

THE LARK



Local Birding
Nagude
Koppie Alleen

Travel
Skomer Island
Mutinondo

AviList

A unified global checklist for birds

Red-billed Oxpeckers notes • Three-banded Courser on the move • Vocalisations of the Three-banded Courser • Great Egret kleptoparasitic behaviour • A leucistic Acacia Pied Barbet • An unexpected winter bonanza - termite alates in June • A bald Common Myna.

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

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

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

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

15 AUGUST 2025

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

Cover page theme 2025: Limpopo Specials

COVER Three-banded Courser
© Marc Cronje.

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Nagude farm in the Lowveld is fast becoming a birding hotspot. Jeremy Kotze gives feedback about our club outing to this farm.



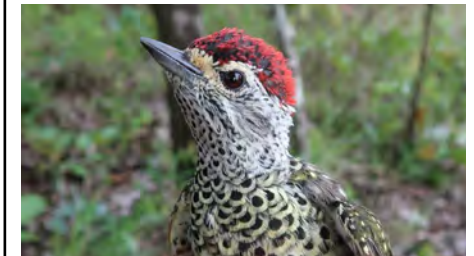
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AviList - it's here! 43
The long-awaited unified global checklist of the world has been published. Read more about it and what to expect.

AviList
The Global Avian Checklist

For a lark ...



It's too cold, let's go for a swim © Derek Engelbrecht

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Editors' chirps

It's surprising to think that the winter solstice has already passed, and while the days are getting longer, they certainly haven't warmed up yet. This time of year is always exciting as we eagerly anticipate the return of the first migrants in the coming weeks. Typically, these are the intra-African or altitudinal migrants, like the swallows, so keep an eye out for them.

This issue is filled with articles about club outings, as well as birding and ringing expeditions to distant places. A big thank you to all the contributors, and a warm welcome to Jeremy Kotze, who is contributing to *The Lark* for the first time. We look forward to many more contributions. If you haven't contributed yet, please consider doing so – our readers would love to hear about your birding adventures and interesting observations.

One of the major news stories in the birding world is the release of the long-awaited unified global checklist of birds, AviList. Navigating several global checklists has been a source of frustration for many birders. While there will be challenges ahead, we now have a solid foundation to work from. The new list has impacted our regional bird list, mainly due to the lumping of species. You can read more about AviList and its regional implications on page 43 of this issue.

As usual, the Bird Briefs section features interesting snippets and notes on various aspects of birds' natural history. Many of these notes will be referenced in the Roberts Birds of Southern Africa, which is currently under revision. If you want to share your interesting observations with the rest of the world, consider publishing them in *The Lark*. Stay warm, and we look forward to receiving your contributions. Raelene and Derek



Red-billed Oxpecker © Derek Engelbrecht



A visit to **nagude**

Jeremy Kotze



The Vorster's farm, Nagude, better known as Mahela to most of us, is a real gem for birding in the Lowveld. The game farm doubles up as a game breeding centre, and the Vorster's efforts to restore the woodlands on the farm has paid dividends. There is a good variety of habitats, including several dams, some low hills and rocky outcrops, rooibos veld and, the gem, mopane woodland. At the last count in June, Nagude's bird list stood on 293 species (Derek Engelbrecht, personal communication).

On 10 May 2025, 14 of us left Polokwane, driving the ~140 km to Nagude close to Letsitele. It was a perfect day, with clear skies, windless, crisp in the morning but warming to 28°C. Our first stop was at a large dam with many dead trees in the water, forming beautiful reflections. The trees provided ideal perches for waterbirds such as African Darter, African Spoonbill, and White-breasted Cormorants (breeding), to name but a few. The farm has many dams of various sizes, and we visited several to boost our species list.

Then we headed into the mopane woodland area, making a few stops and taking a short walk. At our second stop in the mopane woodland, we were handed the day's jackpot when seven Arnot's Chats (Bontpiek) entertained us by performing for 20 minutes in the mopane trees in front of us. The Bontpiek name is very descriptive, and although both male and female have different black and white

BELOW African Darter at one of the many dams at Nagude © Jody de Bruyn.



ABOVE A pair of the charming Arnot's Chat. The male is on the left, the female on the right © Jody de Bruyn.

markings, I'm not sure which is more impressive. They are a very jovial lot, with lots of calling, movement, and parading on the stems and branches, not afraid to hang sideways. Their calls are a rich jumble of whistles, squeaks, rasping, and mimicry.

And now for my personal highlight. I'm convinced Richter and Jody had a secret hotline to the birding community to let them know we were on our way to be entertained by them. Earlier in

the day, I had been bragging about seeing an African Emerald Cuckoo (Mooimeisie) last November on a private game farm on the way to Mokopane, when Jody reminded me also to remember the date and place of our sighting of the Arnot's Chats. The beautiful jet-black Retz's Helmet



(Slanghalsvoël), African Jacana (Grootlangtoon), African Pied Wagtail (Bontkwikkie), Spur-winged Goose (Wildemakou), Blue-billed Teal (Gevlekte Eend), African Woolly-necked Stork (Wolnekooievaar), Black Crake (Swartriethaan), Blacksmith Lapwing (Bontkiewiet), Brown-hooded Kingfisher (Bruinkopvisvanger), Crowned Lapwing (Kroonkiewiet), Goliath Heron (Reusereier), Grey Heron (Bloureier), Hamerkop, Little Egret (Kleinwitreier), Little

LEFT My highlight of the day, the Retz's Helmetshrike © Leonie Kellerman.

BELOW A rarity in the Lowveld, two African Pygmy Geese © Jody de Bruyn.

Shrike (Swarthelmlaksman), bright red, yellow-tipped bill, and red-eye wattles surprised me in the tall, broad-leaved mopane woodland. Both sexes are alike. We had lovely views of one stretching, displaying its left wing with white-banded feathers. I suspect they came first

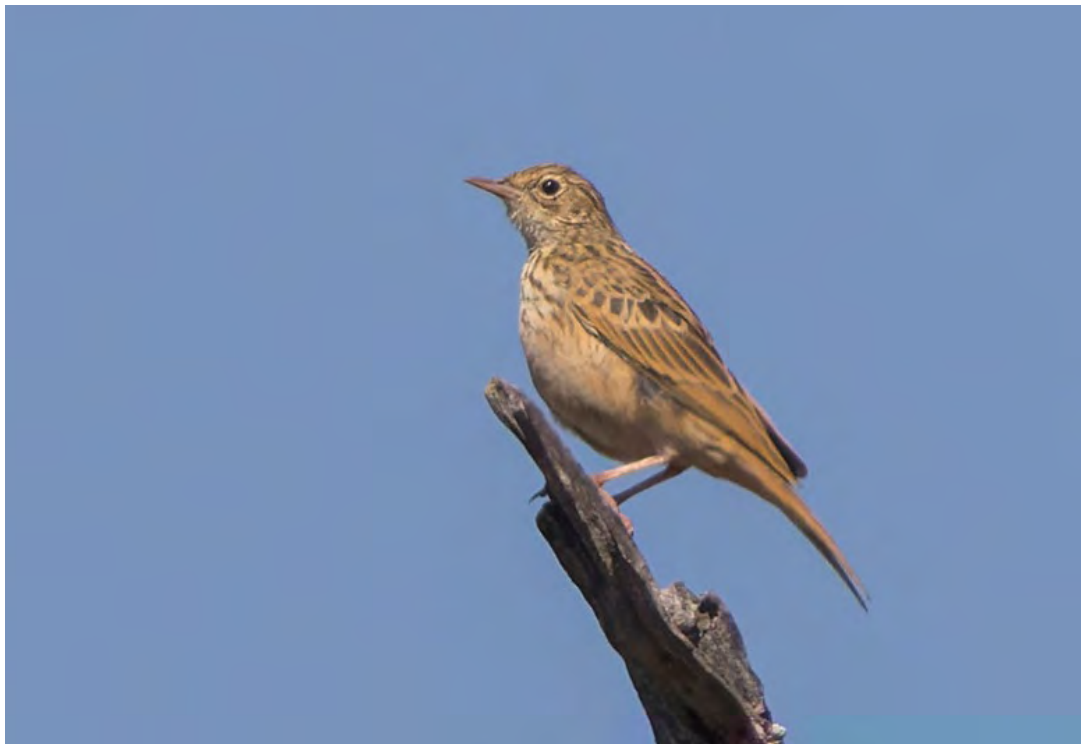
in the bird calling class, as they snap their bills with various weird grating, gobbling, chuckling, whistles, trills, and chattering. I vote this as the bird of the day!

A total of 113 species were identified on the day. In the dams, we sighted African Darter





ABOVE A Woolly-necked Stork relishing the early-morning winter sun © Jody De Bruyn.



ABOVE The Bushveld Pipit © Jody De Bruyn.

Grebe (Kleindobbertjie), Pied Kingfisher (Bontvisvanger), Reed Cormorant (Rietduiker), Water Thick-knee (Waterdikkop), White-breasted Cormorant (Witborsduiker), White-faced Whistling Duck (Nonnetjie-eend), Western Cattle Egret (Veereier), and Three-banded Plover (Driebandstrandkiewiet). A very unusual sighting was the African Pygmy Goose (Dwerggans), a very uncommon and vulnerable species. The male has a green patch on the neck, and the species breeds in tree cavities.

The Stierling's Wren Warbler (Stierlingsanger) was beautifully camouflaged in the mopane forest with its whiter breast and brown-barred

back feathering. Its call is a bit like a ringing telephone. The tiny Bushveld Pipit (Bosveldkoester) was also spotted in the open mopane woodland. Its small size, white eye ring, and pinkish lower helps to identify this species. Another highlight in the woodlands was the Striped Kingfisher (Gestrepte Visvanger).

Other Species of interest included beautiful sightings of several raptors. A Hooded Vulture (Monnikaasvoël) and a few White-backed Vultures (Witruigaasvoël)

rested in the trees and eventually flew off. The Hooded Vulture is last in the vulture food queue, so I always wonder what special digestion they must have for the scraps? On our way out, an African Fish Eagle (Visarend) was sitting majestically on a dry tree stump in the water, and then, just to be sure we noted it, it called its iconic call! A Tawny Eagle (Roofarend), Martial Eagle (Breëkoparend), several Dark Chanting Goshawks (Donkersingvalk), and a Lizard Buzzard (Akkedisvalk) with its characteristic black throat stripe, were all seen at our various stops. We were also fortunate to hear an African Barred Owllet (Gebande Uil)

whose habitat was the forest below one of the dams. The Black-backed Puffback (Sneeubal) performed in a nearby tree, and finally I realised why it is called a Sneeubal in Afrikaans. And then the secretive Southern Boubou (Waterfiskaal) made an appearance, much to my delight, as I see them at our beach house on the Tsitsikamma coast.

Thanks to Richter for the arrangements and the Vorster's for allowing us access to Nagude.

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Bearded Scrub Robin © Jody de Bruyn.



Brown-hooded Kingfisher © Jody de Bruyn.



Blue-billed Teal © Jody de Bruyn.



Martial Eagle © Jody de Bruyn.



Tawny Eagle © Jody de Bruyn.



Water Thick-knee © Jody de Bruyn.



Lizard Buzzard © Jody de Bruyn.



Greater Honeyguide © Jody de Bruyn.



Birding at

KOPPIE ALLEEN

TEXT AND PHOTOS Jody de Bruyn

View over Koppie Alleen looking northwest towards De Loskop in the distance.

The convoy of vehicles entered the Koppie Alleen Farm around 7 am on 7 June 2025 with a group of eager birders ready to explore our first-ever club outing at this venue. Koppie Alleen farm is about 35 km north of Polokwane, situated on the Bylsteel road. En route to the farmhouse, we made a few stops and managed to list the following species: Crested Francolin, Crested Barbet, Acacia Pied Barbet, Green Wood Hoopoe, Chestnut-vented Warbler, Sabota Lark, Ring-necked Dove, Red-faced Mousebird, and a feisty Rattling Cisticola. We had

a Common Buttonquail calling in the veld nearby, and with some luck, a few members had fleeting views of this shy species. We all had a big surprise when the calls of a Verreaux's Eagle-Owl were heard at clump of large trees situated at a neighbouring farmhouse. Unfortunately, there were no visuals of this owl, which is uncommon within the Polokwane 100K area.

At our next stop, we had a pair of Pearl-spotted Owlets entertaining

BELOW Red-faced Mousebird.



ABOVE It is always a joy to come across a Pearl-spotted Owllet.

us. Several species weren't too happy with their presence, and a few had to investigate what all the commotion was about. We managed to add the following species to our list: Arrow-marked Babbler, Groundscraper Thrush, Long-billed Crombec, Golden-breasted Bunting, Cape

Starling, Scaly-feathered Weaver and a Golden-tailed Woodpecker.

At the farmhouse, we were greeted by our host, Francois



Marico Flycatcher

Goosen, who also kindly offered us the use of the farm's game viewer vehicle. A Lilac-breasted Roller watched while everyone got onto the game viewer and headed out to explore the farm. We headed out with everyone eager to see what we could spot next. The open game viewer made it easier for everyone to spot birds, and along the route we managed to list: White-throated Robin-Chat, Namaqua Dove, African Pipit, Blue Waxbill, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Marico Flycatcher and a Pied Crow flying in the distance.

We stopped at a cattle kraal and had a number of bird species visiting the water troughs. With everyone off the game viewer, we explored the kraal area. Namaqua Dove was common, and a number of Marico Flycatchers gave good views to all. A Crimson-breasted Shrike and Southern Red-billed Hornbill were moving along the fence line while a Barred Wren-Warbler gave us some quick views



Groundscraper Thrush



Barred Wren-Warbler

before disappearing into the canopy. A Great Sparrow made a quick appearance. A flyover of a Burchell's Sandgrouse added to the continued list of great sightings for the day.

We managed to add a few seedeaters to our list, such as Yellow-fronted Canary, Violet-eared Waxbill, Black-faced Waxbill, Green-winged Pytilia and Red-billed Quelea. A group of Kalahari Scrub Robins entertained us with prolonged views, and everyone managed to get photos of them. A scruffy-looking Shaft-tailed Whydah male was patrolling the fence line,

and its worn-out feathers indicated the end of his breeding season.

With everyone back on the game viewer, we explored further. We made our way through several gates and headed along the hillside up onto a lookout point. Along the way, we managed to add species like Little Bee-eater, Black-chested Prinia, Burchell's Coucal, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Swainson's

BELOW Not as dapper-looking as usual, this male Shaft-tailed Whydah still elicited the customary oohs and aahs.



Spurfowl and Ashy Tit. At the lookout point, we had excellent views of the surrounding area and were able to point out a number of landmarks from this elevated spot. A few more birds were seen and added to our list, including the Streaky-headed Seedeater, Southern Black Tit, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, and Common Scimitarbill.

As we made our way back to the farmhouse, we had a flyover of a Cape Vulture. A quick stop at the cattle kraal saw us adding Red-billed Oxpeckers. Back at the farmhouse,

BELOW A pair of Common Scimitarbills allowed for some distant views.



we also had views of a pair of Gabar Goshawks. All-in-all we recorded close to 80 species on the day. Thank you to our host, Francois Goosen, for allowing us access to Koppie Alleen Farm and for the use of the game viewer vehicle. Thanks to all who joined the outing, and to Richter and

ABOVE On our way back to the homestead, a low-flying Cape Vulture showed us the way.

Derek who organised the outing for the club.

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TEXT AND PHOTOS Julia Friskin

It is the 1st of June ... the day we'd been waiting months for, had finally arrived! Our trip to Skomer Island in Wales to view the puffins is about to happen!!

We collected our pre-booked tickets from the office for our 11 am departure from Martin's Haven, donned our warm jackets, rain gear, and backpacks with our daily provisions, and were all set to go. The crossing to Skomer takes approximately 15 minutes. As we neared the Island, we had our first sightings of the Puffins

we had imagined them to be, but oh so beautiful with their colourful beaks.

Skomer Island is home to over 40,000 breeding Atlantic Puffins between April and the end of July. It is the largest breeding colony in Southern Britain, and with record numbers this year of 43,000 plus, we were not to be disappointed!

RIGHT The iconic Atlantic Puffin.

BELOW Boarding the ferry to Skomer Island.





LEFT The Common Murre is one of the most numerous seabirds in the Northern Hemisphere. They can dive up to 100 m deep in search of their prey, mainly small fish.

BELOW The Razorbill was once heavily persecuted by humans for eggs, meat, and feathers, but there numbers have bounced back since they received legal protection many parts of its range.

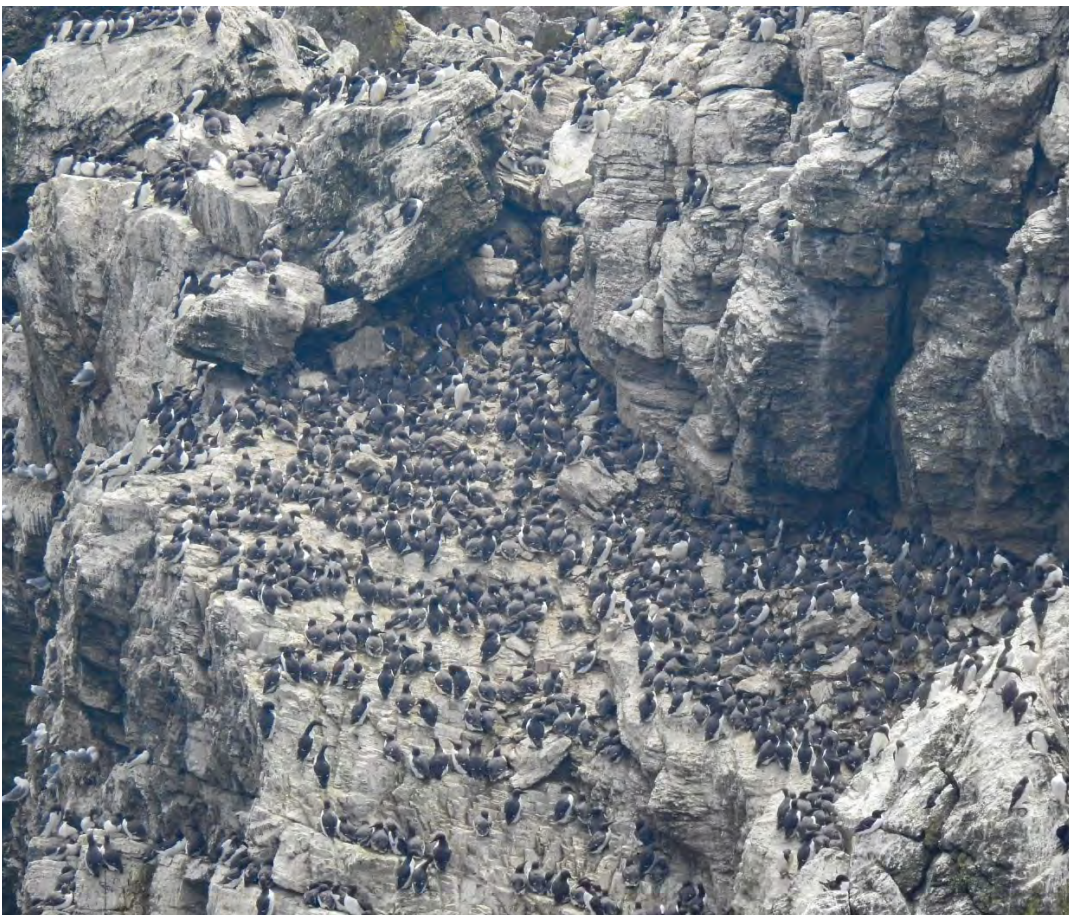
We disembarked at North Haven, Skomer Island, and as we climbed the steep steps up the cliff, we had excellent sightings of guillemots and razorbills, both unusual-looking birds. Our group was briefed on the area, what to look out for, the places of interest and most importantly, told to stay on the paths.

The Skomer Island trail is approximately 6.5 km and takes 3 hours to navigate, though some parts are subject to steep terrain.

The Wick is an impressive cliff face that supports breeding Northern Fulmars, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Black Guillemots, and Razorbills. It is a great area to view thousands of puffins near their burrows and close to the pathways. They are fearless, beautiful, and characterful little birds, not perturbed by the many tourists and photographers.

Skomer Island also supports the largest breeding population of Manx Shearwaters in the world, over 300,000 nest in the burrows





ABOVE The cliffs were alive with seabirds - hundreds of thousands, but ...



LEFT There are some other non-seabird attractions, like this Meadow Pipit.



OPPOSITE TOP The footpath on the Skomer Island trail.



OPPOSITE BOTTOM The nesting burrows create a honeycomb-like structure in the ground

that honeycomb the island. These birds remain underground during the day or fish out to sea, returning under the safety of darkness. We saw many Manx Shearwater remains on the pathways, birds that had fallen prey to the predatory Great Black backed Gulls; however, they are a small minority of their breeding numbers. These gulls predate the birds and rabbits, and we witnessed a gull attack and kill an Eurasian Oystercatcher chick.

The island is very beautiful; it is covered in ferns and wildflowers. It is also home to several smaller birds, namely the Eurasian Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Northern Wheatear, Common

Linnet, Eurasian Wren, Sedge Warbler, Common Whitethroat, and Dunnock.

We unfortunately did not see the diurnal Short-eared Owls, Red-billed Chough, or European Shag. Still, we were pleased to tick off a number of other species, including a Eurasian Curlew, which delighted us with a flyby display.

At day's end, waiting for our boat to return to the mainland, we were thrilled to watch puffins returning to their island with beaks full of small silvery fish.

An incredible once-in-a-lifetime birding trip.

Author email: juliafriskin@yahoo.com



Eurasian Wren



Atlantic Puffin © Mark Friskin

Zambian bird ringing delights

Mutinondo

TEXT AND PHOTOS Ursula Bryson

View from the bar over the pristine landscape.

In January 2025, I spent almost two weeks bird ringing in [Mutinondo Wilderness Lodge](#), in Muchinga Province, in northern Zambia. It was our fourth research stay, during which we documented and collected biometric data. This time we were late in the season, and the rain hit us with full force. Even so, the area is beautiful. It is pristine and shows a great wealth of habitats and plant and animal species.

About 1,700 species of plants have been identified on the property of more than 10,000 ha, as well as 367 bird, 283 butterfly, and 405 other invertebrate species. Mutinondo

as an Important Bird Area (IBA) is renowned as the best site in the world for several bird specials, including the Chestnut-headed Flufftail (*Sarothrura lugens*) and the Bar-winged Weaver (*Ploceus angolensis*) (<https://www.mutinondozambia.com/activities/birding/>).

During our stay, we ringed 233 birds out of 56 species, although the daily rain restricted our ringing time and the bird movement. Our aim

BELOW Nets in the dambo along the Masumfushi River.



ABOVE Fawn-breasted Waxbill.

was to collect data on measurements and moult, and to gather more photographic documentation of the different stages of the development in first-year and fully adult birds. We also took the opportunity to train the resident bird guides - and to learn from them. Together we examined age criteria, plumage features, and moult.

Beyond species frequently found, like Yellow White-eyes (*Zosterops senegalensis*), Short-winged Cisticolas (*Cisticola brachypterus*), Red-collared and White-winged Widowbirds (*Euplectes ardens* and *E. albonotatus*) and Fawn-breasted Waxbills (*Estrilda paludicola*), we also caught common migratory species

like African Pygmy Kingfisher (*Ispidina picta*), European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*), Garden Warbler (*Sylvia borin*), Marsh Warbler (*Acrocephalus palustris*), and Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*).

Our Mutinondo specials we could ring, though, were Scaly-throated Honeyguide (*Indicator variegatus*), Green-backed [Little Spotted] Woodpecker (*Campethera [maculosa] cailliautii*), Broad-tailed Warbler [Fan-tailed Grass-bird] (*Schoenicola [Catriscus] brevirostris*), White-tailed Blue-

Flycatcher (*Elminia albicauda*), Chirping Cisticola (*Cisticola pipiens*), Green-headed Sunbird (*Nectarinia [Cyanomitra] verticalis*), Anchieta's [Red and Blue] Sunbird (*Anthreptes anchietae*), Fülleborn's Longclaw (*Macronyx fuellebornii*), Grey-olive Greenbul (*Phyllastrephus cerviniventris*) and Yellow-throated Greenbul (Leaflove) (*Atimastillas [Chlorocichla] flavigula*).

Our greatest delight was the eight Black-backed Barbets (*Pogonornis [Lybius] minor macclounii*), most of them visiting a fruiting bush. We were able to observe differences in eye colour, the bill and plumage of individuals of different ages.

We hope to return soon and continue our studies. Several papers on the species, including retraps and moult, are in preparation.

Acknowledgements We are very grateful to the owners of Mutinondo, Andre and Claire van Eeden, for their generous support, the managers Kyla and David and the staff for making our stay even more pleasant and to my helpers in the field, the bird guides Victor Kunda and Moses Ndeke, and Fred Parks, for learning and laughter. Our thanks go to Wildlife and BirdWatch Zambia for granting the ringing permit.

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ABOVE Female Green-backed Woodpecker with black-and-white forehead, and ...

RIGHT ... a male with a full red cap.





ABOVE White-tailed Blue-Flycatcher.



ABOVE Scaly-throated Honeyguide.



ABOVE A first-year Anchietia's (Red-and-Blue) Sunbird (*Anthreptes anchietae*) moulting into adult plumage. The yellow gape flange is still well visible..



ABOVE A Female (left) and male (right) Green-headed Sunbird.



ABOVE Juvenile (top) and adult (bottom) Black-backed Barbet. Note the differences in eye-colour, "tooth" of the bill, and the colouration and the quality of the plumage.

ABOVE Fülleborn's Longclaw. The long claws are thought to enable the bird to grasp the grass tufts well when moving on the uneven ground.

AviList

A unified global bird taxonomy for conservation

AviList originated from discussions in 2016 among leading experts from major bird checklist authorities like the IOC World Bird List, eBird/Clements Checklist, Avibase, and BirdLife International. At the time, the global bird taxonomic landscape was becoming increasingly confusing. Three prominent checklists were independently updating their classifications from one to four times a year, often applying different standards, assessing revisions at varying speeds, and even reaching conflicting conclusions. This created significant challenges for users trying to navigate bird information.

To bring harmony to the chaos created by four operational global bird checklists, AviList, a new unified global checklist for birds, was developed by the Working Group on Avian Checklists. This group

comprises experts from prominent ornithological organisations, including BirdLife International, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the American Ornithological Society, the International Ornithologists' Union (IOU), and Avibase. This collaborative effort means AviList will now replace both the International Ornithological Community and Clements lists, and it's set to be updated annually to ensure its continued accuracy and relevance. AviList recognises 11,131 bird species across 252 families.

Why a unified checklist matters?

The primary goal of AviList is to harmonise global bird taxonomy, resolving discrepancies in scientific names that have historically complicated bird conservation efforts. As experts like Marshall Iliff of the Cornell Lab and ornithologist Les Christidis explain, differing

species names among conservation agencies can lead to misaligned resources and confusion, hindering effective protection of biodiversity. A unified list ensures everyone "speaks the same language" when discussing and protecting bird species.

How AviList was created

The AviList team, operating under the International Ornithologists' Union, meticulously worked to reconcile differences between major existing checklists (Clements, International Ornithological Congress, and BirdLife International). They employed an integrative species concept, which involves thoroughly examining all available evidence—including physical appearance (morphology), behaviour, ecology, genetics, evolutionary relationships, and even sound recordings and museum specimens—to determine species status. Decisions on classification are made through a voting process among eight core working group members. This rigorous, detective-like approach addresses the inherent complexities in taxonomy.

Impact and Future

AviList presents a significant advancement for both birders

and conservationists. It provides a consistent standard for avian taxonomy, making it easier to share information, aggregate data, and clarify species limits for both professionals and enthusiasts. The checklist is [free to download](#) and is expected to greatly facilitate data analysis and strengthen conservation efforts globally. The team will continue its work with annual reviews, acknowledging that new scientific research and ongoing evolution mean taxonomy is a continuous process.

Editors' note: We are excited about this major step forward and look forward to start implementing AviList from this issue going forward. It will take some time to work through the list and see how it affects our lists, but some of the species changes (all lumps) include:

- *Little and Dimorphic Egret = Little Egret.*
- *Black and Yellow-billed Kite = Black Kite.*
- *Cape and Agulhas Long-billed Lark = Cape Long-billed Lark.*
- *Karoo and Benguela Long-billed Lark = Karoo Long-billed Lark*
- *Green-backed and Grey-backed Camaroptera = Bleating Camaroptera.*

HOT OFF THE PRESS

Red Data Book of the Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Eswatini 2025

The Red Data Book of Birds 2025 online presents the most comprehensive and up-to-date regional assessments of bird species across Southern Africa.

Developed through rigorous scientific research and in collaboration with local and international experts, the Red Data Book provides critical insights into the conservation status of birds in the region.

The Red Data Book of Birds 2025 follows the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List framework, adapted to reflect the unique environmental challenges and species diversity of Southern Africa. The assessments follow the globally recognised IUCN Red List categories and criteria, offering an evidence-based guide to the risks of extinction faced by avian species in the region.

You can explore the species [here](#).



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RED-BILLED OXPECKER



ARNO ELLMER

A dash of lipstick

Although related to the glossy starlings, oxpeckers lack the brilliant iridescence characteristic of that group and their plumage is plain brown. They thus blend in well on their typically dull-coloured hosts. Red-billed Oxpeckers are rescued from being totally non-descript by their colourful bills and eye-rings – bright red and yellow respectively. The birds' legs are short, with powerful, clasping feet and sharp, strongly curved claws, and their tails are relatively long and rigid. These adaptations are useful for clinging to, clambering around and bracing themselves against the bodies of their hosts. In this respect they resemble woodpeckers, which scale trees in a similar fashion.

Family affairs

Oxpecker nests are usually in holes in trees, where 2–5 eggs are laid. Most hole-nesting birds lay unmarked white eggs, but those of oxpeckers are well patterned, as are the eggs of their similarly hole-nesting starling cousins. Even when breeding, oxpeckers take advantage of their hosts, using copious plucked hair to form a base to their nests. They also engage in courtship and copulation while clinging to the animals.



SIMON PRICE

The Red-billed Oxpecker is an evolutionary marvel and a conservation success story. The mutualism between oxpeckers and their mammalian hosts is a riveting example of ecological interrelationships. Oxpeckers are the world's only obligate mammal gleaners; in other words, they rely on pecking their food off living mammals. Virtually the entire natural history of these birds reflects adaptation to this unique lifestyle.

Historically, a series of relentless hammer blows reduced the original distribution and abundance of the Red-billed Oxpecker to remnants. Subsequent conservation interventions have heralded a resurgence of this remarkable creature and a welcome return to many of its ancestral haunts.

When breeding, oxpeckers pluck hair from their mammalian hosts to line their nests.

Bushveld burgher

This species is found in the eastern half of the Afrotropics from South Africa north to the Horn of Africa. It is absent from West Africa, which is curious as its congener, the Yellow-billed Oxpecker, with which it otherwise overlaps extensively, is widespread in that region. The Red-billed Oxpecker is largely a denizen of bushveld areas. It is absent from drier woodlands though, such as most of the Kalahari. This may be related to reduced humidity limiting its favoured tick prey, the mix of suitable ungulate hosts, its apparent need to drink water regularly, or a combination of some or all of these factors.

Avian Ezekiel

Another facet to the mutualism between oxpeckers and their hosts is the hissing alarm calls the birds emit whenever they spot potential predators, including humans, approaching them. The hosts are highly responsive to these warnings and typically take immediate evasive action. It is interesting that in areas where oxpeckers exploit domestic cattle, they often do not utter alarm calls when humans approach. This is apparently linked to the lack of response from these domestic animals, whereas they continue to give such warnings when on wild animals.



Homeward bound

The advent of the modern era was devastating to oxpeckers. The decimation of wild ungulates by hunters severely reduced the abundance of their hosts. This was particularly damaging where game-extirmination programmes were implemented to eradicate sleeping sickness. The oxpeckers' recourse to domestic livestock partially compensated for the loss of game, but the rinderpest epidemic of the late 19th century devastated both livestock and wild ungulates. A further body blow came with the widespread dipping of cattle with arsenic-based pesticides. This reduced the oxpeckers' food and poisoned the birds directly.

By the middle of the 20th century, oxpecker populations had been greatly reduced and highly fragmented. The birds were restricted to large conservation areas, with remnant populations in rural areas where livestock dipping was not practised. In South Africa they disappeared locally from many areas and became completely extinct in the Eastern Cape. More recently, the introduction of 'bird-friendly' chemical dips has promoted a reversal in fortunes. An increase in protected areas, including large private game reserves, has probably also contributed to this renaissance. Re-introduction programmes have further brought the birds back to some of their former strongholds. This is most evident in the Eastern Cape, where the species is rapidly re-establishing itself following restoration efforts.

Buffaloes are favoured hosts as they are bulky and occur in large herds. Both factors maximise the food supply available to oxpeckers.



CHARL SENEKAL

Black pudding

Oxpeckers feed primarily on the ticks that infest their hosts, although they will also take any mites, lice, leeches and biting flies that parasitise these animals. They harvest their prey using a 'scissoring' motion, especially on long-haired animals, and their beaks are flattened for this purpose. Larger ticks, though, are often simply plucked from the skin. The birds may play a critical role in the control of ectoparasites on their primary hosts.

A wide variety of ungulates serve as hosts, with regional variations. Favourites include giraffe, buffalo, rhino, zebra, impala, eland, kudu, roan and sable. Among the less favoured hosts are hippo, warthog, blue wildebeest, nyala and gemsbok. Some herbivorous mammals do not tolerate the attention of oxpeckers; notable among these are elephants, as well as waterbuck and bushbuck. Oxpeckers have not been recorded, or are rare, on other ungulates such as tsessebe, hartebeest, puku, lechwe, reedbuck, oribi, most (possibly all) gazelles and other smaller antelope. The birds adapt to cattle, which are now the primary hosts in many settled regions. Donkeys, mules, pigs and occasionally sheep and goats are also utilised. Camels seem to be mainly avoided and horses appear largely intolerant of the birds.



ANTON CRONE

The nature of the oxpeckers' prey means that mammalian blood forms a large, indeed probably predominant, part of their diet. It is therefore not surprising that the birds will peck at wounds on their hosts to promote blood flow, which is then consumed directly. Although this helps keep sores clean, it may retard healing. Occasionally, oxpeckers will even tear through healthy skin to access blood. These actions seem to occur particularly on domestic stock and can elicit the ire of farmers. It seems worst where existing sores from harnessing gear is implicated and where stock animals are already in poor condition.

TEXT BY DAVID ALLAN

FAST FACTS

- One oxpecker had 1665 ticks in its stomach and another in captivity consumed up to 12 000 tick larvae or 100 adult ticks per day!
- The original distribution of the oxpecker closely matches that of its most favoured tick prey, the African blue tick and the brown ear tick.
- An oxpecker will even remain attached to its host when drinking by running down the animal's leg or head to reach water.
- Nesting pairs of oxpeckers are often assisted in feeding their young by other flock members, probably offspring from earlier breeding attempts – a reproductive system known as 'cooperative breeding'.
- The bright colours of the bills and eye-rings of young oxpeckers only develop months after they have left the nest.

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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.

All honeyguides

- Photos showing behaviour
- Young birds with their hosts

Green-headed Oriole

- Diet
- Behaviour

Abdim's Stork

- Nests and nestlings
- Behaviour
- Typical habitat

Crowned Eagle

- Foraging and with prey
- Typical habitat
- Nests, eggs, and nestlings

Oxpeckers (Red-billed and Yellow-billed)

- Different age classes
- Photos showing food other than ticks.
- Photos showing behaviour, interactions, birds at nests

Cape Parrot

- Photos related to breeding, e.g., nests, eggs, chicks, etc.
- Photos showing behaviour

Recently published species accounts

[African Finfoot](#)
[Gurney's Sugarbird](#)
[East Coast Akalat](#)

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

WANTED

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



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

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



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

Regulars

Birds in Art

Red-chested Cuckoo

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



Red-chested Cuckoo

First of all, I want to thank Sandrie de Wet for allowing me to use her photos as a reference for my painting! In this issue, we take a closer look at a bird that is very familiar, yet poorly understood by most of the public: the Red-chested Cuckoo, or Piet-My-Vrou (*Cuculus solitarius*). Many people indeed know its three-part call, which in Afrikaans is rendered 'Piet My Vrou'! Some imagination is needed to arrive at those exact words, though ... it is just a whistle with three phrases, descending the scale: "whip-whip-wheeu". This very simple call is repeated by birds over and over and over, sometimes into the night, and may perturb light sleepers enough to call curses down onto the poor birds. Yet, their three-part call is actually more complex, and we might infer less boring than the two-part call of its relative, the Eurasian (or Common) Cuckoo, which has been appreciated enough to be immortalised in the sound of the Cuckoo Clock!

Actually, there are many species of cuckoos, and interestingly, they generally seem to have interesting and characteristic calls, so that we have two others here in South Africa named for their sounds - the Diederik Cuckoo, and the Klaas's Cuckoo (Meitjie in Afrikaans). These

are quite familiar, and the other true cuckoos also tend to have their very recognisable calls - but the 'common' Cuckoo is silent here, and many people may not even realise that it is actually around!

The funny thing about the Piet-My-Vrou is that, though its call is so well-known, very few people ever see it. I'm sure if you ask a non-birder what a Piet-My-Vrou looks like, or even what kind of bird it is, they'd be stumped! In my own case, it took me well into my bird-watching years before I even saw one properly - I needed to sneak up on it as it sat hidden in a tree, and I had to move around the tree a lot before finally my view of it was clear. I subsequently have had only a handful of additional sightings that I can consider to be good. The bird is adept at seeking a spot in a leafy tree where it would be obscured from sight from almost any direction. Then it can blithely call the whole day long, with certainty that a predator trying to find it will have some trouble, hopefully giving it time to abscond.

A Piet-My-Vrou flies, in typical cuckoo style, fast and silent on its long wings. Like many other cuckoos, it is a migrant, though only within Africa south of the Sahara, unlike the common cuckoo. It seems to be resident in equatorial Africa



and regions north of the equator, but southern populations commute between central and southern Africa. It arrives here in our summer, and here is where it breeds!

In breeding, this is a typical parasitic cuckoo. It lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. Its primary host is the Cape Robin-Chat (Gewone Janfrederik), but it also targets the Common Wagtail (Gewone Kwikkie), and further to the north, the Boulder Chat (Swartberglyster). It can also target other robin-chats like the White-throated Robin-Chat (Witkeeljanfrederik). Other robin-chats seem to be more savvy at spotting cuckoo eggs in their

nests, though. The Cape Robin-Chat seems quite untroubled by the fact that the eggs of the Red-chested Cuckoo are quite unlike its own - uniformly chocolate brown, compared to the lighter-coloured, finely brown-speckled eggs of the robin-chat. The female cuckoos can easily find males by homing in on their calls; each male can mate with several females per season, as it has no other reproductive duties at all, apart from sometimes helping to

ABOVE A Red-chested Cuckoo egg in a nest of a White-browed Scrub Robin
© Warwick Tarboton.



ABOVE A Mountain Wagtail has its work cut out to feed the Red-chested Cuckoo fledgling © Warwick Tarboton.

distract prospective hosts so that the female can sneak in and lay her egg undetected. To find hosts, the female cuckoo will lurk about and try to observe nesting birds without being seen. She may lay as many as 20 eggs or more in a typical breeding season; it only needs a few of these to remain undiscovered to be successful at its strategy. Having observed her potential hosts, she will visit their nests when they are away feeding, or her mate may lure them

away from the nests. It may take her only ten seconds to lay her egg. She may even remove one or more of the host's eggs, carrying them away in her bill and dropping or eating them. She will time the laying of her egg to when the host female has started laying eggs, but not yet incubated them. The cuckoo, in turn, can keep her own egg inside her for an extra 24 hours, which gives it a head start on incubation. Thus, the young cuckoo chick will hatch earlier

and be bigger and stronger than the host's chicks; within its first two days after hatching, it will push out any other eggs or hatchlings in its own nest, after which it will be the only remaining mouth to feed!

While cuckoo chicks are fed whatever food their hosts bring them, adult cuckoos have

interesting dietary habits. The Piet-My-Vrou, like many other cuckoos, is specialised to feed on hairy caterpillars! These are the 'immature' forms of a variety of butterflies and moths. The irritating, stinging hairs of these rub off on the thick inner lining of the cuckoo's stomach; these may even eventually form a matted layer covering the inner stomach surface, which, when it gets thick enough to interfere with digestion, the cuckoo will regurgitate in a small pellet. Cuckoos will also eat other invertebrates, including beetles, grasshoppers, spiders, centipedes, millipedes, slugs, snails, small frogs and lizards; they also consume berries and other small fruits.

In the northern parts of its range, the Red-Chested Cuckoo is mainly a forest bird, though it may venture out into lush savannah during the rainy season. In southern Africa, it inhabits a variety of habitats, so long as there is shelter: forest, woodland, savannah, even dense scrub. It does adapt to wooded gardens. It is not endangered at present.

The cuckoo family is a large and diverse one, found throughout the world. Apart from the typical parasitic cuckoos, it also includes non-parasitic cuckoos and coucals, couas, koels, malkohas, anis, and the road runners! .

Author email: willemsvandermerwe@gmail.com

Reflections

REFLECTIONS

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

Pafuri's Levhuvhu River Bridge A Symphony of Sound

Chris Patton

The first time I visited Pafuri was in April 1985 as a 14-year-old boy. My lasting memory of that first venture onto the Levhuvhu River/Pafuri Bridge was my first sighting of the comically grotesque facial wattles of the White-crowned Lapwing (they were still called plovers in those days). We had to remain in our vehicle then, my dad had borrowed a combi from work to give us a higher elevation to aid our game-watching, and we eagerly scanned both sides of the bridge from this raised vantage point, feasting on African Fish Eagles,

Grey, Green-backed and Goliath Herons, Pied and Giant Kingfishers, egrets, storks, geese, jacanas and African Pied Wagtails... although 40 years on my memory is completely faded and somewhat hazy, I can say with confidence all those birds were present... because they are always present, and I calculate I have been on that bridge well over a 100 times since to support my claim.

I loved the Pafuri Bridge from day one, but I loved it even more from the late 1990s, when the Kruger management made the decision to paint yellow lines on the tarmac on both ends of all the high-



ABOVE Views both upstream and downstream from Pafuri's Levhuvhu River Bridge provide an enchanted vista of a birding wonderland © Dries de Wet.

RIGHT My first lifer from the bridge was White-crowned Lapwing... an ex-colleague secured this marvellous image showing their prominent wing spurs © Dries de Wet



level bridges in the park and allowed visitors to get out of their vehicles within those yellow lines. This was a major coup for all Kruger wildlife watchers who relished the freedom to be able to roam bridges on foot, or in my case as a paraplegic since 1990, to roll around and position myself in the ideal position to scan and view the traffic of bird-movement up and down the Levhuvhu River.

But the avian traffic of the river is only the half of it...in my opinion it is among the finest places for a **'dawn chorus'** anywhere. Most of the readers will be enthusiastic birders and will be all-to-familiar with what this means, but for those who don't, a dawn chorus is a natural phenomenon where birds sing collectively during the early hours of the morning, typically

around dawn. It's a symphony of birdsong that occurs as the sun begins to rise (both before and after sunrise), featuring a variety of species singing their distinctive calls and songs, and in most parts of the world is most prominent during spring and summer when the breeding season is in full swing. The primary reasons for birds singing at dawn are territorial declarations and

attracting mates. By singing, birds let other birds know they are present, defend their territory, and attract potential mates. Different bird species have unique songs and calls, all contributing to the diverse soundscape of the dawn chorus.

In previous editions of my memories of birding in Far Northern Kruger, readers will know I frequently laud the thrill of the Punda Extreme birding weekends, arranged and facilitated by the West Rand region of the SANParks Honorary Rangers. In most years, over the 13 or 14 years I was enlisted by the SHRs as one of their onboard 'experts' for the Punda Extremes, held over consecutive weekends at the end of January/start of February each year, the camp would be allocated 4 10-seater game drive vehicles, with each vehicle getting allocated an 'expert' as a guide. The 4



LEFT The Levhuvhu Bridge roadblock, but the demarcated zone where visitors can leave their vehicles and view from the bridge can be seen in the background
© Joep Stevens.

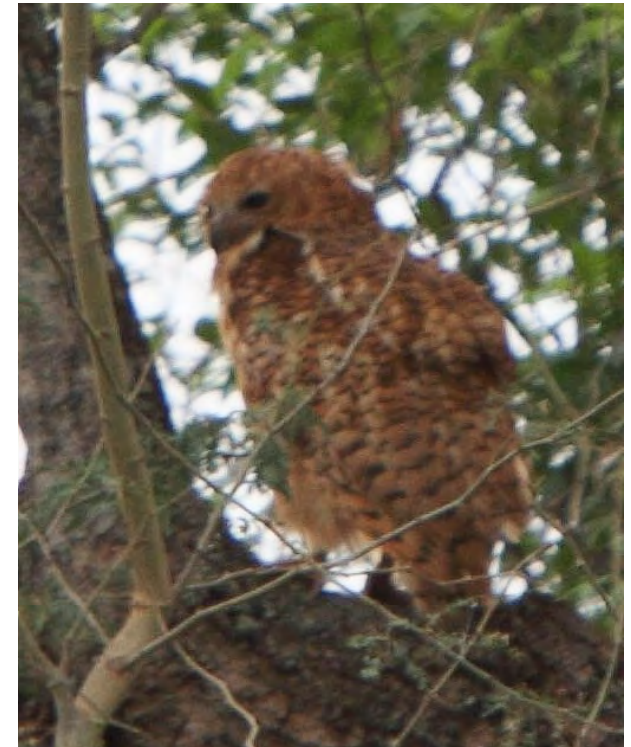
guides would jockey for position as to where their vehicle of birders would do the 'dawn chorus'... Two of the guides were Kruger section rangers, and they would usually choose to do it at Crook's Corner, while my vehicle and the remaining vehicle would always be happy to opt for the Pafuri Bridge.

'Crooks' has some appealing factors, but in my opinion the results (re quality and diversity of sightings) are better from the bridge, and there is a higher strike rate of finding Pel's Fishing Owls... but more on that presently.

Let's get back to the dawn chorus... In late January the explosion of sound cranks up from around 04h20. We'd always leave camp (Punda Maria) at around 02h00, giving us plenty of time on the route to search for various night birds, and still get to the Pafuri area before 04h00 to give us time to search for some nocturnal species before we had to be in position on the bridge to maximize the dawn chorus... but ironically some of these night birds were best located from the bridge, so we might get there... check for Pel's and White-backed Night Heron et al, then move across the bridge north of the river to look for Three-banded Courser, and then return to the bridge for the 'chorus'...

We would not get Pel's every time, and a lot would depend on how high the water level in the river was, but if it wasn't too high and there were lots of slow-moving pools where they can catch fish the returns were usually very reliable... And always for me downstream from the bridge... sometimes perched down on the riverbank, but most often in one of the sycamore figs on the north bank, with their sweeping bends in their trunks or boughs. Once or twice we even found a pair...

A memorable occasion was on 31st January 2015 when the pair of Pel's we had been watching pre-dawn remained in view as it got light, and the trusty driver (a trail's ranger with his FGASA accreditation and permitted to carry and use a rifle for the protection of guests on foot) was able to lead some of the participants down the road that leads to the concession lodge, to allow them to get close up views and take photos. My photos of one of the pair were more long distance, as I remained on the bridge with the other guests, but one of the group was able to get this shot of one of them, while another guest triumphantly returned to the truck with a feather that had floated down to the ground as the bird ruffled its feathers.



RIGHT Pafuri Pel's by daylight on Saturday 31st January 2015
© Leon van Zyl.

BELOW The Pel's feather that another participant triumphantly brought back to our vehicle as proof of the sighting
© Chris Patton



Dawn Chorus delights

To set the scene for a dawn chorus at Pafuri Bridge, one has to be able to visualise the lay of the land... both side of the river are lined with incredible riverine gallery forest, with sycamore fig, leadwood and natal mahogany being conspicuous, but creating the canopy above the south bank of the river at Pafuri Bridge is a tangle of umbrella thorn and fever trees. This canopy is beyond the yellow lines of safe disembarking that I described earlier, but with our driver being equipped with a rifle, we were always able to roam a little further off the bridge. The tangle, the

small size and busyness of movement of the birds, and the poor light at dawn, make photography difficult, but the following sequence of 'poor' photos are more to give the reader a mental picture of the nature of the canopy that hosts so many birds at this spot...

The thing about a dawn chorus at Pafuri is the explosion of sound... It is a beautiful cacophony of bird song and there are so many

BELOW A pair of duetting Tropical Boubous - the male is in front and the buffier female at the back
© Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE The dawn chorus orchestra will include Collared Sunbird © Scott Chalmers

different sounds at once, and if you are listing, it almost induces a level of anxiety for fear you might miss something... It is a sensory overload... The opening act are often the repetitive churring of Green-capped Eremomelas and Yellow-breasted Apalis, both superficially similar, but different, nonetheless. Bleating Camaroptera is a similar early pioneer, though they're inclined to call all day – and hot off the press, up until early June 2025, one would call them Grey-backed Camaroptera, with that now subspecies occurring locally along the Levhuvhu, once again lumped with the Green-backed form,

more prevalent over much of the rest of KNP. South African birding authorities have adopted the newly released world AviList, a newly published, unified global checklist of bird species and taxonomy.

Other vocal lead performers will include Tawny-flanked Prinia, Tropical Boubou, Lesser Honeyguide, Diederick Cuckoo, Black-collared Barbet, White-browed Robin-Chat, Bearded Scrub Robin, Black-backed Puffback, and Collared Sunbird.

Woodland (summer months only) and Brown-hooded Kingfishers will always be prominent, and the cackling laughter of women (the Xhosa translation of their indigenous name) from the Green Wood-hoopoe flocks will reverberate through the cacophonous melody, before the braying wail of the Trumpeter Hornbill will soon be heard, and these large pterodactyl-like birds are usually easily seen too. Red-eyed and African Mourning Doves, and African Green Pigeon will provide a constant background base.

Two of the most sought-after Pafuri bird party specials that partake in the dawn chorus are

African Yellow White-eye and Black-throated Wattle-eye, and both are reliably found on the bridge (and at other key points along the river).

Night riders

The nocturnal cast one will look for from the bridge may have Pel's Fishing Owl in the lead role as we have already described, but best supporting actor Oscars will also go to White-backed Night Heron and African Wood Owl... The heron is regularly seen in the riverbed below

BELOW Black-throated Wattle-eye female (giving the species its name) on the left and the male on the right
© Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE White-backed Night Heron in the Levhuvhu River
© Chris Patton.

the bridge, while the Wood Owl is often lurking in the canopy above the south bank of the river... extras will include Western Barn Owl, African Barred Owlet, African Scops Owl, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl and Fiery-necked and Square-tailed Nightjars.

Bridge Busters

The next attraction of Pafuri Bridge is what I call the 'Bridge Busters'... those species of bird that use the structure of the bridge to nest on, perch on or to hunt for food in its immediate vicinity... In particular the several species of hirundine, and their even more aerial companions the swift clan, that are regularly seen from there... Little Swifts make their nests below the bridge, as do Lesser

Striped and Wire-tailed Swallows, and all three will regularly be seen on (in the case of the swallows) or around the bridge. Foraging along the river itself is one of the more reliable places in Kruger to find Brown-throated Martin (both forms), not an easy bird to see in the Park. Up until the early 2000s it was also one of the most reliable places in the Park to see Mottled Spinetail, and to be able to compare this species in flight with the ubiquitous Little Swift, and the occasional Horus Swift that also occur there from time to time. But then the

nearby baobab the spinetails nested along Nyalaland Drive collapsed, and finding this species in the Pafuri area (except at the Nyalaland Trails camp) is now a lot more challenging. Other birds that frequently perch on the railings of the bridge include White-fronted Bee-eater (which nest in the nearby riverbanks) or even walk along its tar in the case of African Pied Wagtail. I've already described how it's arguably the best vantage point in the park to spot White-crowned Lapwing, multiple egrets, storks and their allies, hamerkops, herons, especially Goliath, and Green-backed/Striated Herons, and the bridge is one of the few places in the park where I've seen Little Bittern more than once.

Raptor Romance

We also have to pay homage to the large number of raptors that one will see from the bridge... African Fish Eagle will be the most visible, but White-backed Vulture also deserve a mention, along with several accipiters – including African Goshawk and Ovambo Sparrowhawk (the latter an uncommon Kruger bird).

The memorable challenges...

Let me share memories from when things didn't quite go to plan, and some

BELOW A pair of mating lions prevented one group from disembarking on the bridge until we were sure they had moved off
© Chris Patton.



of the pitfalls that one sometimes encounters when taking on mother nature, as often these are more memorable than the birds themselves... One weekend in particular it poured with rain... but while the birding was compromised a bit, there were still some cracking birds to be enjoyed, and the participants still managed to smile, or perhaps they were grimacing?

Then there was the time on 29 January 2011, where we did not dare get out of the vehicle and did our count from in its confines, because just past the north bank of the river was a pair of mating lions...

Then there are the companions who travel with you on these weekends. Some were participating guests, many of whom were recurring and would come back every year or two and with whom you develop a friendship and camaraderie over the years. But I want to pay special tribute to all the drivers of the vehicle I have been allocated to over the years. Some of these are activity guides, working in the Park, a couple were nature conservation students, but most frequently I was



ABOVE David, an Nyalaland Trails guide, was my trusty companion through many Pafuri adventures
© Chris Patton.

assigned one of the trail rangers from the Nyalaland Wilderness Trail, and one gent in particular was called David, who himself had a wonderful knowledge of the birds of the Pafuri area and we forged a great team on adventures here on the bridge, on the travels down the western boundary and around Klopperfontein, which I have written about in previous editions, but also moving east in the Pafuri area, which I will still write more about in the upcoming editions.

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Red-billed Oxpeckers notes

text and photos Derek Engelbrecht

email: faunagalore@gmail.com

Oxpeckers' lives are closely tied to their ungulate hosts. They spend most of their day on their hosts feeding, socialising, or performing self-maintenance activities, and occasionally roost on their hosts at night. Less well

BELOW Red-billed Oxpeckers occasionally hawk insects disturbed by their ungulate hosts. This individual is preparing a grasshopper for swallowing.



ABOVE A group of Red-billed Oxpeckers attending a flowering mountain aloe.

RIGHT Two Red-billed Oxpeckers collecting nesting material from cattle.

known is that they also use their hosts as beaters to flush invertebrates, which they catch to supplement their diet, or they use their hosts as vantage points to hawk emerging termite alates. They are also known to attend flowering



mountain aloes (*Aloe marlothii*) and all indications are that they don't only feed on the invertebrates attracted to the flowers, but they are also opportunistic nectarivores. Oxpeckers also collect tufts of hair from their hosts to line their nests. In exchange for all these “free” services provided by their hosts, oxpeckers act as sentinels, often warning their hosts of potential threats.

In addition to all the above services rendered by oxpecker hosts, I observed an unusual interaction between Red-billed Oxpeckers and their host, in this instance, a giraffe. On 30 March 2024, I observed several oxpeckers feeding and socialising on a few giraffe in the Hoedspruit Wildlife Estate, Limpopo Province (1). A Gabar Goshawk arrived on the scene causing several species to raise the alarm, with many birds flying for cover. All the oxpeckers, however, scurried to the giraffe's mane, with some sidling up to it and others flattening their bodies against the mane (2 and 3). One individual even managed to nestle itself within the mane (4). From here, they kept a wary eye on the Gabar Goshawk, only leaving the safety of the mane when they were a safe distance from the goshawk.

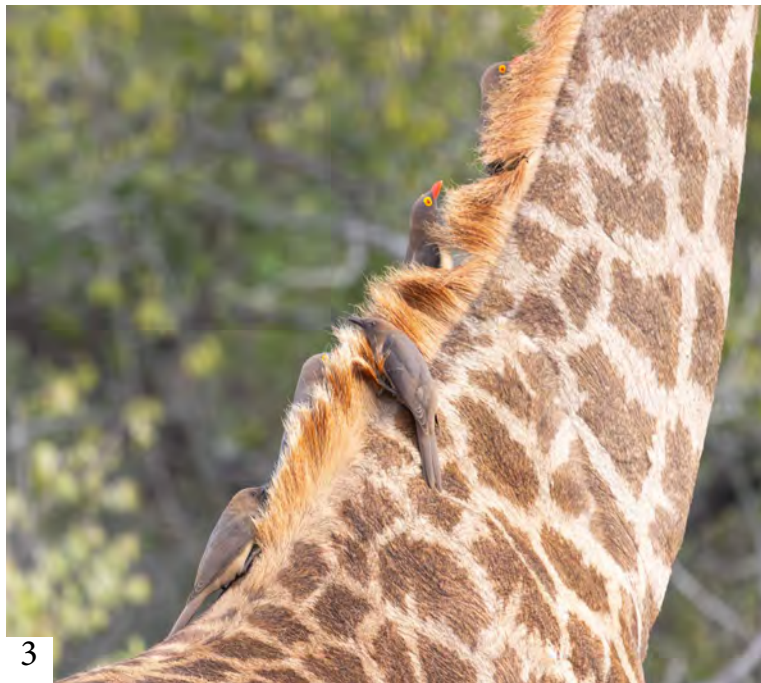
These interactions between oxpeckers and their hosts demonstrate how closely the ecology of oxpeckers is tied to their hosts. A fascinating system.



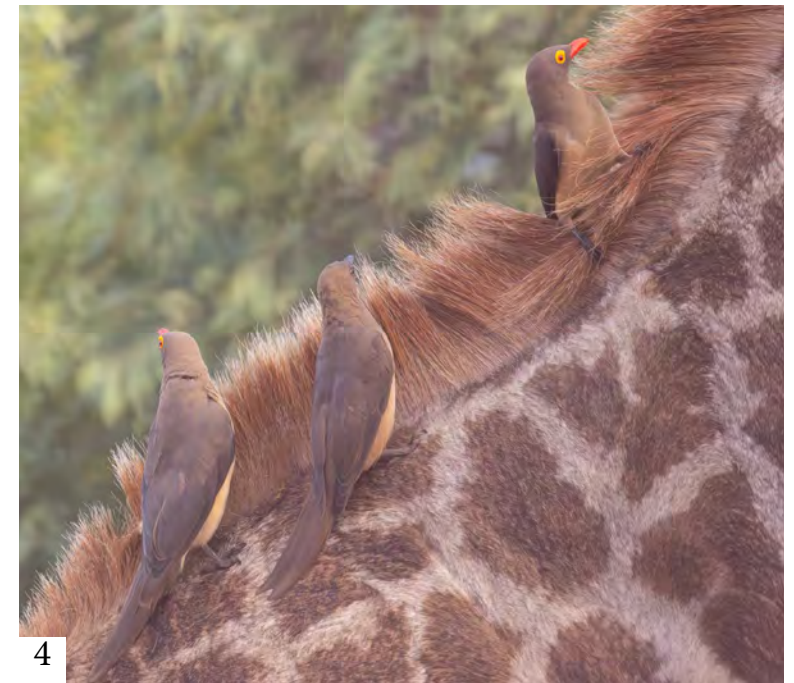
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2



3



4

Three-banded Courser on the move

Derek Engelbrecht

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The enigmatic Three-banded Courser is one of two completely nocturnal coursers in southern Africa, the other being the Bronze-winged Courser. During the day, the Three-banded Courser will roost in the shade of bushes or trees, only emerging onto clearings at night, usually well after sunset (~30–40 mins). It is sparsely distributed and occurs locally throughout much of its range. In the Limpopo Province, it is mainly found in mopane or semi-arid acacia (*Vachellia* spp.) veld, especially on alluvial soils. Its low density and nocturnal behaviour make it difficult to assess its status and distribution.

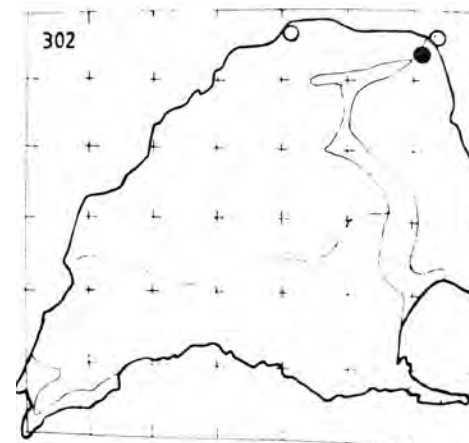
By the late 1980s, only five records of the species existed in South Africa. There was a historic record of a vagrant bird from Griqualand West (Kimberley region), but the other four records were all from the far northern Limpopo Province. At the time, the Three-banded Courser was regarded as "uncertain status:

probably an erratic breeding vagrant" (Tarboton et al. 1987).

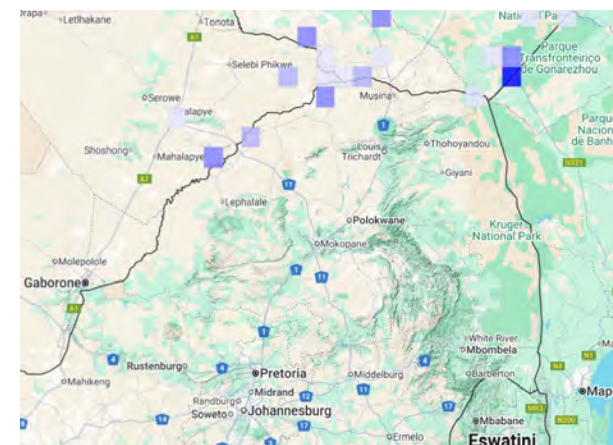
The march of time and the southward march Three-banded Courser in South Africa

Data from the first South African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP1, 1987–1991) suggested the Three-banded Courser was only a rare, peripheral visitor to South Africa (Tree 1997, Hockey 2005). At the time, it was still mainly found in the far northern Kruger National Park (Pafuri region) and the western Limpopo Province, especially along the Limpopo River valley as far south as 23°00'S, 27°50'E (Tree 1997). However, since the early 2000s, sightings have become more regular. Comparing SABAP1 data with the ongoing second Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2, 2007–present) reveals a slight southward range expansion and an increased reporting rate in the Limpopo Province.

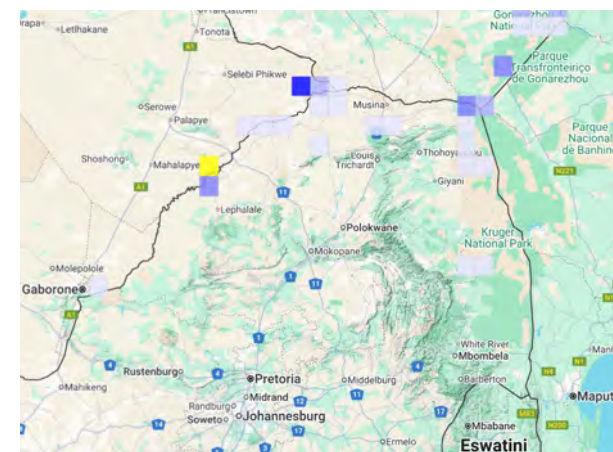
While the main South African population remains north of 23°S,



RIGHT The distribution of the Three-banded Courser during the atlas of the Birds of the Transvaal (Tarboton et al. 1987).



RIGHT The distribution of the Three-banded Courser during first Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP1) from 1987–1991.



RIGHT The distribution of the Three-banded Courser during second southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) from 2007–present.

the past decade has seen a surge in records further south, and not necessarily confined to the low-lying Limpopo River valley. It is fairly regularly reported in suitable mopane woodland north of the Shingwedzi River in the Kruger National Park, but also in the Lowveld outside the Park where sightings and breeding records have been recorded in areas such as the Greater Makalali Game Reserve, Balule, and the Timbavati region in Mpumalanga (~24°30'S). Additionally, there are several records from the western Limpopo Province, specifically from the Blouberg Nature Reserve, Madikwe Game Reserve, and Marakele National Park, with potential breeding at the latter. Currently, the southernmost records (except for some historical records of vagrants, e.g., Kimberley, Kaapmuiden, and Komatipoort) are located at Madikwe Game Reserve (~24°45'S) and across the border in the Greater Gaborone area of southeastern Botswana, such as the villages of Oodi and Kubung (Chris Brewster, in litt.).

Is the range expansion real?

It's difficult to determine whether this apparent range expansion represents a true southward shift or merely a result of increased access to suitable

habitat at night. Night drives are more common in reserves than in the past, increasing the opportunities to encounter this nocturnal species. However, many locations where the Three-banded Courser is now regularly seen have been popular tourist spots for decades, making it difficult to believe that the species would have gone undetected for so long if it had been present. I am therefore inclined to lean towards the notion that the Three-banded Courser is undergoing a genuine southward range expansion.

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Vocalisations of the Three-banded Courser

Derek Engelbrecht

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The Three-banded Courser is almost wholly nocturnal, generally uncommon, and sparsely distributed, and as a result, various aspects of the species' ecology are still shrouded in mystery. Understanding a species' vocal repertoire, especially that of a nocturnal species, is essential for gaining insights into its distribution, behaviour, and population status. By recognising different vocalisations, scientists can track a species' distribution, estimate its population size, and identify potential threats to its survival.

Here I describe the vocalisations of the Three-banded Courser, based on my personal recordings, supplemented by data obtained from online sound repositories such as [Xeno-Canto](#) and the [Macaulay Library](#).

The Vocal Array

The following calls have been described: a social (contact) call, song, an agitated call, an alarm call,

a parental contact call, and other contact calls.

Social Call

A piercing [kee-kee-kee...](#) (also described as a *chuik* or *kui* by some authors) is often the first of the Three-banded Courser's calls to be heard after sunset. It has been described as a social (contact call) (Dowsett et al. 1977), and several individuals may deliver this call together. This call is often delivered either in conjunction with the song or transitions into it (Fig. 1). Although mostly given on the ground, this call is sometimes delivered in flight.

A series of *kee* notes may or may not start with an introductory note, a slow trill or a wailing whistle of ~0.8 s increasing in frequency, followed by 2–70 or more *kee* notes (Fig. 2). The *kee* notes are delivered at a more or less constant rate of one note every 0.34 s ± 0.07 SD (range 0.25–0.46, *n* = 71 intervals) within a frequency range of 2,196.3–3,567.70 Hz, but at a more or less constant

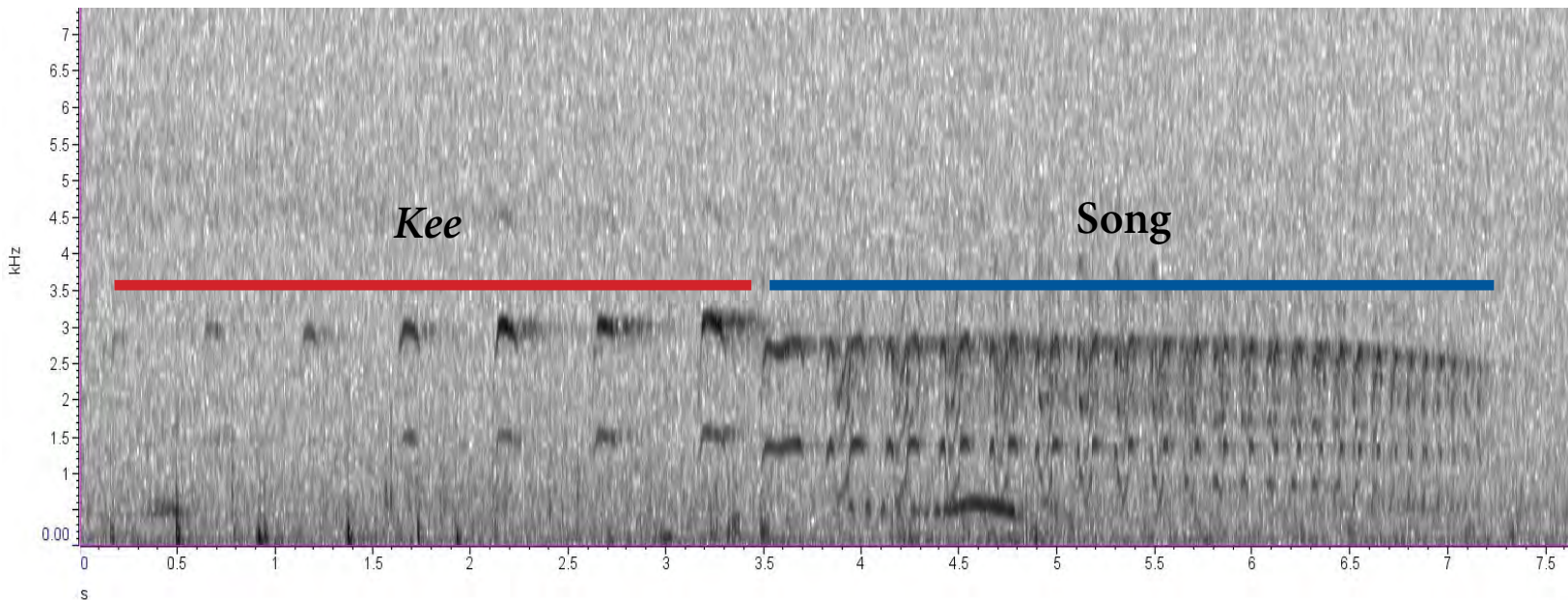


Figure 1. An example of a series of *kee* notes transitioning directly into a song ([ML638433700](https://doi.org/10.1093/bioacp/bkz001) © Derek Engelbrecht).

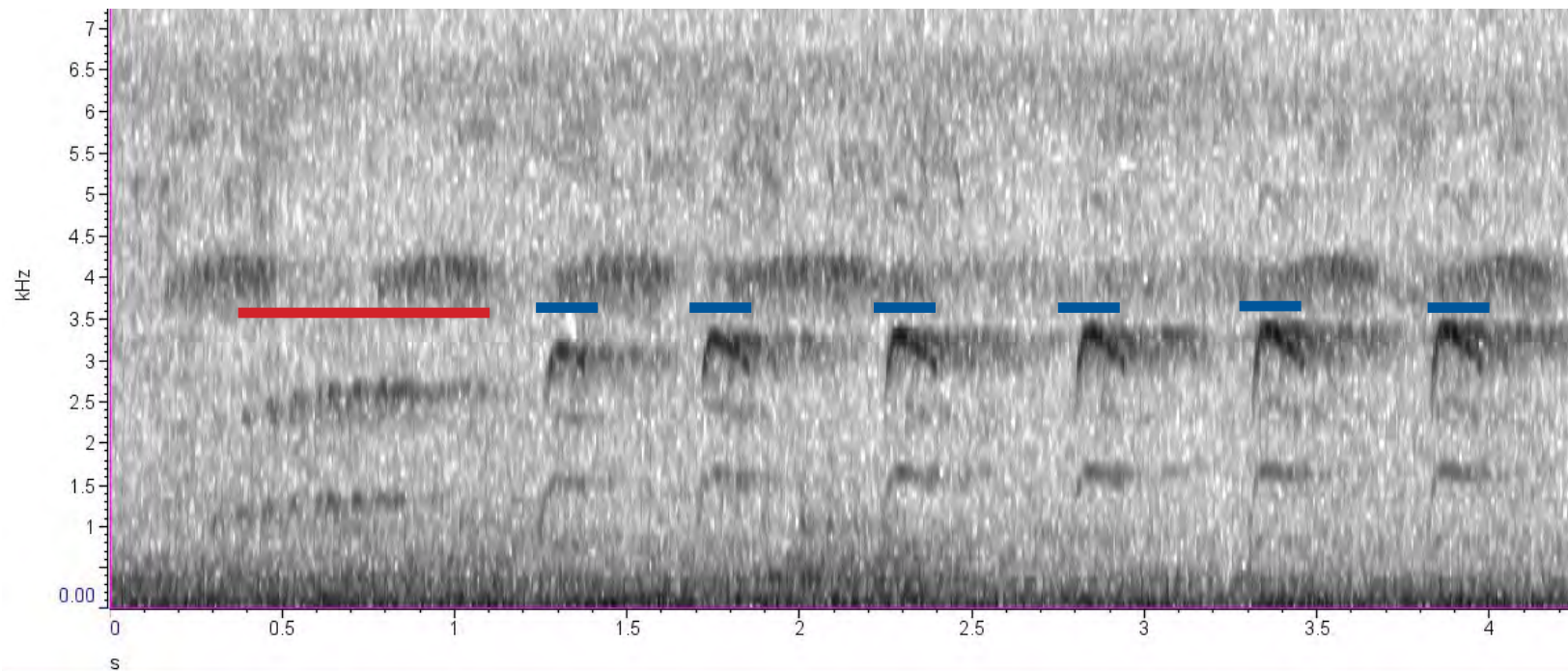


Figure 2. A series of *kee* notes starting with an introductory trill note (red line) followed by the first six *kee* notes (blue lines) of a series © Derek Engelbrecht.

frequency for an individual. The mean peak frequency is 3,149.39 Hz \pm 171.58 SD (range 2,756.25–3,445.31, $n = 101$ notes). The mean duration of a *kee* note is 0.15 s \pm 0.05 SD (range 0.08–0.27, $n = 101$ notes).

There are slight differences in the tempo of the delivery of *kee* notes between individuals, possibly reflecting the 'mood' status, of an individual, e.g., highly excited or not.

Song

The song is a high-pitched (\sim 3,100 Hz) rattle lasting 2–6 s, exceptionally up to 13 s, and sounds similar to the call of Smith's Bush Squirrel (*Paraxerus cepapi*). The song consists of two parts: a short introductory note or phrase and a rattle component (Fig. 3).

The introductory part usually comprises 1–3 notes, the first two, if present, being soft, low-frequency (<1,000 Hz) clicks, followed by a drawn-out, slow trill or hoarse whistled *croowee*. The slow trill gradually increases in pitch and typically ends at approximately the same pitch as the first notes of the rattle.

The rattle can be described as *coowee-coowee-coowee-coowee-coowee-kwe-kwe-kwe...* In the first third of the rattle phase, the notes are delivered at more or

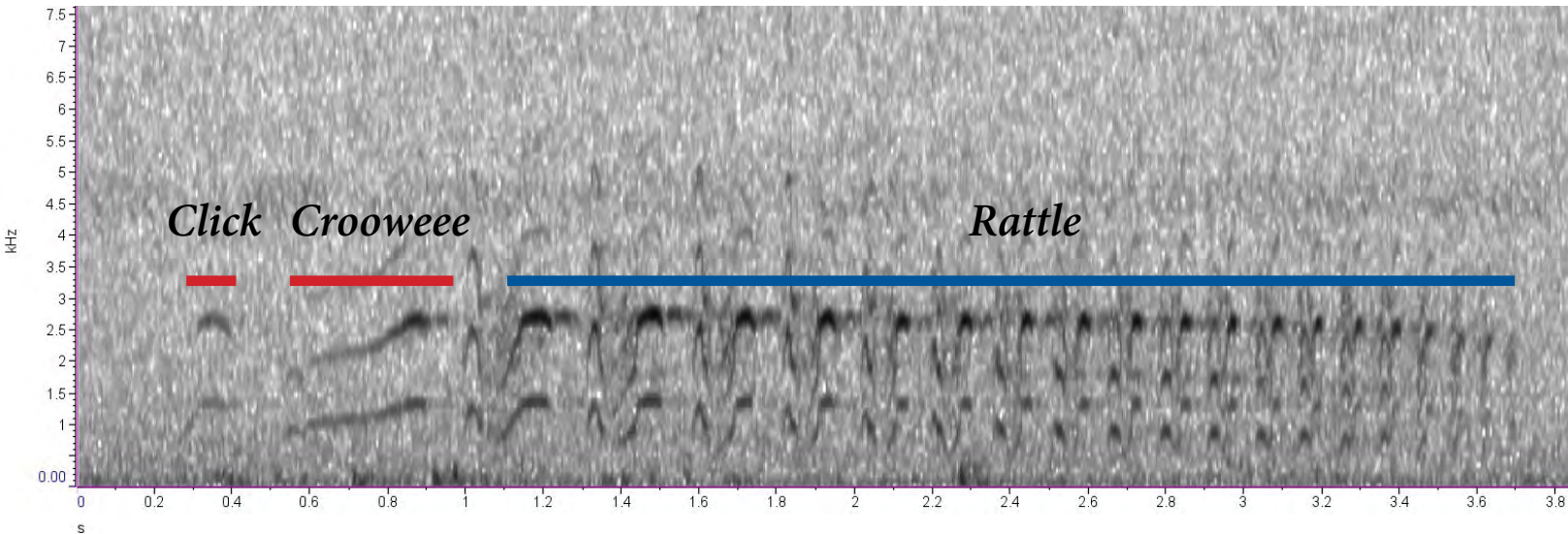


Figure 3. A song phrase starting with two introductory notes (red lines), followed by the accelerating rattle phase (blue line).

~0.04–0.06 s. While the rattle phase usually contains from 13–30 notes, the number can exceed 100 if the individual is highly excited (see Rick Nuttall, [XC819766](#) at 148.5 seconds for an example of a 13.28 s song with approximately 129 notes in its rattle phase).

Agitated Call

This [call](#) is delivered by an agitated individual, either during conspecific aggressive interactions or as an anxiety response call when chicks are threatened. It is a series of excited chattering notes comprising a phrase: *chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck-chick* (Vernon 1972) delivered at ~1 note/0.05 s. Each phrase is comprised of a mean of 8.7 notes \pm 2.77 SD (range 3–13, $n = 12$ notes). The frequency of the notes in a phrase may gradually decrease or, more commonly, show a slight increase (Fig. 4). An alternative expression of this call, or perhaps an entirely different call, is a phrase of 3–12 muted, low-frequency notes delivered at a relatively slow tempo of 1 note every 0.09 s \pm 0.01 SD ($n = 15$) (Fig. 5, see [ML638433697](#) at ~3 s). It is usually delivered with the first-mentioned agitated call.

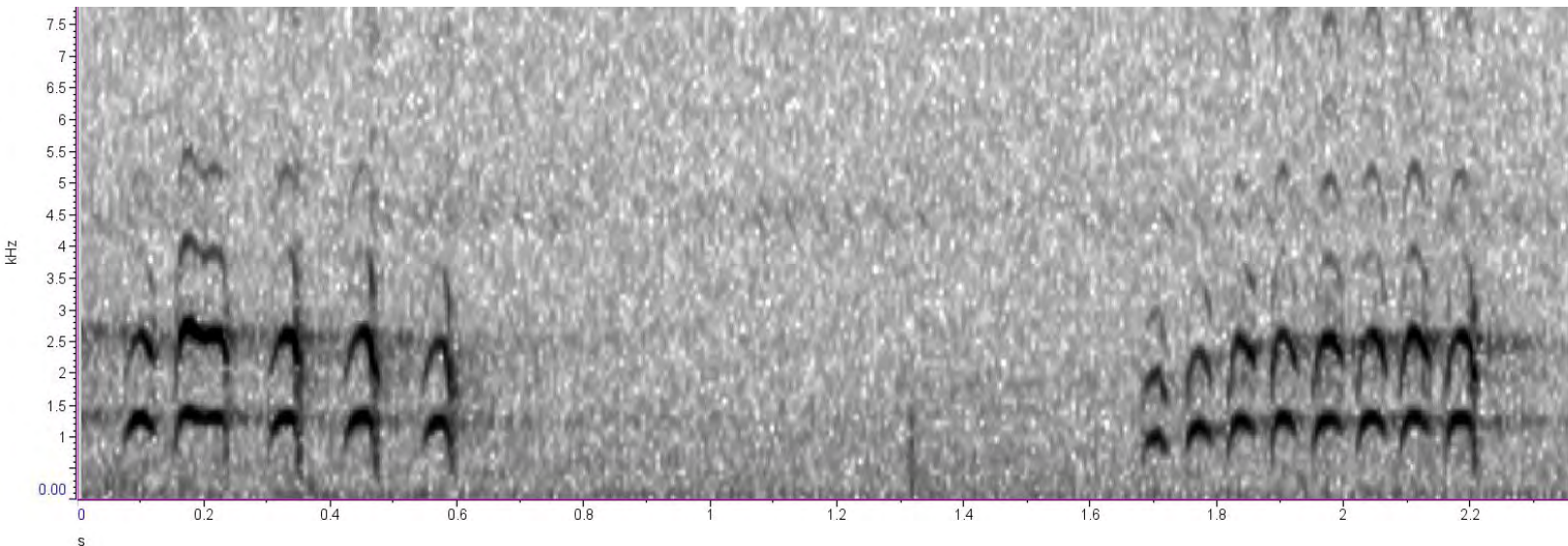


Figure 4. Two agitated phrases, one showing a slight decrease in frequency (left) and the other a gradual increase in frequency (right).

less the same tempo and pitch as the *kee* notes, but during the middle third, the tempo increases and the frequency decreases slightly until the last third when the tempo and pitch remains the same but the

notes start fading away. In the final phase of the rattle, the notes are delivered at a rate of one note every

Alarm Call

Alarm calls reportedly include a purring vocalisation (Hockey 2005) and, when flushed, individuals may call a loud, whistled *pieu* (Kemp and Maclean 1973), or a series of rapidly repeated *phew-phew phew-phew phew-phew phoo* notes likened to the call of a Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*) (Hornby 1960).

Parental Call

Parents call a muffled, low-frequency, *koo-koo-roooop* or *koo-roooop* call to chicks (Frank Lambert, [XC429664](#)). This call is comprised of phrases comprising 1–2 short introductory notes followed by a longer note that first increases and then decreases in frequency. The phrases last on average 0.22 s \pm 0.02 SD (range 0.19–0.28, $n = 15$ phrases), are delivered within a frequency range of 198.00–807.10 Hz, and have a mean peak frequency of 593.75 Hz \pm 57.86 SD (range 468.75–656.25, $n = 15$ phrases). Occasionally, the phrase has no introductory notes.

Other Calls

Nesting birds call a soft *chuik* to maintain contact (Kemp and Maclean 1973). A subdued *wicker-wicker* delivered at a constant frequency was heard at dusk when

birds emerged from their daytime roosts (Vernon 1972).

Daily Pattern of Vocalising

The Three-banded Courser is mainly nocturnal, and most vocalisations are therefore heard at night, but it will occasionally call during the day. Birds start and stop vocalising about 30–40 min after sunset and before sunrise, respectively.

Calls are mainly delivered on the ground or during short flights. There is no data on sex-specific differences in the vocalisations of the species.

This note will hopefully stimulate interest in the vocalisations of the Three-banded

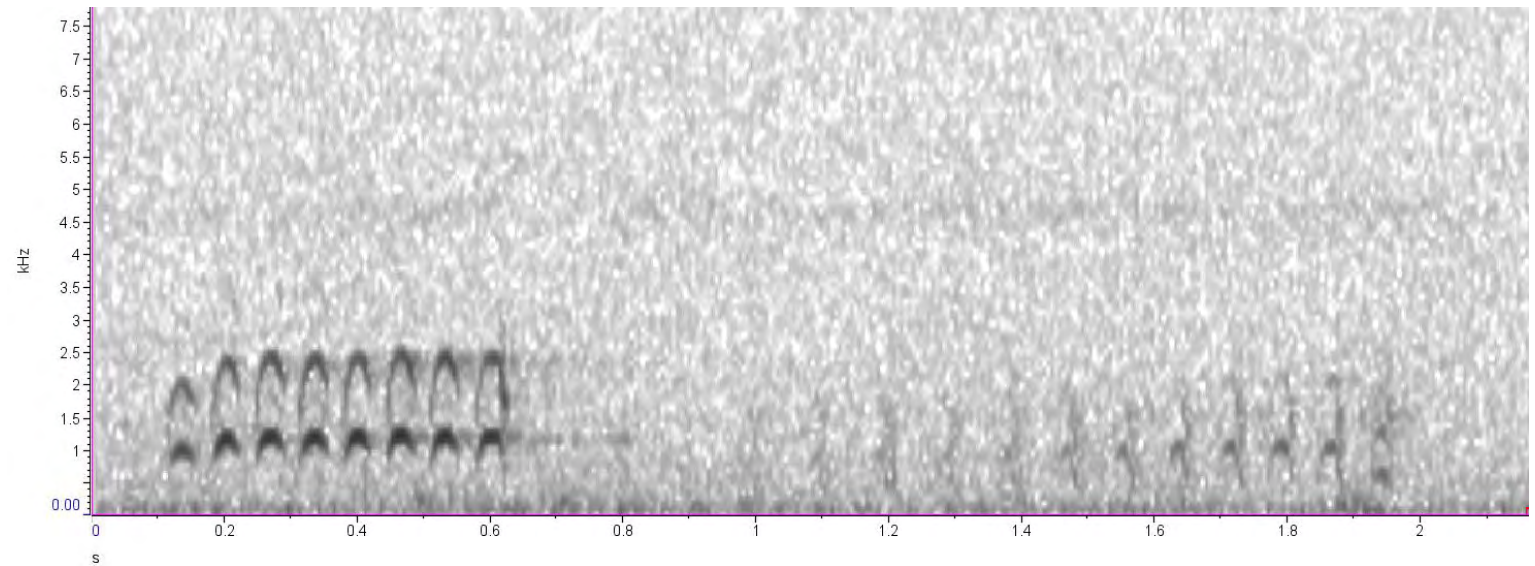


Figure 5. Two agitated phrases: the usual type showing a slight increase in frequency (left) and the softer, slower, lower-pitched agitated call (right).

Courser. The categorisation of the vocalisations described here is based on observations in poor light conditions or in the dark, and from annotated descriptions given by recordists. Recordists must provide as much information as possible to place vocalisations in context so that the vocal array described here can be confirmed and refined. There are undoubtedly more undescribed vocalisations of this mysterious species.

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MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

Diet and Foraging: Food Capture and Consumption

Great Egret kleptoparasitic behaviour

On 24 May 2025, I was observing a Great Egret foraging in the shallows of a small dam (~2 ha) on Nagude Farm near Letsitele. Also present, but on the opposite shore, was a Grey Heron, while a lone Reed Cormorant was foraging in the middle of the dam. During about 15 minutes of observations, the egret struck five times of which three were successful - all common platannas (*Xenopus laevis*) of various sizes. At one point, the cormorant had caught a large platanna about 90 m away from the egret but was battling to swallow it (see below). The Great Egret noticed the commotion and flew straight to the cormorant and dive-bombed it to steal its prey. The cormorant dived below the surface to escape the attention of the egret. The Great Egret flew in a half circle, at which time the cormorant had surfaced again, still holding its prey. The egret made another attempt, but the cormorant once again thwarted its attempt by diving below the surface. The egret then continued to the opposite shore where it landed near the Grey Heron.

Derek Engelbrecht • faunagalore@gmail.com (received 26 May 2025).



Reed Cormorant with a Common Platanna (*Xenopus laevis*).



The Reed Cormorant diving to escape the attention of the Great Egret.



The Great Egret "hovered" above the area where the Reed Cormorant escaped.

Plumages, Moults, and Structure: Plumages

A leucistic Acacia Pied Barbet

I observed this leucistic Acacia Pied Barbet on 13 May 2025 at farm Smits Kraal, about 12 km northwest of Munnik. Note it was only the melanin pigment that was affected, the red forehead is still visible.

Hannes Swanepoel • big5game@worldonline.co.za (received 26 May 2025).

BELOW The leucistic Acacia Pied Barbet. Note that the colour abnormality only affects the melanin pigmented areas, and that the red and yellow pigmented areas are unaffected.



Diet and Foraging: Diet

An unexpected winter bonanza - termite alates in June

One usually associates the mass emergence of termite alates with a warm, summer afternoon, usually following an afternoon shower. On 5 June 2018 at 1005 h, while birding in heavily grazed grassland at Nobody, east of Polokwane, I came upon a mass emergence of termites alates. This is mid-winter, the humidity was low, and there had been no rain for several weeks, so what exactly triggered the emergence is unknown to me.

Seven bird species joined the banquet on offer, including Temminck's Courser, Cape Crow (a rare bird in the area), Short-clawed Lark, Rufous-naped Lark, Ant-eating Chat, Pin-tailed Whydahs, and African Pipit.

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

BELOW An adult Temminck's Courser busy eating a termite alate



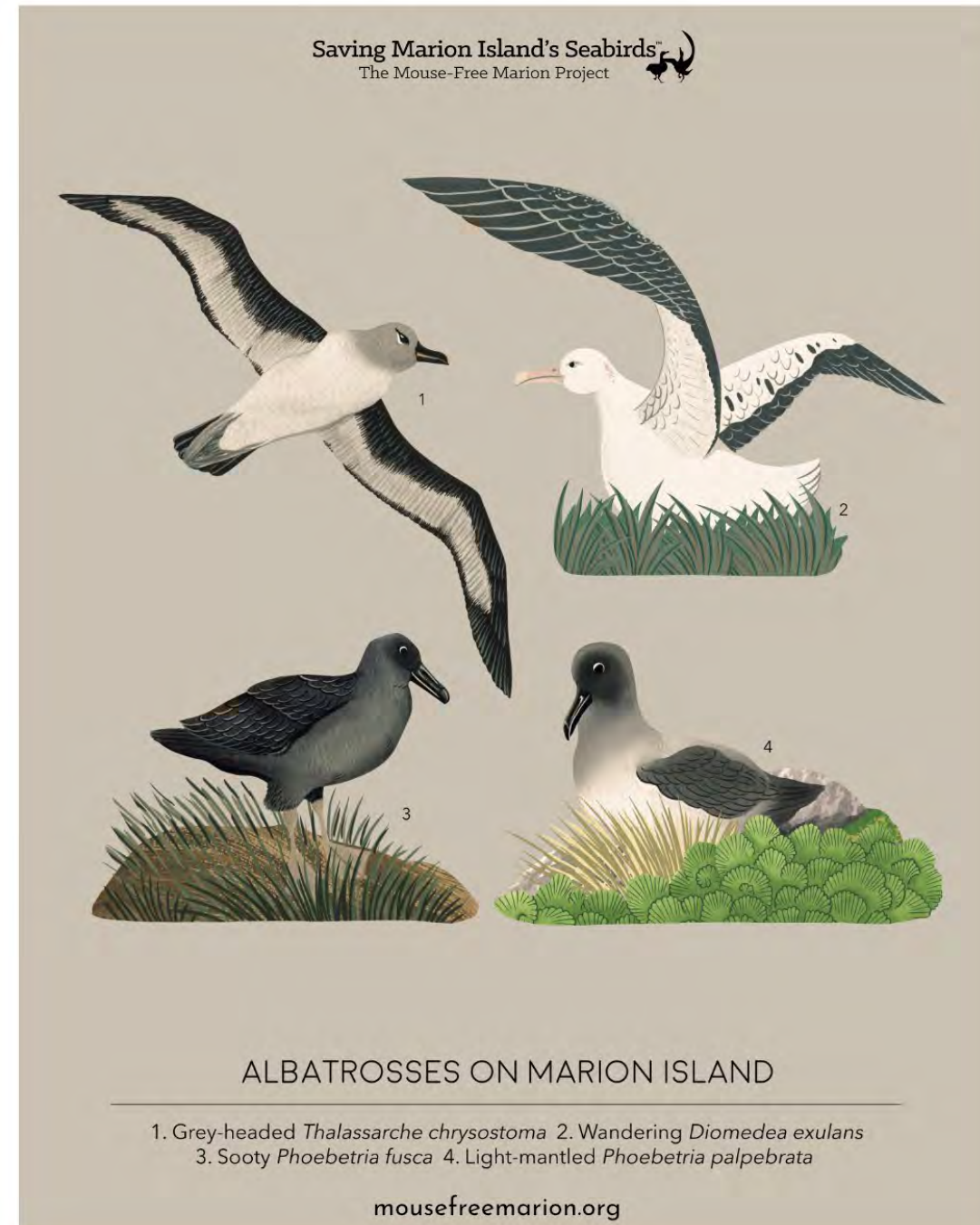
Demography and Populations: Pathogens and Parasites

A bald Common Myna

The image below of a bald Common Myna was taken at Kwa Maritane Bush Lodge in the Pilanesberg National Park on 9 May 2025. Several factors may cause baldness, including parasites such as feather mites and lice (a common cause in Common Myna), nutritional deficiencies, moulting, stress, hormonal imbalances, or the individual may be genetically predisposed to baldness.

George Skinner • georges@shopz-group.co.za (received 30 May 2025).

BELOW The bald Common Myna.





Interesting sightings
15 April 2025 - 15 June 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

Blue-spotted Wood Dove - 27 April 2025. A pair seen in a garden in Tzaneen (Leigh-Ann Hoets).

Burchell's Sandgrouse - 7 June 2025. One individual seen at Koppie Alleen (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Double-banded Sandgrouse - 1 May 2025. A pair seen at Africa Expectation Safaris near Bandelierkop (Johann Roos).

Jackal Buzzard - 7 May 2025. An adult seen in Welgelegen suburb, Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).



Blue-spotted Wood Dove © Leigh-Ann Hoets

Red-billed Teal - 26 April 2025. Approximately 150 seen at the dam at the Sand River bridge on the Soetdorings road (Minkie Prinsloo).
Southern Bald Ibis - 30 April 2025. Two seen on the golf course of the University of Limpopo (Susan Dippenaar).

Verreaux's Eagle-Owl - 5 June 2025. One seen in Dorp suburb, Polokwane (Corne Ferns); 7 June 2025. One heard at Koppie Alleen (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

PASSERINES

African Paradise Flycatcher - 22 May 2025. An aseasonal record of a pair seen on the campus of the University of Limpopo (Derek Engelbrecht).

Cut-throat Finch - 11 June 2025. A pair seen at Africa Expectation Safaris near Bandelierkop (Johann Roos).

BEST OF THE REST
LIMPOPO PROVINCE

NON-PASSERINES

African Pygmy Goose - 10 May 2025. Two females seen at Nagude farm (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

Blue-billed Teal - 18 April 2025. Seen at Uitspan Dam north of Mopane Rest Camp, Kruger National Park (Ian Hobson); 10 May 2025. A pair seen at Nagude farm near Letsitele (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).



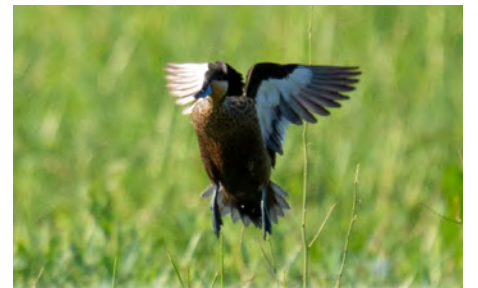
Double-banded Sandgrouse © Johann Roos



Verreaux's Eagle-Owl © Quintin Jacobs



African Pygmy Goose © Richter van Tonder



Blue-billed Teal © Ian Hobson

Greater Flamingo - 6 June 2025.

A juvenile seen at Grootvlei Dam south of Shingwedzi in the Kruger National Park (Lize Stassen); 14 June 2025. A juvenile seen at Nagude (Barend Vorster).



Greater Flamingo © Barend Vorster

Lesser Flamingo - 9 June 2025. One seen at Crooks Corner in the Kruger National Park (SA Rare Bird News Report - 09 June 2025).

Rufous-bellied Heron - 7 May 2025. One seen at Vogelfontein (Jean-Marc du Plessis). Still present on 15 June 2025.



Rufous-bellied Heron © Jean-Marc de Plessis

Tawny Eagle - 10 May 2025. One seen at Nagude farm near Letsitele (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).

White-backed Night Heron - 30 April 2025. One seen at Letaba Oranje on the Letaba River (Jan Pretorius).



Tawny Eagle © Richter van Tonder

PASSERINES

Collared Palm Thrush - 4 May 2025. One seen just south of the Shingwedzi River bridge, Kruger National Park (Rene Rossouw).

White-backed Night Heron - 30 April 2025. One seen at Letaba Oranje on the Letaba River (Jan Pretorius).



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.

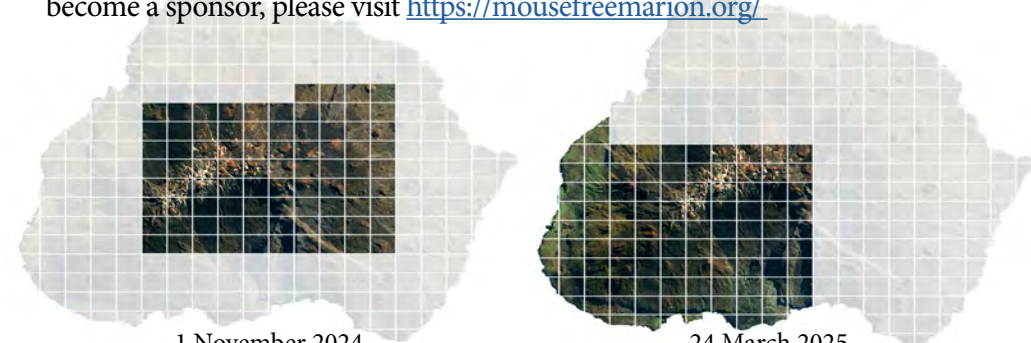
To help raise the necessary funds, please would you consider sponsoring one or more hectares of land on Marion Island.

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/>



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



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

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting and AGM

Date: 2 September 2025

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Club outing

Where? Moletzie Nature Reserve

Date: 26 July 2025

Contact: Richter van Tonder

Cell: 082 213 8276



Shopping list: Cape Vulture, Black Stork, Verreaux's Eagle, Lanner Falcon, White-necked Raven, Greater Honeyguide, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Rock Kestrel, Mocking Cliff Chat, and many more.

Club outing

Where? Woodbush and surrounds

Date: 9 August 2025

Contact: Richter van Tonder

Cell: 082 213 8276



Shopping list: Cape Parrot, Barratt's Warbler, Orange Ground Thrush, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Brown Scrub Robin, Levallant's Cisticola, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Cinnamon Dove, Green Twinspot and more.

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.



Crowned Lapwing © Jody de Bruyn.