebes (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) (including some

juveniles) present. As we were leaving, my wife noticed movement in a patch of dense vegetation on the dam. An adult female Lesser Moorhen emerged shyly and started feeding (Fig. 2).

After observing her for a while, an adult male appeared from the dense cover. Both birds were quite wary and would disappear into denser vegetation at the least disturbance. Although it was a satisfying sighting of an uncommon species for the area, we did not make too much of it. What was, however,



FIGURE 3. Lesser Moorhen male - fluttering up to reach seeds - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 11 March 2023.

interesting was to see how the male bird would swim through the vegetation and then flutter or jump up to reach seeds on the tips of grass stalks (Fig. 3).

When we returned the next day, we were surprised to find that the pair was actively feeding two chicks. The chicks must have hatched relatively recently, since they were still covered with black down (Fig. 4) (Dean 2005). The chicks mostly remained in the

thick fringe vegetation and would only occasionally venture out into the open at the water's edge.

It was interesting to note the different feeding strategies the adult birds employ. The female tended to spend more time in relatively open water, swimming in tight circles to create a small vortex. She would then pick up food items from the surface, presumably insects or seeds (Figs. 5 and 6).



FIGURE 2. Lesser Moorhen female on the well-vegetated dam - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 11 March 2023.



FIGURE 4. Lesser Moorhen chick - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.



FIGURE 5. Lesser Moorhen female swimming in a circle to create a vortex - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.



FIGURE 6. Lesser Moorhen female picking food items from the water surface - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.



FIGURE 7. Lesser Moorhen female feeding chick - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.

Once she had gathered enough, she would swim to where the chicks hid in the fringe vegetation and feed one of them (Fig. 7). She then immediately returned to the open water and repeated the process.

On the other hand, the male bird tended to stay more in the dense vegetation along the dam's edge and employed a more direct approach by physically plucking seeds from grass stems (Fig. 8). He would then immediately feed them to one of the chicks.

The seeds the male bird was feeding on were from Couch

Paspalum (*Paspalum distichum*) (Fig. 9), a water-loving, mat-forming invasive grass, possibly originating from the Americas, but now widely introduced in South Africa (Griffiths et al. 2015).

However, the male also ventured into the water, where he would duck his head underwater to reach succulent shoots (Fig. 10). Once he got hold of the desired shoot, he vigorously shook and pulled on it until he broke off the bit he wanted (Fig. 11). This he would then proceed to feed to a chick.



FIGURE 8. Lesser Moorhen male plucking grass seeds with chick waiting on the left - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.



FIGURE 9. Lesser Moorhen male with Couch Paspalum grass in the foreground - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.



FIGURE 10. Lesser Moorhen male ducking to reach underwater shoots - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.



FIGURE 11. Lesser Moorhen male with selected shoot - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.



FIGURE 12. Lesser Moorhen male with female feeding chick in the background - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 March 2023.

It appeared as though the male and female were individually feeding a specific chick (Fig. 12). It might just have been that they were feeding the closest chick to them then at the time they had food to present, since it was difficult keeping track of the chicks' movements in the dense vegetation.

On Saturday, 8 April 2023, Francois and Catharina Noome visited the site and reported two

fledgling Lesser Moorhens (Fig. 13) swimming in open water. These were, in all likelihood, the same chicks initially located on the 12th of March 2023. The number of days elapsed between the sightings were 27 days. The fledgling period for the Lesser Moorhen is 35 to 38 days, and the chicks are independent after 5 to 6 weeks (Dean 2005). It is therefore probable that both these chicks fledged successfully.

Red-winged Starling - some observations

text and photos Ingrid Weiersbye

email: ingridw@polka.co.za

This species is certainly the largest starling in southern Africa. In its natural habitat, it frequents higher rainfall rocky mountainous areas of cliffs, kloofs, and gorges, with suitable crevices in the rock faces where pairs can build their nests. Here it attracts attention as it flies with rich russet wings, uttering wistful musical call-notes. These attractive attributes remain with the bird as it increasingly chooses man-made environments in which to forage and nest. In doing so, it now more often engenders irritation as it tends to become a pest, for example, waking one up at dawn or hammering millipedes loudly on the roof to feed its chicks!

BELOW Typical natural habitat of the Red-winged Starling .



FIGURE 13. Fledgling Lesser Moorhens - Weenen Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, 8 April 2023 (© Catharina Noome).

Acknowledgements I thank Brian Colahan for commenting on this note and to Francois and Catharina Noome for sharing their observation and using Catharina's photograph.

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LEFT Red-winged Starlings at their nest in a rock crevice, the male delivering food.

has Lanner Falcons nesting on one of the ledges, which likely occasionally prey on the starlings, causing them to relocate. A very poor set of photos in a coastal mountainous area in the Overberg region of the Western Cape, taken in rain and poor light, and through double-glazed windows, is my evidence that Peregrine Falcons

Where I live in the KZN Midlands, the species, along with its neighbours the Speckled Pigeons, have forsaken the cliff sides and ledges of a huge historic quarry, and have re-located to an adjacent shopping centre, taking up residence in the eaves along the verandas, and sheltered nooks and crannies above the ATMs. Here, both species nest, creating an unsightly and unwelcome mess from their droppings and nesting habits. The quarry also

are also predators of Red-winged starlings, where they share similar habitat.

Craig (Craig 2005), describes a pair attacking an African Harrier-Hawk. The latter must surely be a very efficient predator of nestlings, able to reach into rock crevices with its long legs. Still, it seldom has the audacity to venture into the busy shopping complexes to investigate the hidden spaces above ATMs where the starlings know they are safe!

Diet-wise, the Red-winged Starling is yet another species which strangely consumes noxious-smelling millipedes, broken up and carried to feed nestlings. Nectar is sought after, commonly the larger *Aloe* spp., the birds often playing a pollination role as shown in attached images with Mountain Bottlebrush (*Greyia sutherlandi*), and Coral Tree (*Erythrina* spp.).

The species eats wild berries and prefers smaller rather than larger fruit. In my garden, these starlings never join the barbets, turacos, and other frugivores at the avocados and papaya, and they ignore even the wild figs. The species was seen to gather in large groups to feed on the berry clusters of Wild

Currant (*Searsia lucida*) bushes in the Cape Overberg, and *S. dentata* in the Drakensberg, and to feed on Crossberry (*Grewia occidentalis*) and other berries in the canopy of forest kloof trees.

Small groups are regular visitors to the vulture restaurants in the nearby Drakensberg where the bone marrow is relished, and where the eland occur, Red-winged Starlings can sometimes be observed gleaning them for ectoparasites. They will readily scavenge dog food left out, second only to monkeys and baboons in their brazen persistence.

BELOW A male with fragments of a millipede in its beak.





ABOVE An adult male taking nectar from a *Greyia* spp.



ABOVE A flock feasting on bone marrow.



ABOVE An adult male taking nectar from an *Erythrina* sp.



ABOVE A female gleaning an eland for invertebrates.

In the Cape Overberg, during the winter of the Lockdown in 2020, large flocks, numbering several hundred individuals, were seen gathering and perching on rooftops around vacant lots between houses (1). The starlings would fly down into the vegetation in a feeding frenzy, moving from plot to plot as they fed (2). There

appeared to be no fruiting bushes, aerial insects, or winged termites, so it likely was a caterpillar irruption.

Along with House Sparrows and Cape Wagtails, Red-winged Starlings have also learnt to scavenge insects from car grills in parking lots, a great example of innovative opportunism.



1



2

In summary, a few of the above observations can be claimed to be new knowledge and serve to confirm already-known facts presented by Craig (2005). However, one abiding memory I hold that can never be cited is the Red-winged Starlings at our son's graduation ceremony in the great hall at UCT. On this auspicious occasion with its splendid ambience, thousands gathered to celebrate the conferring of degrees upon young graduates. The family members were seated all round in the upper-level balconies, with a 180-degree birds-eye view down below to the stage of dignitaries and chancellors, and which were directly above, by some 15 m, the crowded rows and rows of excited students below, many in black academic gowns and graduation caps, others with beautifully coiffured heads befitting the occasion.

I was delighted with my seating, because we were just below eye-level across from a magnificent chandelier, dominating the entire hall's ceiling. I had already spotted a pair of Red-winged Starlings feeding young at a nest built inside the central glass dome. I seemed alone in noticing what was happening for the entire duration of the (often tedious) proceedings. The nestlings were vociferously demanding food,

the parents were tirelessly toing and froing between the chandelier and the outer windows, delivering beakfuls of rather disgusting-looking leggy, fleshy items resembling dismembered geckos, solifuges, perhaps some stale dog food, perhaps fruit pulp, or portions of smashed millipedes. In their haste, occasional particles were dropped to fall below onto the heads and shoulders of the students. I eagerly anticipated any moment someone detecting a gross, slimy bit on their head and screaming, but their mortarboard caps protected some, and others had hair so teased up and sprayed that the bits fell unnoticed. I gleefully imagined the horror and revulsion of these pretty girls upon the discovery on their hair or shoulders of the revolting bits and pieces at the end of the day's proceedings. I was so distracted and entertained by this Red-winged Starling family that I almost missed our son going up to receive his degree!

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MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

Behaviour: Predation

Black-crowned Night Heron predating a Red-billed Teal duckling

On the 20th of March 2025, I observed an adult Black-crowned Night Heron catch and eat one of a brood of eight Red-billed Teal ducklings. The observations were made on the farm Kwaggabult near Mogwadi in the Limpopo Province. The duckling was only a few days old.

Basie Breytenbach (received 21 March 2025).

Behaviour: Social and Interspecific Behaviour - Nonpredatory Interspecific Interactions

A Nylsvley stand-off: Swainson's Spurfowl and African Crake crossing paths

An African Rail and Swainson's Spurfowl crossed paths on the Vogelfontein road at Nylsvley Nature Reserve (1). The two birds had a stand-off for just over a minute, the smaller African Rail clearly the aggressor (2). When the spurfowl eventually lost interest and made the first move, the African Rail charged at it, causing the spurfowl to take flight and run away (3).

Derek Engelbrecht • faunagalore@gmail.com (received 15 February 2025).





Interesting sightings
16 February 2025- 15 April 2025

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

Black-crowned Night Heron - 1 March 2025. Seven seen at a backwater pool at De Loskop (Richter van Tonder).

Black Sparrowhawk - 4 March 2025. Seen at the Polokwane Golf Club (Derek Engelbrecht); 8 March 2025. A juvenile seen in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

Black Stork - 1 March 2025. One at the Hout River bridge near De Loskop (Jody de Bruyn).



Black Sparrowhawk © Derek Engelbrecht

Corn Crane - 27 March 2025. One seen at the picnic site in the Polokwane Game Reserve (Lynette Els).

Dwarf Bittern - 1 March 2025. At least 30 adults, and also some fledglings at De Loskop (Derek Engelbrecht).

European Honey Buzzard - 3 April 2025. One seen in Welgelegen for a few days in early April (Derek Engelbrecht).

Great Spotted Cuckoo - 9 March 2025. One in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht); 15 March 2025. **One seen in a rural village near the Wolkberg Wilderness Area (Minkie Prinsloo).**

Levaillant's Cuckoo - 30 March 2025. One seen and heard calling in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

Osprey - 3 April 2025, One seen at Nyl River Bush Camp (Leonie Kellerman).

Whiskered Tern - 1 March 2025. Several seen at De Loskop (Jody de Bruyn); 12 April 2025. Several seen at Moorddrift (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

White-backed Duck - 1 March 2025. Two seen at De Loskop (Richter van Tonder).

Woodland Kingfisher - 26 April 2025. A pair in Welgelegen initiated a second brood in March and one was still present on the above date (Derek Engelbrecht).



Dwarf Bittern © Derek Engelbrecht



Osprey © Leonie Kellerman



Whiskered Tern © Derek Engelbrecht



Woodland Kingfisher © Derek Engelbrecht

PASSERINES

Common Whitethroat - 15 March 2025. One seen near Bandelierkop (Johann Roos).

Garden Warbler - 1 March 2025. One heard at De Loskop (Richter van Tonder).

Sedge Warbler - 1 March 2025. Good numbers seen in previously flooded grassland at De Loskop (Derek Engelbrecht).

Yellow Canary - 1 March 2025. A pair seen at De Loskop (Jody de Bruyn).



Common Whitethroat © Johann Roos



African Pygmy Goose © Steve Benbow



Denham's Bustard © Hannes Swanepoel



Pink-backed Pelican © Duncan McKenzie

**BEST OF THE REST
LIMPOPO PROVINCE**

NON-PASSERINES

African Pygmy Goose - 14 March 2025. One seen near Olifantsbad Pan, Kruger National Park (Steve Benbow).

African Skimmer - 31 March 2025. Three seen at Nhlanganini Dam near Letaba Reset Camp, Kruger National Park. Four, two adults and two juveniles, were seen on 2 April 2025 at the same site ([SA Rare Bird News Report - 31 March 2025](#)).

Denham's Bustard - 15 April 2025. Two seen above the Strydom Tunnel (Hannes Swanepoel).

Pink-backed Pelican - 25 March 2025. Seen near Crooks Corner,

Kruger National Park (Duncan McKenzie).

Red-footed Falcon - 16 March 2025. A male seen at the Boyela Waterhole (Don English).

Three-banded Courser - 14 April 2025. Two adults seen at Marataba Conservation Camps in Marakele National Park (Matt Lailvaux).



Three-banded Courser ©Matt Lailvaux

PASSERINES

Cape Rock Thrush - 22 February 2025. One seen on Tshipise Hill at the Tshipise Resort (Adrian Haagner).

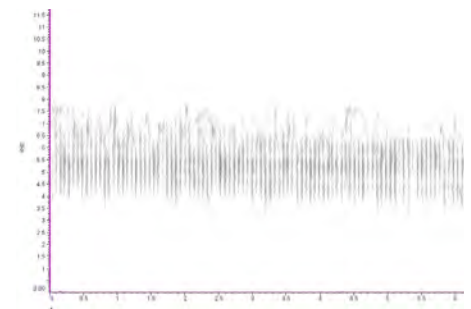
Fan-tailed Widowbird - 5 March 2025. An adult male seen at a perennial pan in the Makuleke Concession near Pafuri in the Kruger National Park.

Golden Pipit - 14 March 2025. One seen in Pridelands Game Reserve near Hoedspruit (Simon Westerlund).

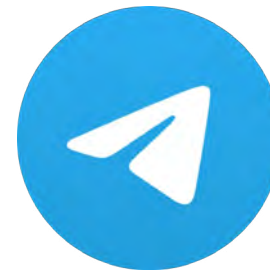
River Warbler - 29 March 2025. One vocalising at Pafuri near Crooks Corner (Don English).



Golden Pipit © Simon Westerlund



River Warbler © Duncan McKenzie



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
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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.

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



1 November 2024
 Percent of target reached: 28.0%
 Sponsored Hectares: 8453 ha
 Sponsors: 1802



24 March 2025
 Percent of target reached: 38.1%
 Sponsored Hectares: 11,420 ha
 Sponsors: 2254

UPCOMING EVENTS



Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting and AGM
 Date: 20 May 2025
 Time: 18:30
 Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

WINTER BREAK
 No club meetings for June and July
 STAY WARM!

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
 Date: 5 August 2025
 Time: 18:30
 Venue: Polokwane Golf Club



Club outing

Where? Mahela
 Date: 10 May 2025
 Contact: Richter van Tonder
 Cell: 082 213 8276

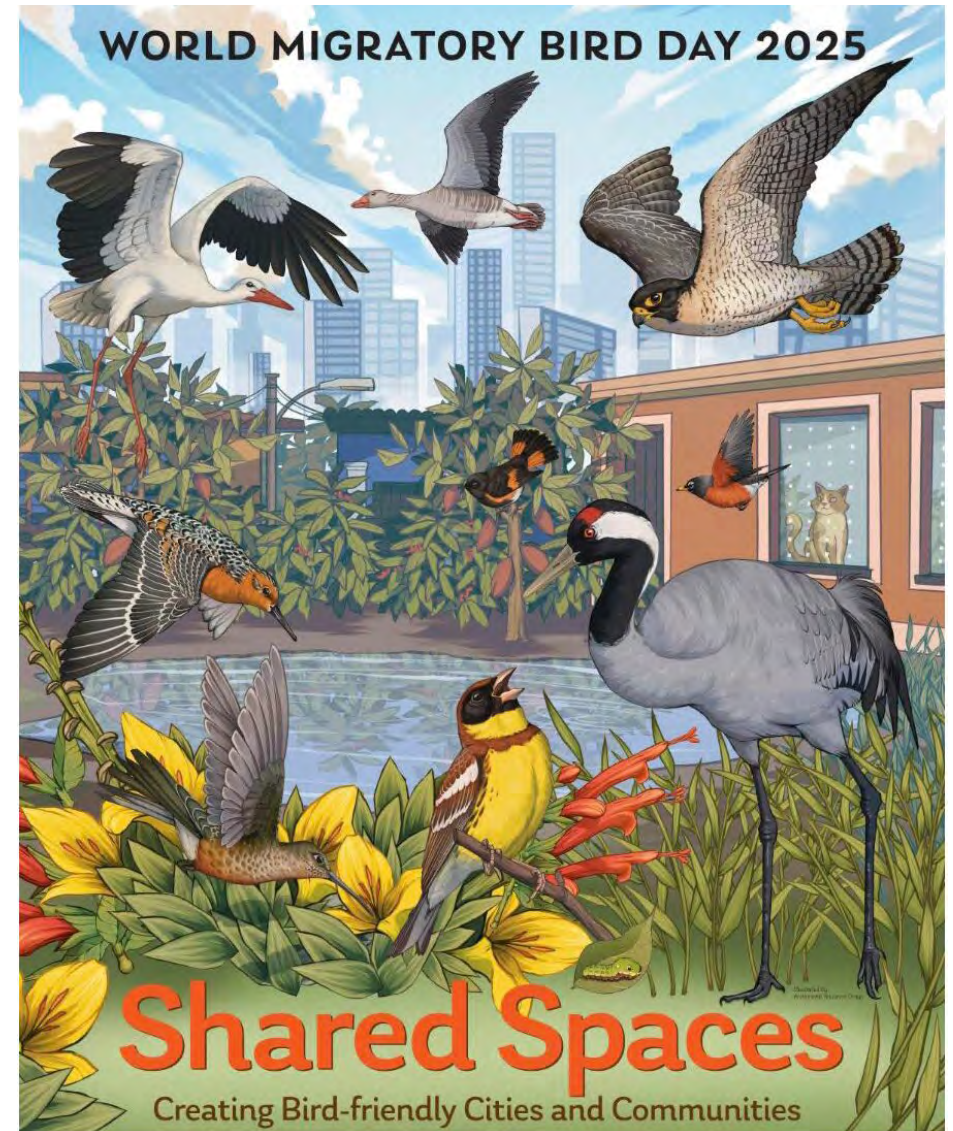
Shopping list: Hooded, White-backed and Cape Vultures, Tawny Eagle, Shikra, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Arnot's Chat, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Orange-winged Pytilia, Bushveld Pipit, Green-capped Eremomela, Grey Penduline Tit, and many more.



Club outing

Where? Mockford Farm
 Date: 7 June 2025
 Contact: Richter van Tonder
 Cell: 082 213 8276

Shopping list: Cape Teal, various vultures including Hooded, Lappet-faced, Cape and White-backed, Marabou Stork, Secretarybird, and various bushveld birds.



Visit [World Migratory Bird Day \(WMBD\)](#)

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.



Grey Go-away-bird © Derek Engelbrecht.