

# THE LARK

Club outing  
Homan's Farm

**BBD 2025**



## Hope for Botha's Lark

A mysterious bird: Kretschmer's Longbill • Gabar Goshawk predated a Cape Longlaw  
• Additions to the list of *Schotia brachypetala* nectarivores • Going big - Red-winged Starling  
nests • Melodious Lark with ectoparasite • Pale Chanting Goshawk anting • Natal Spurfowl in  
my garden in Polokwane • Breeding observations of Secretarybirds in the Free State • Cape  
Batis longevity record - correction • Dusky Lark vocalisations on the nonbreeding grounds  
• African Green Pigeon eating leaves of *Senegalia burkei* • Red-billed Oxpecker taking alates

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

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

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

**15 FEBRUARY 2026**

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

Cover page theme 2026: Young Birds

COVER Juvenile White-crested Helmetshrike  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

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January/February 2026

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## Featured

### Pierre Homan's Farm

**Willem van der Merwe** <sup>5</sup> joined the recent club outing to Pierre Homan's farm east of Tzaneen, and, as usual, there were lots on offer.



### Birding Big Day results

<sup>17</sup> Despite a tough birding year in the northern parts of the country due to all the rain we had, the club's teams did very well in their various categories. Read about the recap of BBD 2025.



### Botha's Lark press release

<sup>24</sup> A glimmer of home for this embattled little lark.



## For a lark ...



Are you "outfoxed" by this Maccoa Duck's bill? © Jody de Bruyn.

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## Editors' chirps

As we flip the calendar to 2026, it's the perfect time to reflect on your past birding year. Celebrate your lifers, learn from your dips, and most importantly, reminisce about the fun you had chasing after birds, often with like-minded people. This latest issue of *The Lark* captures exactly why we love our hobby—it's about the thrill of the chase, the amazing things we see while out in the bush, and the great stories we share afterward.

The year 2025 certainly kept us on our toes. It's been a VERY WET year, and, although we never complain about the rain, it certainly is less than ideal for top-notch wader watching. A "wader-drought" aside, paging through the 2025 editions of *The Lark*, it has undoubtedly been a year for the books. We also celebrated some truly "feel-good" moments, such as the rediscovery of Botha's Lark after an 18-month disappearance. It is really heart-warming knowing there are conservationists out there giving it their all to protect this very special species.

But birding is not always about chasing numbers or rare and endangered species. Sometimes it is just about the weird, wonderful, and mysterious... Sometimes it is a species in a distant land, at other times, incredible things happen in our own backyards. In this issue, you can read about the first record of double-brooding in Natal Spurfowl, and who would have guessed that the African Green Pigeon is not only a frugivore, but it would occasionally eat leaves too! If anything, 2025 reminded us that birds are full of surprises, and yes, even in your backyard.

As we head into 2026, we plan a great number of outings to exciting places, with the perennially popular Wolkberg outing kicking off the club's 2026 birding year in style.

Here are our wishes for you in the coming year: May your coffee be hot on those early-morning outings, may your "lifers" be many, may you get a new bogey bird, and may you see something very special when you least expect it—and report it to *The Lark*.

We hope you enjoy the variety of articles in this edition, and we look forward to receiving your contributions in 2026.

Happy birding and happy reading.

Raelene and Derek

**PIERRE HOMAN'S**

**Farm**



text **Willem van der Merwe**

**O**n Saturday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of November, our club hosted an outing to Pierre Homan's farm, a short distance beyond Tzaneen. This is the Lowveld—hot and wild! This farm is still mainly undisturbed, wild savannah and woodland, with many fine trees such as the Bloodwood (Kiaat), Round-leaved Bloodwood (Dopperkiaat), Large-leaved

Green-capped Eremomela  
© Jody de Bruyn.



ABOVE The woodland at Pierre Homan's farm © Marcia van Tonder.

False Thorn (Grootblaarvalsdoring), Camel's Foot (Kameelspoor), Kudu Berry (Koedoebessie), Large-fruited Bushwillow (Raasblaar) and, along the rivers and in other moist spots, the Sycamore Fig (Gewone Trosvy). Spots that are more open feature tall grasses. This well-developed Lowveld woodland and savannah houses a selection of birds, many of which are hard to find around Polokwane, so it is with several specials in mind that we set out early that morning. The weather was cloudy and cool, with a brief, very light drizzle prompting

us to wait it out under some trees for a short while, which was enough to keep us mostly dry. Otherwise, it was pleasant not to be experiencing the oppressive heat that can sometimes make summer birding in the Lowveld rather uncomfortable.

The birds also seemed to have enjoyed the mild weather, and we were quite fortunate to find our specials. The first one we got was even right when we turned off the main road to the farm. On a fence close to the road, there sat a Croaking Cisticola (Dikbektinktinkie)!

This is a rather chunky, thick-billed cisticola, even looking a bit like a female bishop or widow. Its unmistakable croaking call makes it easy both to find and identify. This bird likes the tall grass, and we've found it almost every time we visited the farm thus far.

Another special we found early was the Broad-billed Roller (Geelbektrouphant) – we didn't have a very good view of it, but it is always welcome. Moving into the woodland, two species which we heard but didn't see were the Red-chested Cuckoo

(Piet-my-Vrou) and the Purple-crested Turaco (Bloukuifloerie). The White-browed Robin-Chat (Heuglinse Janfrederik) was heard all over the place, but difficult to see, as were, as is usual for them, the Gorgeous Bushshrike (Konkoit) and the Sombre Greenbul (Gewone Willie). The cheerful Yellow-breasted Greenbul (Geelborswillie) was more



ABOVE Yellow-throated Longclaw  
© Jody de Bruyn.

accommodating and allowed us at least a few glimpses.

Another special which we heard and saw – at least some of us – was the Yellow-throated Longclaw (Geelkeelkalkoentjie), a handsome bird that prefers the lush Lowveld grasslands, while the Cape Longclaw (Oranjekeelkalkoentjie) likes the higher, inland grasslands and is the one we see more regularly around Polokwane.

It was a good day for tiny birds. We got the green-backed form of the Bleating Camaroptera (Kwêkwêvoël) with its whip-crack-like call in the dense bush. This

tiny but charming warbler is now considered just a single species again, after having been divided into green-backed and grey-backed forms. We got the Red-faced Cisticola (Rooiwangtinkinkie), which was singing loudly everywhere. We also got some wonderful views of the little Green-capped Eremomela (Donkerwangbossanger), another special of well-developed woodland, flitting about and calling loudly.

A more familiar but always welcome woodland bird was the Yellow-breasted Apalis (Geelborskleinjantjie). We also had good views of the Grey Penduline Tit (Gryskapokvoël), which is officially South Africa's smallest bird species.

The great sycamore figs were very popular with fruit-eating birds, of which two of the most beautiful were the Violet-backed Starling (Witborsspreu) and the African Green Pigeon (Papegaaiduif). Another gorgeous species, but feeding on nectar rather



TOP The diminutive Grey Penduline Tit is always a delight to encounter  
© Jody de Bruyn.



MIDDLE The stunning Violet-backed Starling's plumage is at its best in gloomy light conditions  
© Jody de Bruyn.



RIGHT Not always the easiest to photograph, but this African Green Pigeon was rather obliging  
© Jody de Bruyn.

than fruit, was the Scarlet-chested Sunbird (Rooiborssuikerbekkie).

One of the most exciting moments was, when, close to the farmhouse, we heard a low hooting. It was a Buff-spotted Flufftail (Gevlekte Vleikuiken)! The sound was coming from tall grasses and reeds near a gully that likely receives a good deal of water. But try as we might, we couldn't lure the bird out of its cover or otherwise catch a glimpse of it!

We got several birds of the "pecking" type, belonging to the order Piciformes or the woodpeckers. Of the barbet family, the tiny Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird

(Geelblestinker) is typically associated with woodland. Its tinkling call is unmistakable. We also got the more familiar Black-collared Barbet (Rooikophoutkapper), and the Crested Barbet (Kuifkophoutkapper). In the related woodpecker family, we also ticked the Golden-tailed Woodpecker (Goudstertspieg) and the larger Bearded Woodpecker (Baardspeg). Not particularly associated with the Lowveld,

BELOW Striped Kingfisher - one of the characteristic species of woodland habitats © Jody de Bruyn.



but always special to see, was the Brown-backed Honeybird (Skerpbekheuningwyser). Honeyguides are in the Piciformes along with the barbets and woodpeckers!

Two of our main targets were the Thick-billed Cuckoo (Dikbekkoekoek) and the White-breasted Cuckooshrike (Witborskatakoeroe). We got close to both – in that we saw species associated with them! The cuckoo parasitises Retz's Helmetshrike (Swarthelmlaksman) – and we did get those! We also saw the related White-crested Helmetshrike (Withelmlaksman). Both those

ABOVE Having dipped on the Thick-billed Cuckoo, we at least got good views of its host, Retz's Helmetshrike - not a bad compromise at all © Jody de Bruyn.

species are marvellous social birds with strange, machine-like calls and inquisitive behaviour making them often easy to observe, once a group can be located. So we didn't get the cuckoo, but it was great to see the helmetshrikes. And we did get some other cuckoos – Black Cuckoo (Swartkoekoek), Red-chested Cuckoo (Piet-my-Vrou), Diederik Cuckoo (Diederikkie), Klaas's



ABOVE We had to settle for the Black Cuckooshrike after we dipped on its cousin, the sought-after White-breasted Cuckooshrike © Jody de Bruyn.

Cuckoo (Meitjie), and the Burchell's Coucal (Gewone Vleilorie), which is a non-parasitic cuckoo. As for the White-breasted Cuckooshrike, another bird that usually frequents tall, mature woodland, we dipped on it, but did get good views of the related, somewhat more widespread Black Cuckooshrike (Swartkatakoeroe). We easily observed both its distinctive orange gape and its high, trilling call.

Other than the already-mentioned Gorgeous Bushshrike, we got several other members of the bushshrike family, mostly identified by their calls: Orange-breasted Bushshrike (Oranjoborsboslaksman), Grey-

headed Bushshrike (Spookvoël), Black-crowned Tchagra (Swartkroontjagra), Brubru (Bontroklaksman), Southern Boubou (Suidelike Waterfiskaal), and Black-backed Puffback (Sneeubal).

It was not that good a day for raptors, in terms of the quality of the sightings, but we did get several species, even if the views were somewhat distant: Lizard Buzzard (Akkedisvalk), African Goshawk



Pale Flycatcher was a lifer for me © Jody de Bruyn.

(Afrikaanse Sperwer), Wahlberg's Eagle (Bruinarend), Common Buzzard (Bruinjakkalsvoël), African Fish Eagle (Visarend), and White-backed Vulture (Witruugaasvoël) made it onto our list.

Towards the end, we saw a lifer for me, the Pale Flycatcher (Muiskeurvlieëvanger). Maybe not spectacular, but elegant in its plain grey-brown plumage. A lifer for a couple of others of us, which we also specifically sought out, was the Blue-Spotted Wood Dove (Blouvlakduifie)! This was an unusual place to find it – typically, it is mainly seen in Venda, much to the north, but it's been reported here recently, and we did indeed find it! Even those of us who've seen it before were delighted with the sighting. The blue wing spots are usually hard to see, but the best way to identify it is by the reddish tip to its bill.

A few more not-so-usual species we found included Black Saw-wing (Swartsaagvlerkswael), some Red-billed Oxpeckers (Rooibekrenostervoël), Common Scimitarbill (Swartbekkakelaar), Green

Woodhoopoe (Rooibekkekelaar), Tambourine Dove (Witborsduifie), Striped Kingfisher (Gestreepte Visvanger), Little Bee-eater (Kleinbyvreter), Red-headed Weaver (Rooikopwewer), Thick-billed Weaver (Dikbekwewer), Golden-breasted Bunting (Rooirugstreepkoppie), and Wire-tailed Swallow (Draadstertswael). Not restricted to the Lowveld, but always beautiful and fine to see were African Paradise Flycatcher (Paradysvlieëvanger), Black-headed Oriole (Swartkopwielewaal), European Bee-eater (Europese Byvreter), and Pintailed Whydah (Koningrooibekkie). Then there were the regulars like the White-browed Scrub Robin (Gestreepte Wipstert), Willow Warbler (Hofsanger), Western Cattle Egret (Veereier), Spotted Flycatcher (Europese Vlieëvanger), Southern Black Flycatcher (Swartvlieëvanger), Common Hoopoe (Hoephoep), Southern Grey-headed Sparrow (Gryskopmossie), and many others. In total, we saw about 105 species – not bad for an early summer morning outing! The farm is fast becoming a stalwart destination for prime Lowveld birding.

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It's simple.  
The longer we wait,  
the more we lose.



One of the world's rarest birds, the African Skimmer, is extinct in South Africa as a breeding species. Due to the ongoing degradation of our rivers, they are left without the sand banks required to breed, or any hope to ever return. As habitats continue to disappear, so will our birds. Help us act now.



# Birding BIG DAY

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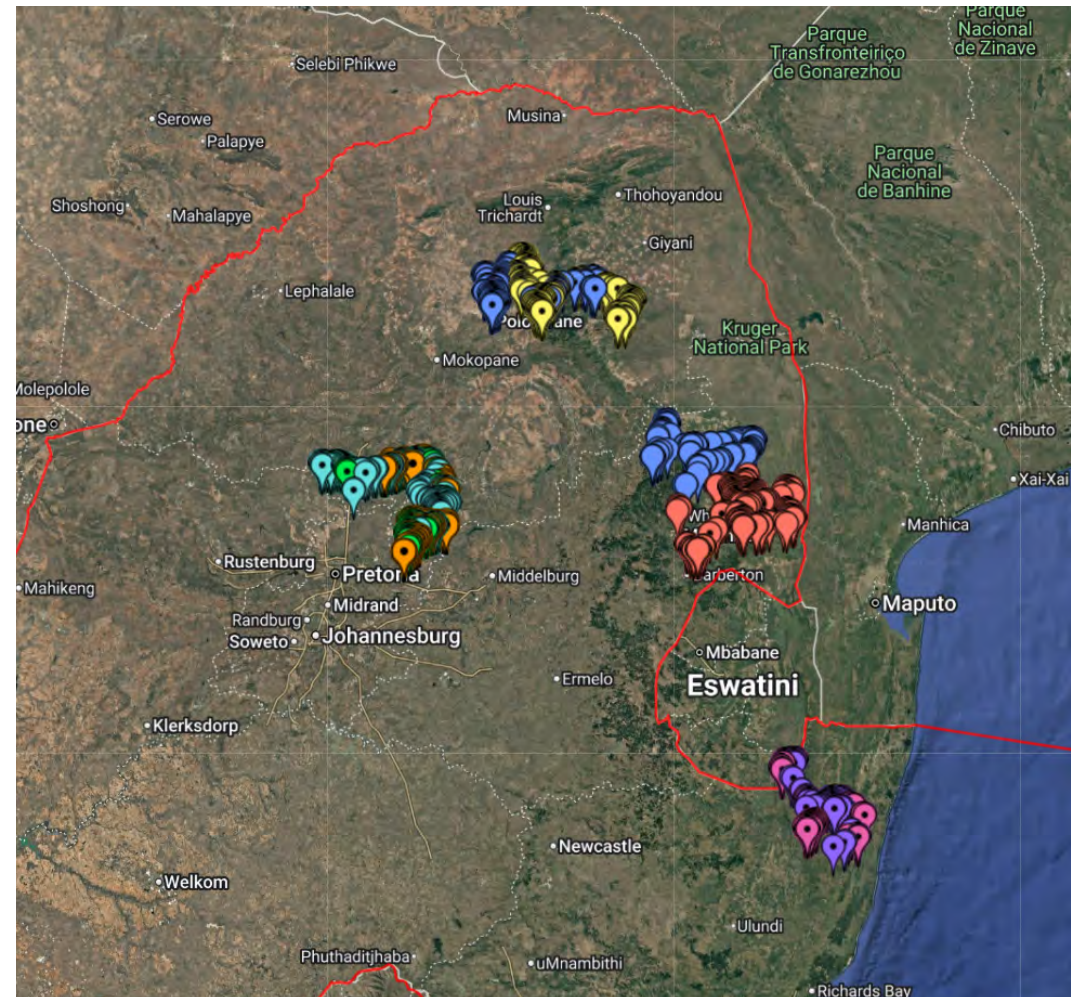
All the BirdLife Polokwane teams, all the results

# 2025

The 41<sup>st</sup> edition of Birding Big Day 2025, which was held on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2025, set a new record for the number of teams registered for the event - a whopping 503 teams! This extended last year's record of just under 450 teams by more than 50. Well done to BirdLife South Africa and its partner Return Africa for promoting the event so well.

Over the years, I have concluded that there are two truths in the event: we always complain about the conditions, and we always have a great day out doing what we all love - birding and birding hard! In 2024, the northeastern parts of

BELOW The distribution of the Top 10 teams on BBD 2025.



the country were gripped by a heat wave and a drought. A year later, heavy pre-event rainfall flooded shorelines, making waders hard to come by on the day. Nevertheless, as in most previous years, all the Top 10 teams worked in the northeast of the country, mainly Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and northern KwaZulu-Natal, with some teams birding two or more provinces, including Gauteng.

The podium for the overall winners of BBD 2025 remained unchanged from 2024. For the third consecutive year, the Mpumalanga-based team Hamerkop emerged as the overall winners, recording 322 species. Well done to Ehren and Johan Eksteen, Lourens Grobler, and Duncan McKenzie. Once again, despite misfortune and a delay at a crucial time of the day, BirdLife Polokwane's team, Wat-Kyk-Jy, still managed to break the 300 species mark, finishing second with a respectable 306 species. The Ndebele Nightjars, whose route straddles three provinces, were third with 304 species. As a testament to how the rain affected numbers, especially waders, 2025 saw only three teams eclipse the

300 species mark, compared to four to seven in the last five years.

Only two Limpopo-based teams were in the Top 10 this year, both opting for the popular Polokwane Plateau-to-the-Lowveld route. Gauteng and Mpumalanga each had three teams in the Top 10.

The T20 version of BBD, the 6 km "dash", is growing in popularity, with some incredible scores achieved. In 2025, first place was a tie, with teams Wild Tomorrow Watchers (northern KZN) and Bosveld Laksmanne (Mpumalanga) declaring their day on 234 species. Last year's category winners and BirdLife Polokwane's Redbilled Rocket Tails, finished third (or with the second highest score) on 202 species, using Polokwane as their base. Another home-grown team, Vriende Van Blouberg, scouring the Blouberg Nature Reserve and surrounds, completed the Top 10 in this category with a score of 179 species.

Below is a summary of the Top 10 across the two categories, the provincial winning totals, and the report cards for BirdLife Polokwane's BBD 2025 teams.

The Top 10 teams in BBD 2025's 50 km and 6 km categories as well as the overall winning totals per province..

Category	Place	Name	Province	Total
<b>50 km</b>	1	Hamerkop	MP	322
	2	Wat-Kyk-Jy	LP	306
	3	Ndebele Nightjars	MP/LP/GP	304
	4	Simply Birding	LP	275
	5	Soaring iSuzus	MP/LP/GP	273
	6	Off the Rails	KZN	267
	7	Swamp Donkeys	KZN	258
	8	Jurassic Larks	MP/LP/GP	256
	9	Visvangers	MP	254
	10	Mother Flockerss	MP	252
<b>6 km</b>	1	Wild Tomorrow Watchers	KZN	234
	1	Bosveld Laksmanne	MP	234
	2	Redbilled Rocket Tails	LP	202
	3	The Ticking Bomb	LP	189
	4	2 for the Pentad	MP	188
	4	Golden Tales	KZN	188
	5	The Four Pels - Do Ndumo	KZN	187
	6	Vriende van Blouberg	LP	179
6	Middelburg Storkers	MP	179	
6	Shamwari Trogons	EC	179	
<b>Province</b>	1	Hamerkop	MP	322
	2	Wat-Kyk-Jy	LP	306
	3	Soaring iSuzus	GP	301
	4	Off the Rails	KZN	267
	5	Wacky Waxbills	NW	250
	6	Four Cuckoos for a Day	WC	205
	7	Three Ruffs and a Reeve	FS	201
	8	Klaasy Kentonians	EC	199
	9	Bird Smits	NC	163
	10	Balmeri aberrans	EC	158

**BBD** *TOTAL*  
**306**

## REPORT CARD 2025

**TEAM NAME:** Wat-Kyk-Jy

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

**AREA:** Polokwane, Magoebaskloof, Tzaneen and the Lowveld to Letsitele

**CATEGORY:** Open

**POSITION:** 2<sup>nd</sup>

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Saddle-billed Stork, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Maccoa Duck, and Retz's Helmetshrike.

**DIPS:** A flat tyre, forest birds, African Olive Pigeon, Hamerkop, and Klaas's Cuckoo.

### COMMENTS

A flat tyre put an end to your hopes of winning or improving on your own score, but well done for not throwing in the towel and still cracking the 300 barrier. Well done on your second place and better luck next year!

*The Lark editors*

**BBD** *TOTAL*  
**202**

## REPORT CARD 2025

**TEAM NAME:** Redbilled Rocket Tails

**MEMBERS:** Mark, Julia, and James Friskin

**AREA:** Polokwane

**CATEGORY:** 6K

**POSITION:** 2<sup>nd</sup>

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Full moon, cloudless, windless, perfect conditions. Bird highlights included Marsh Owls in the road, Greater Painted-snipe and Yellow-billed Stork at Tom Naude Dam, a pair of Cut-throat Finches, Hamerkop (always a tricky one), and European Roller (uncommon around Polokwane).

**DIPS:** Spotted Eagle Owl, Purple and Black-headed Herons, Willow Warbler, African Green Pigeons, Woodland Kingfisher.

### COMMENTS

Wow! Well done on breaking the 200 mark once again despite the challenges you as a team faced.

*The Lark editors*

# BBD

TOTAL  
**179**

## REPORT CARD 2025

**TEAM NAME:** Vriende van Blouberg

**MEMBERS:** Leonie Kellerman, Les Reynolds, Jan Fourie, Johan Janse van Vuuren, Sarel Alberts.

**AREA:** Blouberg

**CATEGORY:** 6K

**POSITION:** 6<sup>th</sup>

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Green-capped Eremomela, European Honey Buzzard, Verreaux's Eagle, Saddle-billed Stork, and, for the second year running, no Common Mynas.

**DIPS:** Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Three-banded Courser, Kori Bustard, Black Cuckooshrike, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl.

### COMMENTS

Up, up, and up - well done on once again improving your score. Only those who know Blouberg will know how incredible this total is. Keep it up!

*The Lark editors*

# Press Release

## **Botha's Lark, South Africa's Most Endangered Bird, Rediscovered After 18 Months**

*With fewer than 340 individuals thought to be left in the wild, the Botha's Lark could become the first South African bird on record to go extinct, but recent breakthrough discoveries are giving conservationists hope.*

20 November 2025, Johannesburg, South Africa



Botha's Lark © Derek Engelbrecht.

A resident of South Africa's high-altitude grasslands, the Botha's Lark (*Spizocorys fringillaris*) has suffered a dramatic population collapse, with a 90% decline in the past decade. It is not yet completely understood why this bird has disappeared from almost all of its historic range, but the decline signals the possible collapse of an entire ecosystem: South Africa's grasslands. As a ground-nesting grassland specialist, the species' survival is closely tied to the health of its endangered habitat. Found only in parts of Mpumalanga and the Free State, the Botha's Lark is a true endemic to South Africa.

Following the detection of this sharp decline, the Botha's Lark was uplisted in BirdLife South Africa's Regional Red Data Book of South Africa, Lesotho, and Eswatini to Critically Endangered, just one step away from Extinct in the Wild. To conserve the species, BirdLife South Africa established a dedicated grasslands conservation team to research and implement conservation measures. This team includes a biodiversity stewardship specialist who promotes sustainable

BELOW Botha's Lark eggs  
© Derek Engelbrecht.



land management and agricultural practices, a community outreach officer who fosters collaboration with local landowners and communities, and a conservation biologist who conducts field research and monitoring. Together, they combine research, engagement, and stewardship to safeguard the Botha's Lark and its habitat.

The team's first task was to locate the bird, a challenge led by conservation biologist Matthew Orolowitz, the Birding Ecotours Fellow of Grasslands Conservation. The species had not been recorded for 18 months and was absent from most of its historic strongholds. Orolowitz walked more than 500 kilometres in search of this elusive bird. His persistence was rewarded in the summer of 2024/2025 when a small breeding group was found. Nineteen nests were recorded, each containing two to three eggs. Only eight chicks fledged; the rest were lost to predation or environmental causes such as unseasonal weather. This poor breeding success highlights the species' vulnerability.

Alarmingly, no other breeding populations of the Botha's Lark were to be found for another year. The scope of the search needed to be increased, so a large-scale search

was organised by BirdLife South Africa's grasslands conservation team, empowered by the help of over 40 volunteer birders. Access was granted to participants by farmers, communal land authorities, and other land users, allowing volunteers to survey sites from Amersfoort to Harrismith. The event was a tremendous success, resulting in 5,644 observations of 227 species, including 31 species of conservation concern. The highlight was the discovery of a previously unknown population of the Botha's Lark, demonstrating the importance of citizen science and coordinated field efforts! This breakthrough discovery, whilst signifying only the second currently known site for the Botha's Lark, is of immense significance in the battle to save the species from extinction.

With agricultural land use shifting in response to economic and environmental pressures, the Botha's Lark must continually search for the few remaining patches of suitable grassland. Orolowitz notes there is no simple solution to halt the species' decline: "Many factors - agricultural expansion, grazing changes, climate variability, and infrastructure development - may be contributing. We must continue working with farmers, communal



ABOVE Botha's Lark fledgling  
© BirdLife South Africa.

land users, conservation authorities, and schools to create safe places where the species can survive.”

Ernst Retief, Landscape Conservation Programme Manager at BirdLife South Africa, stresses the need to “conserve the complete landscape where the species occurs, benefiting not only the Botha’s Lark but other birds, invertebrates, and plants too.” Dr David Ehlers Smith, BirdLife South Africa’s Science and Spatial Planning Project Manager adds: “While discovering small breeding populations is encouraging, the reality is dire: only about twenty sightings have been recorded in the past few years. Confirming whether the species persists elsewhere is vital to guiding our research priorities and the lark’s survival prospects.”

BirdLife South Africa remains committed to conserving all the country’s bird species. Birds are integral to our natural heritage and play essential ecological roles. Of these, the Botha’s Lark deserves special attention and care to ensure its future. BirdLife South Africa calls on all birders, landowners, and conservationists to assist in saving this iconic species.

For more information, contact: BirdLife South Africa Communications Manager Kurt Martin at [kurt.martin@birdlife.org.za](mailto:kurt.martin@birdlife.org.za), +27 (0) 11 789 1122.



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## ROBERTS 8 WISH LIST

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

### All tinkerbirds

- Photos showing behaviour
- Photos showing diet
- Photos at nests

### White-chested Alethe

- Nests and nestlings
- Behaviour
- Diet
- Typical habitat
- Recordings

### Black Harrier

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

### Southern Double-collared Sunbird

- Different age classes
- Photos showing diet
- Photos showing behaviour, interactions, birds at nests, nestlings, etc.
- Photos of nests

### Pygmy Falcon

- Photos showing behaviour and diet
- Habitat photos.

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Regulars

# Birds in Art

**Orange-breasted Waxbill**

**Text and Artwork**

**Willem van der Merwe**

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



Orange-breasted Waxbill

For this issue, I feature one of the prettiest birds in South Africa – the Orange-breasted Waxbill, *Amandava subflava* (sometimes called the Zebra Waxbill and also formerly known under the scientific name *Sporaeginthus subflavus*). In addition to being very cute, it is one of South Africa's smallest waxbills (and birds), reaching only 10 cm in total length and weighing approximately 7.5 g. It also occurs over much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, being absent only from dense rainforests and deserts or semi-deserts. Even so, it has a specialised habitat requirement: tall, rank grass or weedy growth. Fortunately, this is found in much of the wetter savannah regions of Africa and in the drier areas with rivers, ponds, lakes, or marshes. In South Africa, this waxbill is associated with wetlands and moist, tall grasslands. Most of South Africa is very dry, and well-developed grasslands are associated mainly with the high central-to-eastern plateau, and the 'midlands' of KwaZulu-Natal, closer to the coast. They have also adapted to rank growth in and around farm fields.

In my region, this waxbill is primarily associated with wetlands and occurs at the Polokwane Bird Sanctuary. Because of the rank

grass, sedges and reeds in which they live, they're challenging to spot. In addition, they forage low to the ground, eating seeds directly from grass seedheads or picking them up from the ground surface. They eat small numbers of insects as well – marshy regions often have plentiful midges on offer, and the rainy season in the savannah sees mass emergences of the flying reproductive termites, or alates, which are beloved by these and many other bird species. They mostly live in small flocks, but in the non-breeding season, they may come together in gatherings of more than 50 birds. Placidly feeding in the marshes, they keep in contact with each other with soft, tinkling notes. When disturbed, they fly out over the grass with a dipping-and-rising flight, diving into dense vegetation a short distance away. They're rather shy of humans, rarely allowing a close approach. They are also highly active, constantly in motion, hopping and flitting from one grass stem to another, flicking their tails. It is thus a real challenge to see them well, even with good binoculars, and equally challenging to photograph them.

But when seen well, this is a most charming little bird. The male, pictured here, is slightly more



colourful than the female, with a red bill, a bold red eyestripe, red rump and undertail feathers, yellow and olive striping on the sides, a bright yellow belly, and a suffusion of orange on the breast. The female lacks the eye stripe and has a duller yellow breast, lacking the orange breast. But she's a beautiful bird as well. There are two subspecies in Africa: the northern nominate subspecies, which

is deeper orange underneath, and the southern subspecies, *Amandava subflava clarkei*, which occurs mostly south of the equator and is yellower underneath.

Courting Orange-breasted Waxbills put their cuteness on

ABOVE A pair foraging on open ground in a track  
© Jody de Bruyn.

display. The male may point his tail at the female while fanning it, stand beside her, and bow his head, or hop around her on the ground, fluffing up his flanks and belly feathers, sometimes while holding a grass stalk in his bill. Many waxbill species do this kind of dance, waving a grass stalk or a feather.

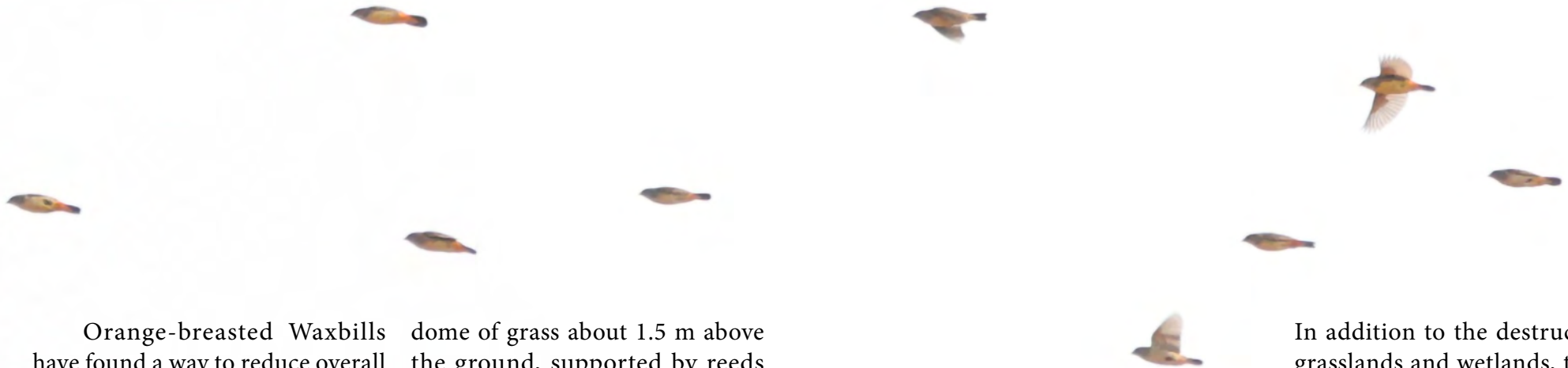
Orange-breasted Waxbills, which occur in far lesser numbers than these, will take over old, abandoned bishop or widow nests. They've also been known to use the nests of weavers, queleas, prinias and cisticolas. When they cannot find suitable nests, they build their own, with both sexes working, forming a

dome of grass about 1.5 m above the ground, supported by reeds or other grasses. They breed after good rains, which over here means late summer, sometimes into early winter. They line the nest with soft feathers, sometimes also using soft grass seedheads. The female lays four to six eggs per clutch (exceptionally up to nine). Both sexes incubate, the male by day and the female by night. Like other waxbills, the chicks

have prominent spots inside their mouths and conspicuous markings at the edges of their gapes, which may help their parents see where to place food in the gloom of the nest. They're fed on regurgitated grass seeds and insects. Sometimes, these waxbills are parasitised by the Pin-tailed Whydah, whose young may be raised alongside their own. The whydahs, as they grow up, actually learn some of the calls of the waxbills and incorporate them into their own calls and songs.

Overall, the Orange-breasted Waxbill is widespread and not endangered; however, it is somewhat rare in South Africa and warrants monitoring for declines. In addition to the destruction of grasslands and wetlands, they are also captured for the cage bird trade. Their very prettiness works against them. Please, people of the world, stop this, come to Africa and see our wondrous little feathered marvels wild and free!

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# Reflections

*Reflections*

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks



ABOVE A close-up of the gravel section of the S63 along the Luvuvhu River from Pafuri Picnic Site to Crooks Corner.

## Praying for and Preying in Pafuri The Pafuri River Road

**The last remnants of an enchanted fever tree forest and timeless vistas of crocodile-infested muddy waters**

Chris Patton

The subtropical magnificence of the gravel section of the S63 along the southern bank of the Luvuvhu River (I've erroneously referred to it as the Levuvhu River in some of the previous articles), from the Pafuri Picnic Site to the intriguingly named Crooks Corner (the subject of the next edition of *Reflections*) must be one of the greatest wildlife drives on the planet.

The birds of the many stretches of open floodplain we covered in Pafuri Floodplain Reflections in *The Lark* 61, but in this edition, I want to write about some of my encounters with the birds of the riverine forest, and of the many vistas the route provides to look over the Luvuvhu River. The gravel road from the picnic site to Crooks is only 6 or 7 km, but it is so action-packed. The distance needs to be covered really slowly, so it can

take a good couple of hours to travel if you are armed with a camera or binoculars and prepared to stop frequently in the ubiquitous shade, particularly at the viewpoints over the river or when finding specials or bird parties.

This drive is famous for the river and the riverine forest, particularly the copses of fever tree forest. The name Luvuvhu River is believed to have evolved from the Venda word for river bushwillow (*muvuvhu*). The clumps of fever tree forest, on the other hand, are a striking and unique forest, known for their distinctive yellow-green barked fever trees (*Vachellia xanthophloea*) that are famous for the ethereal, glowing appearance of the trees, especially in the warm light of sunrise and sunset. This area is celebrated for its magical atmosphere and high biodiversity, where fever trees grow alongside other majestic trees we described

in earlier editions of this sequence on the Pafuri area.

The most extensive fever tree forests in Pafuri are north of the Luvuvhu, in the Makuleke Concession. However, there are still some to be seen south of the river along SANParks' roads, as the photos at the start and end of this article demonstrate. But they are in decline, and the fever trees in the Pafuri region, and indeed throughout their range in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KZN face significant threats, including bark stripping for medicine and fuelwood (hopefully that is more outside the Park), wildlife disturbance (particularly through excessive browsing where elephant



LEFT The remnants of the Fever Tree Forest, along the river section of the S63 in the Pafuri Region are an enchanted world of endless birding possibilities © Dries de Wet.

numbers are high), and the impacts of flooding, often exacerbated by altered water flow regimes (caused by water extraction upstream for agriculture or mining), and through climate change. The situation is bad, and we should all pray that it is not banished to memory, but I have heard disturbing reports from people who have been there recently that it is not as spectacular as it once was.

Fever trees grow quickly and die off relatively quickly, contributing to an ever-changing tree profile in the Luvuvhu/Limpopo floodplain. Flood dynamics play a role with fever trees, and the 2013 flood in the Pafuri area dumped a lot of sand and silt in the riparian forest on the southern floodplain (of the Luvuvhu), and one can still see this wave effect when driving along the river road. It is hypothesised that fever trees don't

cope with silt or sand being deposited over their root systems.

But because their wood is so soft, fever trees are a haven for insects, particularly species that bore into the wood, and this in turn attracts a plethora of birds that feed on this insect abundance. But more on that later in the article.

Now, many of the birds one finds along the Pafuri River Road we will have already covered in the previous editions on Nyala Drive, Levuvhu Bridge and the Pafuri Picnic Site, but there are some spectacular memories I have of sightings along this route. Many of them involve birds of prey that seem to thrive on an abundance of prey in the Pafuri paradise.

Two involve one of my favourite birds, the Crowned Eagle... Crowned Eagles are

regularly heard chanting along the route and can be seen soaring above the canopy at times, but the two encounters involved birds seen at remarkably close quarters. Both were on Punda Extreme Birding Weekends hosted by the West Rand Honorary Rangers, with me guiding a 10-seater open safari vehicle. The first was in January 2011, when we were edging along the river road, stopping frequently to take in the plethora of birds. Some vervet monkeys were foraging carefree in the adjacent undergrowth, unperturbed by our truck. But then all hell broke loose as out of nowhere a Crowned Eagle plunged through the canopy, radaring in on one of the monkeys. In the commotion, guests gasped; the eagle narrowly missed; and the monkeys scattered, the intended target scurrying to safety as the rest of its troops chattered frantically, chastising the eagle and warning the entire area of danger.

The eagle's wings hit branches, and then the ground in its attack, but in one seamless movement, it raised itself flying vertically upward and settled on a branch right next to the vehicle. I quickly fired off a shot to capture its presence, and I could swear it looked visibly embarrassed at its near miss...



right next to the road, a little further east along the S63. The irony was we actually stopped to see, and photograph a rather confiding Grey-hooded Kingfisher, a special bird in its own right, and the entire truck's occupants with cameras had them out already photographing

this bird, when one of the novice birders on the truck looked across and deeper into the tree and said "hey what's that big bird?"... To our collective astonishment it was a perched Crowned Eagle, with its distinctive pattern of dense blackish bars and blotches against a whitish background providing incredible camouflage as the eagle sat calmly beneath the forest canopy. Everyone (including me) got much better shots

than my monkey encounter, but one of the guests was a chap named Leon van Zyl, who captured this incredible photo of the bird as it took flight. I have not seen Leon since that day, but he was elated by the encounter and kind enough to share a photo of our memory with me. I am sure readers will agree that the blurred background and the eagle's sheer majesty make it an unforgettable moment.

ABOVE A visibly embarrassed Crowned Eagle having just missed a vervet monkey during aerial attack © Chris Patton.

RIGHT The majesty of a Crowned Eagle in flight on the S63 © Leon van Zyl.



I know the photo above isn't the best, but hopefully readers can see the bird's "expression". However, 4 years and 2 days later, on the 31st of January 2015, the vehicle I was guiding came across another Crowned Eagle, this time in the middle of the day, resting peacefully



So, as indicated, the extended memory of this remarkable close-quarter encounter with the Eagle was that we had stopped initially for a Grey-headed Kingfisher, which, as experienced Kruger birders will attest, is among the most challenging of Kruger's kingfishers to see reliably. This bird, however, was very obliging, and first posed for frontal shots, and then turned around for back shots to show the full 360° experience (AB De Villiers would be proud)... When I look at the time record of my photos, the kingfisher shots (and I took about 30) were from 12h18 to 12h21, while the eagle shots were all at 12h23.



But Crowned Eagles are not the only raptors of which I have fond memories along the route... Particularly on the many Punda Extreme Adventures that I guided, we found African Cuckoo-Hawk, African Goshawk, Long-crested Eagle, Ovambo Sparrowhawk, Bat Hawk, Lizard Buzzard, and Little Sparrowhawk are all repeat offenders on the register of magical memories. I have poor photos of all of these, but

My full frontal (TOP) and rear (BOTTOM) shots of the Grey-headed Kingfisher that led to an epic eagle encounter © Chris Patton.

Tommy Liversage, one of the regular participants on Punda Extremes, who used to live near me in Pretoria when I still worked up at SANParks' head office, is always a better bet for quality photos and has been kind enough to share some for this article.

Visitors travelling along the S63 are more likely to hear the African Goshawk than to see it, and its "two stones being knocked together" call as it soars above the canopy is a feature of the route in the early mornings. In fact, all the listed raptors are challenging to track down because of their skulking

behaviour when not in flight, but the relative frequency of finding these specials along the Pafuri river road suggests that their densities are high in the area.

And of course, there is also the chance of stumbling onto the Pafuri's most sought-after celebrity,

Visitors travelling along the S63 are more likely to hear the African Goshawk © Tommy Liversage (LEFT) than see it, while Lizard Buzzard © Tommy Liversage (RIGHT) is a bonus to see at any time.





ABOVE A European Honey Buzzard found in the vicinity of the Fever Tree Forest in 2010  
© Chris Patton.

RIGHT A colourfully exhibitionist White-fronted Bee-eater earning its name  
© Bianca Currie.

that big ginger fellow that specialises in nocturnal fishing, that is ideal in the slow-moving muddy pools of the nearby river. Tommy also managed to seize this beautiful image on one of the weekends, peering through the foliage along this stretch of the S63.

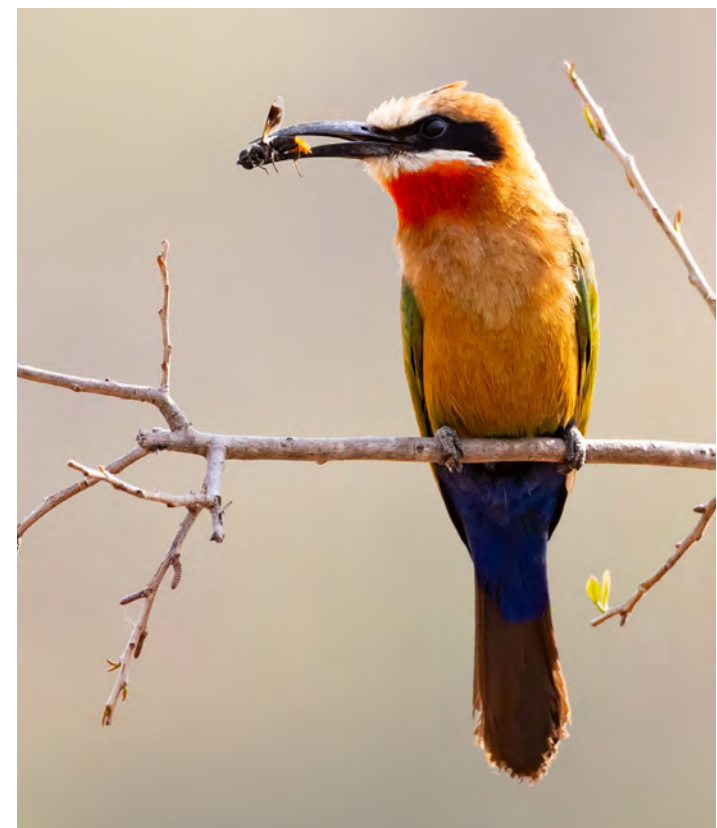
### What's the Buzz?

Birds are not the only animals plentiful along the route. Elephants, buffalo, nyala, impalas, bushbucks, vervets, and warthogs are seen in good numbers, and lion and

ABOVE A lurking Pel's Fishing Owl along the S63 © Tommy Liversage

leopard sightings are regular. Still, those into entomology will notice good numbers of butterflies and bees, always a good sign of a healthy environment, and the bees have a noticeable impact on birds. Honeyguides pulsing calls allude to the fact that there are bee nests around, sometimes in holes in the ground, but often in hollows in

trees... Bee-eaters will be loud and colourfully exhibitionist, and can be observed feasting on the adult bees, but one fond memory involving the product that bees produce is of finding



two noticeably different morphs of the rare summer visitor, European Honey Buzzards, in almost the same place two years apart: one was a brown-morphed bird, and the other had heavy intrusions of cinnamon and grey.

**Take advantage of the view... (and the shade)**

One of the most rewarding things to do along the Pafuri River Road is to take advantage of the raised riverbank to scan and watch the river from the shade of parking opportunities beneath lofty trees, and let the action come to you... There are several spots where the vista will look like the buffalo image below...

The water may be muddy, and the banks not rich with vegetation, but the open sandy banks nevertheless have a strong level of avian appeal... There are many amazing photographic opportunities, and birds like African Jacanas, Three-banded Plovers, Green-backed, Goliath and Grey Herons (3G Herons), Great and Little Egrets, Yellow-billed, Woolly-necked, Marabou, Saddle-billed and even Black Storks, White-crowned and Blacksmith Lapwings, Water

BELOW The elevated vantage points of the Luvuvhu River  
© Chris Patton.



ABOVE Two African Openbills in the Luvuvhu River in solemn conversation  
© Chris Patton

Thick-knees, and good numbers of the curiously featured African Openbills will most likely be on view. The photo I took of the two openbills, looking as if they are in some solemn ceremony, is a typical Luvuvhu River scene.

The larger river birds, like herons and storks, mainly nest in trees, but the smaller ground-dwelling waterside birds listed here tend to nest on the open riverbanks and often offer fantastic views of their nests and offspring. My former Kruger colleague and good friend, Dr Bianca Currie, secured this phenomenal photo of a family of Water Thick-knees from the Pafuri river road.

Although there are several vantage points one can get vistas of the river along the S63, one of my favourites is at the site of the old Pafuri picnic/campsite (the relocation was described in the *Reflections* article in *The Lark* 62)

As you drive from west to east toward Crooks Corner, the road enters the original cleared area, right alongside the river, from a raised bank. There is a massive tree with a large sweeping branch



at right angles to the bough of the tree, and we have seen Pel's on the branch when passing through the route before dawn... But the accompanying image of an African Fish Eagle, taken at the same spot

in the same tree in October 2004, will help readers visualise the location. Shade here is ample and appreciated, and if I am on my own with no other commitments, I will often park here for a bite, a beverage

or even a siesta and let the wildlife do the rest.

The road then turns 90% from the river vista point and heads away from the river through the still visibly cleared area, but

ABOVE A family of Water Thick-knees along the banks of the Luvuvhu  
© Bianca Currie.



ABOVE African Fish Eagle at the old Pafuri Picnic Site clearing along the S63  
© Chris Patton.

some old concrete structures are a further indication that this was once a camp/picnic site... With thick riverine forest canopy overhead in a cleared flat area, there is almost always Kurrichane Thrush around, and other birds of the forest understory like Bearded Scrub Robins, Terrestrial Brownbuls, and the Grey-backed form of the Bleating Camaroptera, all rustling through the leaf litter or undergrowth.

But to conclude this journey, I want to return to the magical fever trees, whose almost haunting vibe always lends the drive a mystical aura. The tree provides a "birdy

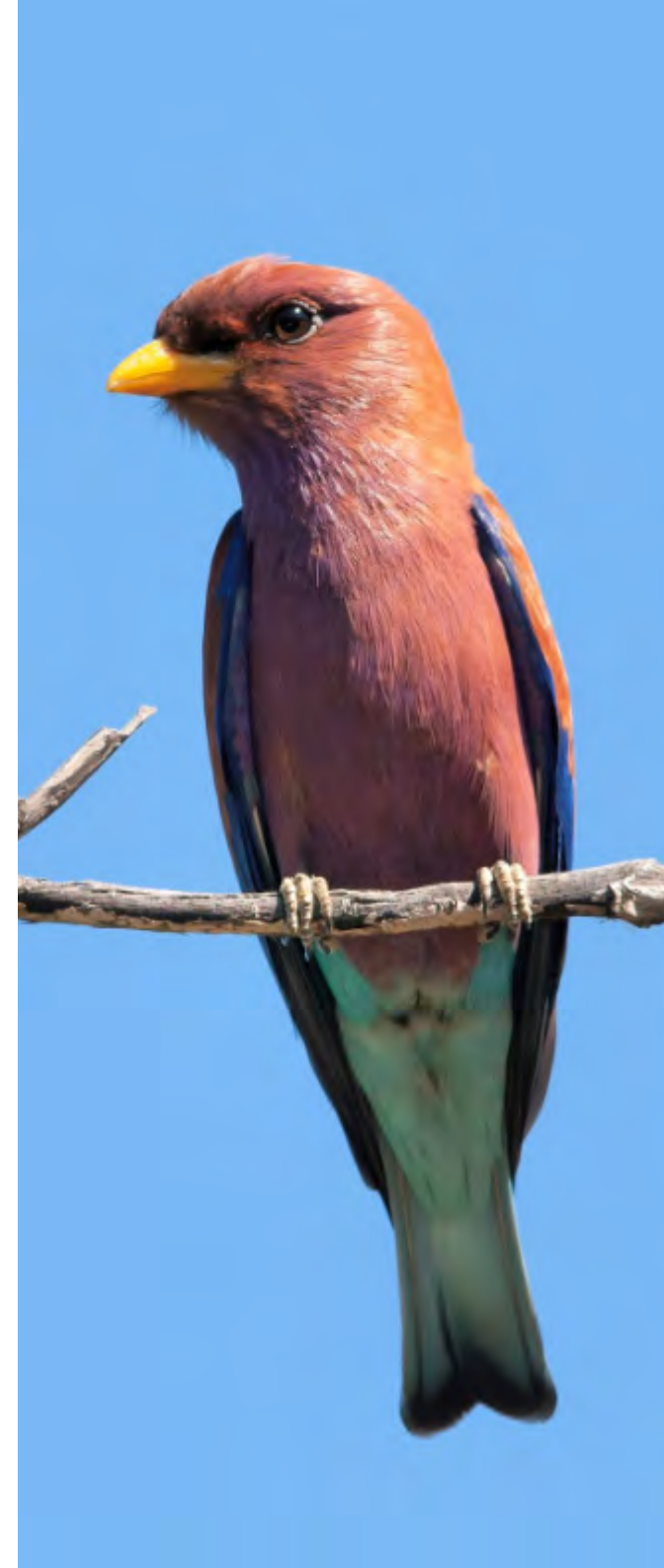
smorgasbord" of food sources, including nectar, fruits (pods/berries), and insects, making it a valuable addition to the riverine forest.

I wrote earlier that their wood is incredibly soft and teems with insect life. There is a constant hum of cicadas. The soft wood is ideal for woodpeckers, and all four of Kruger's species (Bearded, Bennett's, Cardinal, and Golden-tailed) can be found with a

bit of searching. Eremomelas, apalises, flycatchers, helmet-shrikes, barbets and puffbacks are also part of the ever-present cast, but if I think of one bird I associate with fever trees in the Pafuri area, admittedly only in the summer months, it is the raucous and enigmatic Broad-billed Roller.

So to finish this article with a final feverish flourish, I hope readers who travel to this wonderful part of the world will once again experience the splendour and iconic atmosphere of the area, and that rumours of its demise are either exaggerated or nature in a temporary state of flux. Having been a regular annual visitor to Pafuri for two decades, I last visited in 2019, and I feel a sense of heartache and longing to connect with this spiritual place once again.

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



RIGHT Perhaps the emblem of fever trees in summer - Broad-billed Roller  
© Daniel Engelbrecht.

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# A mysterious bird: Kretschmer's Longbill

Derek Engelbrecht

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**K**retschmer's Longbill is one of those infuriatingly difficult birds to find. With only 209 eBird records for the species in a well-birded region, one gets an idea of just how difficult it is to get this bird. Not only is it generally uncommon and highly localised, but once you hear its distinctive call, the real challenge starts – to see it! This is a bird of the gloomy underworld of montane forests and coastal thickets, especially where there are lianas. However, the aforementioned isn't the reason the title of this note implies it is a mysterious bird. There are several other mysteries associated with Kretschmer's Longbill, and I'm going to share some of these with you.

## Mystery #1: The type locality

The species was collected by the German ornithologist and collector Oskar Rudolph Neumann during his 1892 expedition to East Africa. The species was formally described in 1895 (Reichenow and Neumann

1895), and named in honour of another German collector, Eugen Franz Kretschmer. The type locality was given as “*Kiboscho (Kilima Ndscharo [=Kilimanjaro]) ca. 2500m*”. Kiboscho, now called [Kibosho](#), on the southern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, is at an elevation of ~1,400 m. However, Kretschmer's Longbill has never been recorded above 1,800 m. This suggests either the elevation or the locality given was likely in error.

## Mystery #2: Taxonomic status and affinities

Well, it is not really a mystery, but it adds to the mystique of this species' systematic history. Kretschmer's Longbill was described initially as a greenbul, *Phyllostrephus kretschmeri*, and, honestly, one can be forgiven for thinking it looks like a greenbul. The spelling of the generic epithet was later corrected to *Phyllastrephus kretschmeri*. Meanwhile, Grote (1911) described a new species, *Macrosphenus griseiceps* (Sylviidae),

from coastal forests in southeastern Tanzania; more on this later. The placement of the nominate Kretschmer's Longbill in the genus *Phyllastrephus* was problematic, and in 1920 Neumann placed it, along with *Macrosphenus griseiceps*, in a new genus, *Suaheliornis*, still within the Pycnonotidae (the greenbuls and brownbuls) (Neumann 1920). Interestingly, the Lowland Tiny Greenbul *Phyllastrephus debilis*, which looks very similar to Kretschmer's Longbill (Figure 1), was also placed in this new genus. In 1955, Mackworth-Praed and Grant synonymised *S. kretschmeri* and *S. griseiceps*, treating them as subspecies (Mackworth-Praed and Grant, 1955). Hall and Moreau (1970) assigned five longbill species, including Kretschmer's Longbill, to the genus *Macrosphenus*, where it has remained since then. BUT, even within this small genus of longbills, Kretschmer's Longbill is noticeably larger, with a longer, stouter bill, and a longer tail compared to its congeners. A 2006 molecular study found that the species belonged to the African greenbuls; however, the specimen used in the analysis, which was thought to be a Kretschmer's Longbill, was in fact the Grey-olive Greenbul, *Phyllastrephus cerviniventris*, from

Malawi. A recent phylogenetic study using DNA revealed what was long suspected – Kretschmer's Longbill is not closely related to the other longbills (Fjeldså et al. 2020). Its taxonomic position and affinities remain a mystery.

## Mystery #3: Eye colour

The type specimen from Mount Kilimanjaro had pale eyes, as do populations in northern Tanzania, e.g., the Usambaras and Pugu Hills near Dar es Salaam (see [Macaulay Library images](#)). Nominate populations in other Eastern Arc mountains, such as the Ngurus, Ulugurus, Udzungwas, and the Mahenge Mountains, have reddish-brown eyes (F. Jensen, personal observations). All populations representing subspecies *griseiceps* in coastal southeastern Tanzania and northeastern Mozambique have reddish-brown eyes (Grote, 1911, Vincent 1935, F. Jensen, personal communication). Why some populations of the nominate subspecies would have differently coloured eyes is a mystery. This is an important identification feature that is not always mentioned in regional field guides. If one can obtain a clear view of individuals representing the southern populations (*griseiceps*), they would immediately be



Figure 1. Kretschmer's Longbill (dark-eyed form) (top, © Flemming Jensen) and Lowland Tiny Greenbul (bottom, © Derek Engelbrecht). Southern populations of Kretschmer's Longbill has dark eyes, which, provided you can get a clear view in the gloomy undergrowth, will easily distinguish it from the Lowland Tiny Greenbul. Appearance aside, the two species have very different vocalisations and behaviours.

distinguishable from the similar-looking pale-eyed Lowland Tiny Greenbul (Figure 1).

#### Mystery #4: Behaviour

Jack Vincent collected six specimens near [Netia](#) in Nampula Province, northeastern Mozambique (Vincent 1935). The identity of these six specimens is not disputed, as they are held in the ornithological collection at the Natural History Museum at Tring. However, Vincent's description of its behaviour is noteworthy because it does not align with the species' known behaviour. For example, Vincent wrote (of subspecies *griseiceps*): “*In the Netia forest the birds were common and invariably going in parties of five or six individuals, which spent their time scratching about among dead leaves under the thickest bushes, occasionally giving utterance to a throaty gurgling warble.*” He goes on to add: “*More often than not these small Bulbuls were members of a bird-party...*” Moreau (1948) had his reservations about Kretschmer's Longbill joining bird parties: “*We do not think Suaheliornis kretschmeri in Usambara joins mixed bird-parties (which typically work the mid-stratum), but gets its food on and close to the ground.*” So, Vincent and Moreau disagreed about the species

joining bird parties, but both agreed that, at least at times, Kretschmer's Longbill forages on the ground.

I have been in correspondence with several birders and professional ecologists, such as Warren McClelland and Duncan McKenzie, both with field experience of Kretschmer's Longbill, and they confirmed that the behaviour described by Vincent and, to a lesser extent, Moreau, does not match their knowledge of the species. Both stated that they have never seen Kretschmer's Longbill foraging on the ground among the leaf litter, joining mixed-species flocks, or foraging in conspecific groups of 5–6 individuals. They concur that Kretschmer's Longbill almost invariably occurs singly or in pairs (never in conspecific groups or heterospecific bird parties) and it forages like a typical leaf gleaner in tangles of lianas and other dense vegetation, mainly in the midstratum, but also occasionally in the lower stratum or subcanopy of thickets (it does not scratch in the leaf litter).

So, what cannot be disputed is that Vincent found Kretschmer's Longbill in the Netia region, as the Tring specimens attest to. However, if Vincent's behavioural observations are incorrect – which they almost certainly are – then which species

was he looking at? A clue might be in his description of the voice as a “*throaty gurgling warble*”, and I’d venture a guess that in the gloom of the dense forest understorey, he confused Kretschmer’s Longbill with Lowland Tiny Greenbuls. Unfortunately, Vincent’s incorrect description of the foraging behaviour of Kretschmer’s Longbill has become entrenched in the ornithological literature and is still used in current texts on this species.

#### Mystery #5: Vocalisations

Vincent’s dubious observations of Kretschmer’s Longbill at Netia described an occasional “*throaty gurgling warble*” while foraging and its song as “*a clear and cheery, fluty, chirrupping whistle of ‘cheer-up, cheer-up,’ almost Song-Thrush like.*” As mentioned above, it is my opinion that the throaty gurgling Vincent heard was, likely, another species, probably the Lowland Tiny Greenbul. Vincent heard the species’ song only once and proceeded to collect the songster; this individual is one of his six specimens in the Tring collection. As far as his description of the song goes, it is accurate, and its authenticity is not in doubt. Sclater and Moreau (1932) described the song, rather accurately, as “*eet-i-riid*” or “*eet-itti-*

*rid*” and mentioned two alarm calls: a low “*charr*” and a clear “*ker-ip.*” Keith (1997) describes the song as “*a quick 4-note phrase of loud pure notes lasting c. 1 s, first note loudest and highest, followed by a slight pause, next 3 shorter, third slurred upwards ...; last note sometimes ‘chu’ ...*” This description has become the “standard” for Kretschmer’s Longbill in ornithological texts. The song is also correctly described as “*unmusical, monotonous, sometimes continued for long periods.*” However, scrutiny of Kretschmer’s Longbill song, using recordings available on [Xeno-Canto](#) and the [Macaulay Library](#), has revealed that it is far more complex than described in the literature.

I analysed recordings available in Xeno-Canto using Raven Pro 1.6. A summary of the song strophe parameters analysed is presented in Table 1. My analyses revealed that, rather than 3–4 notes given in the literature, the song is delivered in strophes of 4–8 notes (mean = 6.3 notes  $\pm$  1.57 SD, range 4–8,  $n = 10$ ), repeated monotonously, typically at intervals of 3–5 seconds, for extended periods. I have not found evidence of an individual switching strophes to introduce variability; however, most available recordings are relatively short, and potential variability in

Table 1. Table 1. The spectral properties of the song strophes ( $n = 123$ ) of Kretschmer’s Longbill.

Parameter	Mean $\pm$ SD (range)
$\Delta_{\text{time}}$	0.80 s $\pm$ 0.07 SD (0.67–1.20)
Frequency <sub>low</sub>	1,685.81 Hz $\pm$ 276.24 SD (950.7–2,195.6)
Frequency <sub>high</sub>	4,303.63 Hz $\pm$ 413.60 SD (3,725.9–5,513.8)
$\Delta_{\text{frequency}}$	2,617.82 Hz $\pm$ 525.70 SD (1,850.11–3,660.53)
Frequency <sub>peak</sub>	3,051.26 Hz $\pm$ 507.47 SD (2,239.45–4,823.44)

the structure of an individual’s song strophes may have gone undetected. Nevertheless, based on the currently available evidence, it appears that an individual’s song strophes are unique to that individual. This means that each individual has a unique “signature” strophe, which can be used for individual identification.

The individual notes in a song strophe are delivered in rapid succession, accompanied by frequency shifts and modulation of some notes. However, early authors may be forgiven for stating that the song consists of 3–4 notes, since the notes are delivered so rapidly that they are discernible only when the call is slowed significantly. A typical song strophe lasts approximately 0.80 seconds (Table 1) and is generally composed of two parts: an introductory phase followed by a rambling phrase (Figure 2).

The introductory phase consists of one or two notes. While

Keith (1997) states that the first note, i.e., the introductory phase, is the highest-pitched note, this is not always so, and some notes in the rambling phase are often higher-pitched than the introductory notes. Rarely, an individual may vocalise the introductory phase without the ramble, or alternatively, the introductory phase may be omitted (Figure 3). The delivery of these unusual strophes may depend on the individual’s level of excitement. Following the introductory phase, there is an inter-phase pause lasting a mean of 0.29 s  $\pm$  0.04 SD (range 0.20–0.42,  $n = 122$  pauses), before the rambling phase starts.

The rambling phase is characterised by a fast-paced sequence of whistles, clicks, and frequency-modulated warbles. Whistles may be upward or downward-sloping slurs (Figure 2). In contrast to Keith’s (1997) statement that the first syllable is

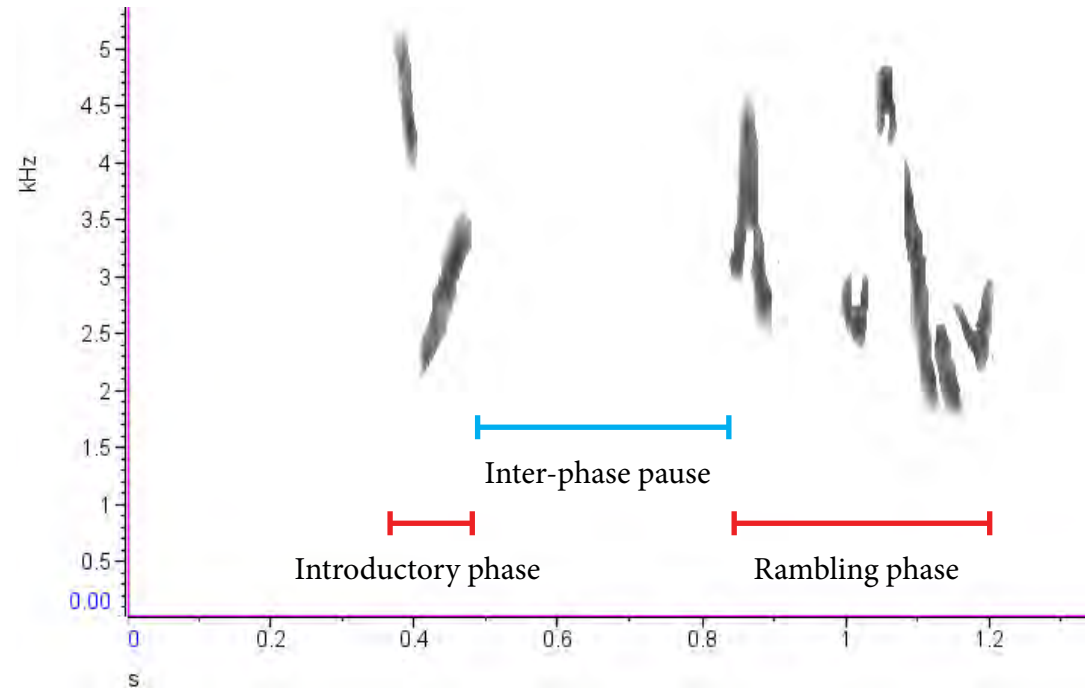


Figure 2. An example of a single phrase comprised of eight notes. The different phases are also shown in this image.

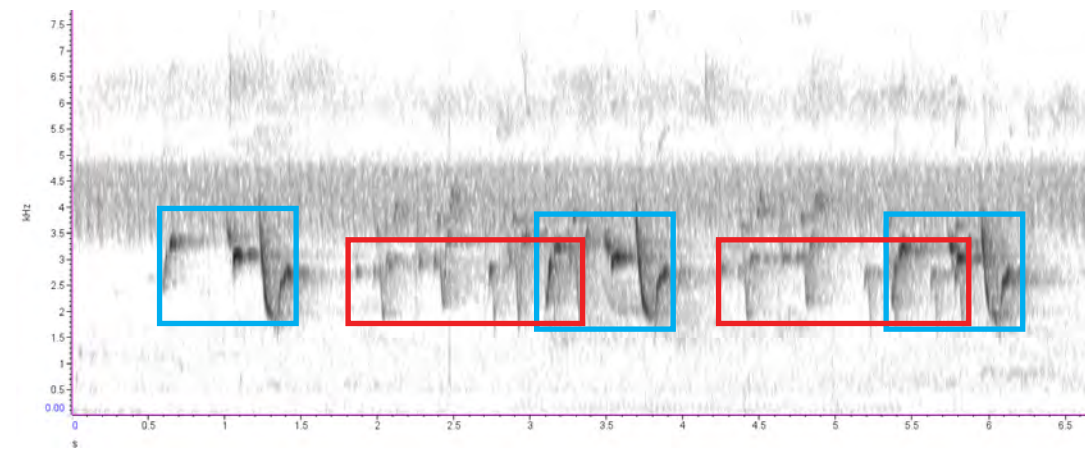


Figure 4. Two birds vocalizing. The blue blocks are the song phrases of, presumably, the male. Another bird (presumably a female) reciprocates (red boxes) (P. Ericsson, Xeno-canto: [XC467166](#)).

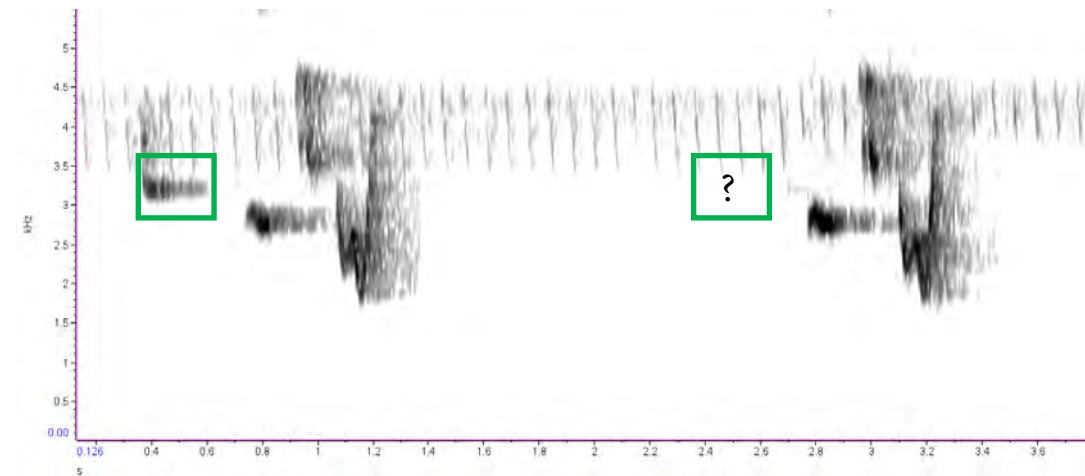


Figure 3. Two phrases of a song. The left one has a single note (green circle) in the introductory phase, while the phrase on the right lacks the introductory phase. It should be noted that omission of either the introductory or the rambling phase are rare occurrences.

usually the highest-pitched, some notes in the rambling phase often surpass the pitch of notes of the introductory phase. Furthermore, the rambling phase generally increases in complexity as the strophe concludes.

Occasionally, the song is delivered as a jumbled warble lasting ~3–5 seconds (e.g., [XC429886](#)), but the context in which this was vocalised is not known. At other times, song is accompanied by a response from another individual, perhaps a mate. This call generally carry less "body" and is less structured than the song (Figure 4).

In addition to song, there are other calls in the Xeno-Canto and Macaulay Library databases, but

without context, it is not possible to confidently suggest what their functions might be, and these calls are not covered in this note.

Most of the online calls available are from the Usambaras and Pugu Hills, representing the nominate. There is only a single recording available from the southern limit of the species' range a [Quiterajo](#) in Mozambique. Interestingly, although the song of this population is structurally similar to the song of other populations, it is higher-pitched ( $F_{\text{peak}} = 4,565.0 \text{ Hz} \pm 496.67 \text{ SD}$ ,  $n = 9$  phrases vs  $2,931.7 \text{ Hz} \pm 252.29 \text{ SD}$ ,  $n = 114$  phrases), with a broader bandwidth ( $3,396.8 \text{ Hz} \pm 157.83 \text{ SD}$ ,  $n = 9$  phrases vs  $2,556.3 \text{ Hz} \pm 494.43 \text{ SD}$ ,  $n = 114$  phrases). It should be noted that, although

this is based on a single recording, this finding suggests there may be geographic variation in the song parameters, and that the population in coastal Mozambique and possibly southeastern Tanzania may represent a unique dialect. Intrepid birders visiting this relatively unexplored area should be aware of the potential presence of Kretschmer's Longbill and are encouraged to obtain recordings and photos of this population.

#### Mystery #6: Breeding

Consider this ... the nest and eggs of this species have never been described! A photo of a fledgling in November in the Usambaras ([ML626608657](#)) and birds in breeding condition collected in April in the Usambaras, Tanzania (Ripley and Heinrich 1966), suggest that they have an extended breeding season lasting from October to May. With this as your only clue, here is an incentive for an audacious natural history expedition – be the first to discover the nest and eggs of this mysterious species.

#### Mystery #7: The status of the species' southern populations in Mozambique

Since Vincent's (1935) records of Kretschmer's Longbills in the

Netia region of Nampula Province, northern Mozambique, there have been no subsequent records of the species from that region. Based on Google Earth imagery of the region, the “*coastal jungle*” and “*Netia forest*” that Vincent refers to no longer exist there, and the population is likely extinct. Vincent also mentions seeing the birds near the Lurio River to the north, but once again, this record is tainted by his statement that “*a small party was seen in a thicket close to the Lurio River at Namapa.*”

As mentioned above, Kretschmer's Longbill occurs either singly or in pairs, but never in parties, and therefore, the authenticity of this record must be questioned. Nevertheless, like at Netia, there are no other published records of the species from the Lurio region, but the region is rather remote and under-explored. Inspection of Google Earth images from this region shows that there are still pockets of forest or thickets that appear potentially suitable for Kretschmer's Longbill. This area would most certainly reward adventurous birders with many interesting sightings, and, who knows, perhaps an isolated population of Kretschmer's Longbill. The only recent records of the species are from the Quiterajo region in the country's extreme northeast, where

several individuals were encountered during biodiversity surveys in the 2010s. At present, Quiterajo represents the southernmost population of Kretschmer's Longbill.

To conclude, this note demonstrates that numerous aspects of the natural history of this secretive species remain shrouded in mystery. I hope this note has stimulated interest in this species and that, in the next few years, some notable discoveries will be made to unmask this mysterious species – including its nest and eggs.

**Acknowledgements**—I wish to thank Warren McClelland and Duncan McKenzie for sharing their knowledge of the species from northeastern Mozambique with me.

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## Gabar Goshawk predating a Cape Longclaw

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During SABAP2 surveys on 16 December 2025 in the Lucernvlei area (-29.722°, 26.546°; pentad 2940\_2630) south of Dewetsdorp, Free State Province, a Gabar Goshawk was observed in an open grassland area with rows of *Eucalyptus* trees next to the road. The habitat was primarily grassland with marshy streams and dams, interspersed with clumps of *Eucalyptus* and other tree species. The goshawk was on the ground with a prey item in its talons, and, upon closer observation with binoculars, it appeared that it had just caught a bird. Photos revealed that a Cape Longclaw was the victim. The longclaw was identified by the extent and pattern of white on its tail, the streaked head, and size.

Gabar Goshawks are known to capture a wide range of medium-sized and small non-passerine and passerine species, including doves, larks, weavers, sparrows, and unidentified pipits (Allan 2005).

This observation of Cape Longclaw predation by a Gabar Goshawk represents a new dietary record for the species. It is not surprising that Cape Longclaw has not previously been recorded in the diet of the Gabar Goshawk, as the two species prefer different habitats. Cape Longclaws prefer short, moist grassland, whereas Gabar Goshawk is mainly a species of open woodlands. The Gabar Goshawk record also generated a SABAP2 ORF (= Out of Range Form). The species' range expansion into the mainly treeless, mesic Highveld grasslands since SABAP1 may be attributed to the planting of alien *Eucalyptus* trees and other trees in towns, villages, and at homesteads

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ABOVE Gabar Goshawk with its Cape Longclaw prey south of Dewetsdorp, Free State, on 16 December 2025 ([ML647019092](https://doi.org/10.1111/mlb.12992)).

## Additions to the list of *Schotia brachypetala* nectarivores

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Following the article about opportunistic nectarivory at flowering Weeping Boerbeans *Schotia brachypetala* in *The Lark* 62 (Engelbrecht 2025), I have recorded the following species taking nectar from a weeping boerbean in our garden in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown), Eastern Cape Province (see list below). Some of these birds would not normally encounter this tree, but almost certainly feed on local *Schotia* species, such as *S. latifolia*.

Family	Scientific name	Common name
Coliidae	<i>Colius striatus</i>	Speckled Mousebird
	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>	Red-faced Mousebird
Colombidae	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>	Laughing Dove
Nectariniidae	<i>Cyanomitra veroxii</i>	Grey Sunbird
	<i>Chalcomitra amethystina</i>	Amethyst Sunbird
	<i>Cinnyris chalybeus</i>	Southern Double-collared Sunbird
	<i>Cinnyris afer</i>	Greater Double-collared Sunbird
	<i>Nectarinia famosa</i>	Malachite Sunbird
Oriolidae	<i>Oriolus larvatus</i>	Black-headed Oriole
Ploceidae	<i>Ploceus capensis</i>	Cape Weaver
Pycnonotidae	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>	Common Bulbul
Sturnidae	<i>Onychognathus morio</i>	Red-winged Starling
	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Common Starling
Zosteropidae	<i>Zosterops virens</i>	Cape White-eye

This list adds two new species to the list of *S. brachypetala* nectarivores, namely the Laughing Dove and Common Starling—bringing the list of avian *S. brachypetala* nectarivores to 77 species.

### References

Engelbrecht, D. (2025). New additions to and an update of the list of Weeping Boer-bean *Schotia brachypetala* nectarivores *The Lark* 62:78–94.

## Going big - Red-winged Starling nests

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In *The Lark* 57, I reported on the mass and dimensions of two Red-winged Starling nests on the University of Limpopo campus (Engelbrecht 2025). Red-winged Starling nests are bulky nests, with one of those nests weighing in at 1,250 g! This year, I collected two more nests from structures (after breeding was completed). Both nests were considered to pose a safety risk (fire), and I was asked to assist with their removal from the buildings. The details of the two new nests from the 2025/2026 season follow (Table 1).

### Nest # 1

This nest was placed in a disused pipe that had previously been used to extract air from a laboratory. The pipe had a diameter of ~400 mm and may have constrained the nest width (310 mm). This nest had an apron (= ramp leading to the nest cup) measuring 410 mm, and the overall length of the nest approached 3/4 of a metre! Although this is by far the bulkiest nest I have measured, it is not the heaviest; nevertheless, it comprised a substantial amount of material. The difference in mass between

Table 1. Nest dimensions and mass of two Red-winged Starling nests on the campus of the University of Limpopo. All linear measurements are in millimetres (mm) and mass in gram (g).

Parameter	Nest #1	Nest #2
Maximum width of base	310	330
Nest length (including apron)	720	
Apron length	410	
Nest depth	130	125
Cup diameter (inner)	64	62
Cup depth	44	42
Mass	900	550



OPPOSITE LEFT Red-winged Starling nest in situ in the pipe; the nest extracted, with a 30 mm ruler next to it for scale (RIGHT); a lateral view of the nest (TOP); and the completed clutch of three eggs.

this nest and the 1,250 g nest reported by Engelbrecht (2025) is likely due to the nest containing fewer cob clods. The nest material used in the construction of this nest included dried leaves, small twigs, bits of dried dung, dried animal droppings (perhaps cat or mongoose), seed pods, a few feathers, and a 'compost-like' material, likely collected from

gutters. The lining consisted of green twigs with leaves stripped, as well as pine needles.

This nest contained a clutch of 3 eggs measuring (l x w, mass):  
 1. 35.31 mm x 24.83 mm, 11.6 g  
 2. 31.94 mm x 23.83 mm, 9.7 g  
 3. 34.13 mm x 24.08 mm, 10.6 g.  
 All three eggs were fresh at the time of measurement (i.e., measured within 4 days of laying).

The nest was partially predated sometime between 23 October 2025 and 4 November 2025 when two eggs were lost. Incubation of the remaining egg continued, but on 7 November 2025, the nest was empty.

of an office block. Unfortunately, the nest's position didn't allow regular, safe nest inspections, so I have little data on this nest, except that it was lost after 5 days of incubation.

**References**

Nest # 2  
 This nest was placed atop an air-conditioner motor on the exterior

Engelbrecht, D. (2025). Red-winged Starling nest dimensions and materials used. The Lark 57:90.

## Melodious Lark with ectoparasite

TEXT AND PHOTOS Dawie de Swardt

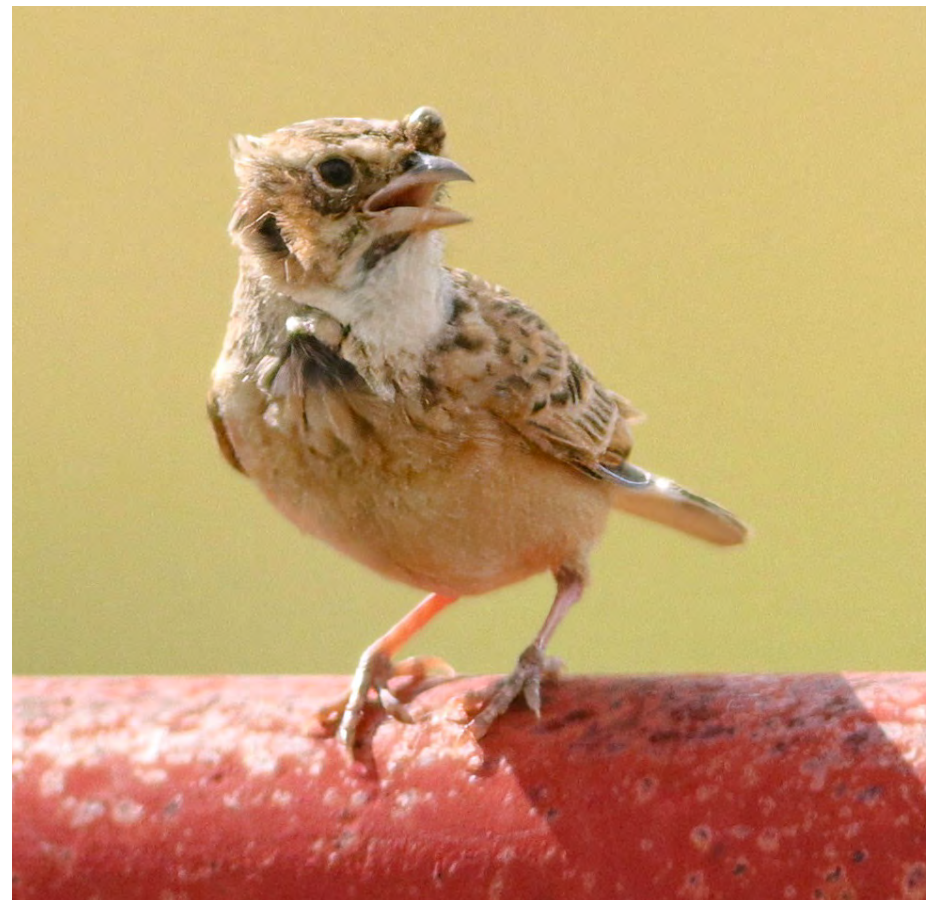
email: [dawie@nasmus.co.za](mailto:dawie@nasmus.co.za)

On 15 December 2025, SABAP2 bird surveys were done in areas west of Tierpoort Dam, south-west of Bloemfontein, Free State Province. In most *Themeda triandra*-dominated grasslands south of Bloemfontein, Melodious Larks were frequently encountered, either heard during their song

flights or calling from perches on roadside fences. Sound recordings were obtained from several birds and later uploaded to Xeno-Canto or the Macaulay Library. In the Smaldeel area (-29.4609, 25.9788) about midway between Jagersfontein and Tierpoort (pentad 2925\_2555), I observed a Melodious Lark singing from a perch. While photographing and getting sound recordings of the individual, I noticed “something” on its head.

On closer inspection of the images, I identified the “something” as a tick (ectoparasite). Ticks are mostly confined to head, neck, and chin of ground-dwelling birds, because these areas cannot be reached by the bird's beak during self-maintenance activities such as preening. Ticks attached to other areas of a bird's body are quickly

LEFT Melodious Lark singing, the tick is clearly visible on its forehead.



ABOVE A closer view showing the size of the engorged tick.

removed during preening. The National Museum Ornithology Department curates ectoparasites from several passerine bird species, including larks, but there are as yet no ticks from Melodious Lark in the museum's collection (DdS, personal observation). Dean (2005) listed no ectoparasites for this species. This photographic record is probably the first documented record for a tick as an ectoparasite on Melodious Larks.

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## Pale Chanting Goshawk using millipede for anting

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A single adult Pale Chanting Goshawk *Melierax canorus* was observed at 9:40 on 3 April 2019 in the Pilanesberg National Park (-25.162813, 26.93882), South Africa, engaging in what appeared to be active self-anointing, a form of anting. In self-anointing, instead of using ants, another species is used to apply pungent or chemically

active compounds to a bird's skin and plumage, presumably to repel ectoparasites. In this instance, the goshawk used what looked like a Yellow-banded Millipede *Anadenobolus monilicornis*. The goshawk was perched in a dead

BELOW The Pale Chanting Goshawk with the millipede in its talons.



tree, holding an approximately 10–15 cm-long millipede and rubbing it repeatedly against the feathers of its breast, flanks, and wings. After several seconds of rubbing, the bird paused to preen for a few seconds, then resumed rubbing for an additional 15 to 20 seconds before flying off with the millipede, dropping the millipede at its next perch. I could not see, nor did the photos show, that the millipede exhibited a defensive secretion. After dropping the millipede, another Pale Chanting Goshawk flew past, and the two flew off together. At no stage did it seem to attempt to eat the millipede.

This behaviour is consistent with insect-mediated self-anointing, commonly known as anting, which has been documented in more than 200 bird species Cape Sugarbird and Cape White-eye (Lunt et al. 2004, Potgieter 2025). The use of a millipede by a raptor species, however, appears to be novel for the family Accipitridae and, to the best of current knowledge, the first record for the Pale Chanting Goshawk. The millipede's benzoquinone and hydroquinone secretions may deter ectoparasites or confer antimicrobial benefits, suggesting a potential instance of zoopharmacognosy (self-medication).



ABOVE The Pale Chanting Goshawk manipulating the millipede before rubbing it against its feathers.

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## Natal Spurfowl in my garden in Polokwane

TEXT AND PHOTOS Jan Fourie

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In recent years, several coveys of Natal Spurfowl have become established in some of the older, well-wooded suburbs in Polokwane. A pair has taken up residence in our garden in the Dorp suburb since 2023.

We first noticed a pair of Natal Spurfowl visiting our garden quite regularly between September and November 2023. Then, in December 2024, we saw the pair visiting regularly, accompanied by six chicks. The family remained around till the chicks were well-grown. The youngsters then left the area, but the adults remained behind. We saw them sporadically, and then on 11 July 2024, they showed up once again, this time with five small chicks.

According to Little (2005), eggs are laid from December to May in South Africa. Judging by the size of the chicks photographed on 11 July 2024, laying must have commenced at the end of May or early June. Not only is this an

extension of the breeding season in South Africa, but, assuming the two broods were reared by the same pair, then this is the first evidence of double-brooding by Natal Spurfowl.

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OPPOSITE TOP The male Natal Spurfowl accompanying the six chicks on 3 January 2024.

MIDDLE The adult pair photographed on 3 April 2024.

BOTTOM The pair with five chicks photographed on 11 July 2024.



## Breeding observations of Secretarybirds in the Free State, South Africa

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A behavioural study on Northern Black Korhaans *Afrotis fraoides* at the farm Leeuwrant, south of Bloemfontein, Free State Province, in 1989 (de Swardt 1992), provided an opportunity to study a Secretarybird *Sagittarius serpentarius* breeding attempt in the

same study area. The Secretarybird nest containing a clutch of three eggs was located on top of a *Ziziphus mucronata* bush. Secretarybirds primarily place their nests in the crowns of *Z. mucronata*, *Vachellia karroo*, and *Olea* species (Figure 1). Two young fledged (and were ringed) from the Leeuwrant nest in

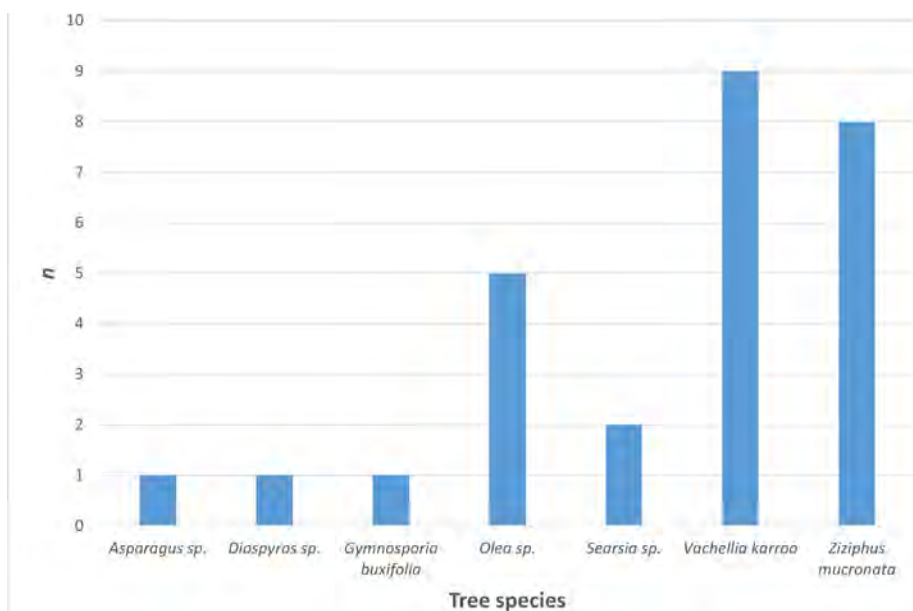


Figure 1. Nest trees used by Secretarybirds in the Bloemfontein and surrounding areas between 1989 and 2025.

December 1989. These fledglings were also observed in the area during observations of the korhaans (de Swardt 1990). Over the years, I observed and ringed nestlings in 27 nesting attempts in the Free State, of which 11 were monitored regularly (Table 1).

This paper reports on a breeding attempt by a pair along the Jagersfontein road in 2025, using the same *Z. mucronata* nest tree as was used 36 years earlier. Secretarybirds have been regularly observed and breeding activities recorded over the years within a 10-kilometre radius of this nest attempt (see de Swardt 2011, de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015). At the same time, during CAR (Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcounts) on a fixed route from the De Brug silos via Immigrant and ending at Houthaalberg, a second breeding attempt was suspected and later confirmed (de Swardt 2025); this nest was monitored too. This paper also reports on this breeding attempt.

### Nest monitoring

#### The Leeuwrant nest

On the morning of 16 August 2025, DdS was doing SABAP2 surveys in the Poskraal area between Bloemfontein and Jagersfontein. While driving on the

main road (around 7:00), a pair of Secretarybirds was observed perched on a *Z. mucronata* bush (the same tree as in the 1989 nest observation). From previous experience, I know that they roost in the nest tree and only later begin nest building; I made a mental note of this observation for future visits. Another atlas survey was conducted on 30 August 2025, and a pair was observed in the nest tree area; nest-building activities with sticks on top of the tree were noted, confirming a possible breeding attempt.

We revisited the nest site on 24 September 2025 and brought a ladder and nest mirror along to inspect the nest contents. As we approached the nest, the incubating female left it, confirming the pair was breeding. As the nest is nearly 3.5 metres high in a *Z. mucronata* bush, we were unable to see the contents, even with a nest mirror. This nest record and photos of it were shared with Cassie Carstens of BLSA, who visited the nest site on 13 October 2025. Later, we received confirmation from Cassie that two nestlings (probably less than a week old) hatched from a 3-egg clutch. The female was not on the nest, and we were somewhat concerned about the survival of the nestlings, as Pied Crows are known to attack

Table 1. Secretarybird nests observed in the Bloemfontein and surrounding areas between 1989 and 2025. Date refers to the day the nestling/s were ringed or the last visit before the nestling/s fledged.

Date	Locality	Nest site	Eggs	Fledged	Reference
1989-12-15	Leeuwraant, Bloemfontein	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	3	2	de Swardt 1990
1991-12-15	Bainsvlei, Bloemfontein	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	3	2	de Swardt 2007
1992-12-15	Biesiesbult, De Brug	<i>Asparagus</i> sp.	3	0	de Swardt 2007
1999-01-29	Kwaggafontein, Bloemfontein	<i>Olea</i> spp	1	1	de Swardt 2007
2000-09-08	Theronsvlakte, Bloemfontein	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	2	2	de Swardt 2007
2000-12-01	Kwaggafontein, Bloemfontein	<i>Olea</i> sp.	2	2	de Swardt 2007
2000-12-13	Hagedsam, Bloemfontein	<i>Olea</i> sp.	2	2	de Swardt 2002
2000-12-14	Soetdoring NR, Soutpan	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	2	2	de Swardt 2007
2002-10-16	Wolverant, Bloemfontein	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	2	2	de Swardt 2007
2006-11-25	Vaalkop, Petrusburg	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	3	3	de Swardt 2007
2009-11-28	Klein Rust Plaats, Bloemfontein	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	2	2	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015
2010-01-11	Ruigtepoort, Fauresmith	<i>Rhus</i> sp.	1	1	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015
2010-02-06	De Dam, Bloemfontein	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	2	1	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015

Date	Locality	Nest site	Eggs	Fledged	Reference
2010-02-06	Bergplaats, Bloemfontein	<i>Olea</i> sp.	2	2	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015
2010-02-10	Winterhoek, Bloemfontein	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	1	1	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015
2010-12-21	Kwaggafontein, Bloemfontein	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	2	2	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015
2011-07-23	Klein Rust Plaats, Bloemfontein	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	2	2	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015
2011-12-13	Heuningberg, Petrusburg	<i>Olea</i> sp.	2	2	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015
2011-12-13	Moseley, Petrusburg	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	2	2	Not ringed (already left nest)
2012-03-22	Cypherfontein, Springfontein *	<i>Rhus</i> sp.	1	1	de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015
2014-01-31	Kroonpoort, Koffiefontein*	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	1	1	Unpublished SAFRING data
2014-11-06	Langfontein, Petrusburg	<i>Vachellia karroo</i>	3	1	de Swardt 2016
2017-10-28	Glengary, Dewetsdorp	<i>Diospyros</i> sp.	2	2	Unpublished SAFRING data
2020-01-27	Klein Rust Plaats, Bloemfontein*	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	2	1	de Swardt 2021
2021-10-30	Nooitgedacht, Jagersfontein	<i>Gymnosporia buxifolia</i>	2	2	Unpublished SAFRING data
2025-12-06	Leeuwraant, Bloemfontein	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	3	2	This study
2025-12-06	Bloubospan, De Brug	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	2	1	This study

very young, unattended nestlings. The third egg seemed to be infertile.

On 8 November 2025, we, assisted by Marie Steenkamp, revisited the nest and, this time, were equipped with a dash camera mounted on aluminium poles to photograph the nest contents (Figure 2). Our initial concerns about the unattended nestlings were allayed when both were found to be present and estimated to be approximately 4 weeks of age. Their black flight feathers were clearly visible and growing, and the blackish crest feathers were also well in brush. The adult was absent, and usually at this age, both adults search for food and deliver food to the nestlings in the nest (which they regurgitate). We left the nest area but returned on 6 December 2025 to ring them. They were now about 9 weeks of age, fully feathered, and weighed 3,010 g and 3,060 g, respectively (Figure 3; Table 2). The infertile egg was collected to be added to the Ornithology Department's egg collection of the

National Museum, Bloemfontein. The egg measured 79.3 mm x 57.8 mm.

**The Bloubospan nest**

Every year in January (summer) and July (winter), DdS participates in the CAR route bird counts, surveying CAR route FS106. This route is from the De Brug silos via Immigrant siding towards the Houthaalberg area near Tafelkop. This area is about 40 kilometres south of Bloemfontein in the Hagesdam area. Secretarybirds were regularly observed along this route and in the surrounding area.

The winter 2025 count was delayed due to unforeseen circumstances, and the survey was conducted on 2 August 2025. As with the Leeuwrant pair, a pair was seen atop a *Z. mucronata* tree (around 8:00) in the Bloubospan area. Since I suspected this pair was breeding, I revisited the area to confirm my suspicion. I also wanted to trace the farm owners to obtain permission to access their property

Table 2. Measurement and mass data of the Secretarybird nestlings ringed on 6 December 2025. All linear measurements are in millimetres (mm) and mass in gram (g).

	Ring nr.	Culmen	Tarsus	Wing	Tail	Mass
Leeuwrant (Soekie)	9A54344	45.3	290.0	478.0	320.0	3,000
Leeuwrant (Kaptein)	9A84771	35.4	255.0	430.0	297.0	3,060
De Brug silos (Sabi)	9A84772	34.9	230.0	335.0	243.0	2,980



Figure 2. Nestling of Leeuwrant nest at the age of 4 weeks on 8 November 2025 ([ML644859182](#)) © Jaco Smith.



Figure 3. Leeuwrant nestlings were ringed at 9 weeks of age on 6 December 2025 ([ML646448378](#)) © Dawie de Swardt.

to monitor the nest (and, for Cassie, who visited the nest on 13 October 2025). Again, nest-building activities were noted in the nest tree, and the pair was observed in the vicinity of the nest. This nest site is about 30 km northwest of the Leeuwrant nest site. After we visited the Leeuwrant nest on 24 September 2025, we headed for the De Brug nest. This nest was also out of reach for our ladder (approximately 4 m high), but we were able to see its contents

(eggs present) using my nest mirror, and breeding was confirmed. Later, before we departed the nest area, we observed the female walking towards the nest and then flying to the nest to continue incubating the eggs (Figure 4). On 13 October 2025, Cassie Carstens also visited the nest to confirm a clutch of two eggs.

On 8 November 2025, we revisited the nest for a follow-up. The female was still on the nest but flew off when we raised the dash

Figure 4. Female returning to nest after nest inspection at the De Brug nest on 24 September 2025. Breeding was confirmed, and the contents could be seen with a nest mirror; the nest was too high for the ladder ([ML642378509](#)) © Dawie de Swardt.



Figure 5. Nestling of De Brug silos nest at an age of about 2 weeks on 8 November 2025 ([ML644859276](#)) © Dawie de Swardt.

camera mounted on the pole above the nest to photograph its contents. There was only one nestling present, approximately 3 weeks of age, as indicated by feathers beginning to go into brush. There was no sign of the second egg, so either the other egg was infertile and never hatched or was broken, discarded, or predated, or both eggs hatched and one

nestling died young. Nevertheless, the nestling fledged successfully. (Figure 5).

On arrival at the nest site on 6 December 2025 to ring this nestling, an adult bird (female?) was standing on the nest and feeding the nestling. It fled the nest and began walking in the grassland. The nestling was ringed and approximately 6 weeks



Figure 6. The De Brug silos nestling ringed at the age of 6 weeks on 6 December 2025 ([ML646448500](#)) © Dawie de Swardt.

of age, but still had downy feathers on its body and crest; the primaries and tail feathers were still growing, and it weighed approximately 2,980 g (Figure 6; Table 2).

### Discussion

Secretarybirds are known to reuse nests in successive years (de Swardt 1990, Dean and Simmons 2005), but this note reports that a nesting tree first documented in 1989 was used 36 years later for the 2025 breeding attempt. The

Leeuwrant *Z. mucronata* nest tree is approximately 800 m from the Bloemfontein–Jagersfontein road and is visible when travelling past by vehicle. Over the years, I conducted numerous SABAP2 surveys along this transect and never observed any Secretarybirds near this particular tree. Also, *Z. mucronata* and *Olea* species are not listed by Dean and Simmons (2005) or Kemp et al. (2020) as nest trees, despite DdS reporting the use of these trees for nesting by

Secretarybirds in earlier reports.

Dean and Simmons (2005) reported data on 21 nest attempts, of which only 10 young fledged (24 eggs laid), yielding a breeding success rate of 41.6%. Over the years (1989–2025), the breeding success of nests observed in Bloemfontein and surrounding areas was about 80% (from 27 nests where 44 nestlings fledged from 55 eggs laid (see Table 2 and references therein). The



Figure 7. A Secretarybird got its foot caught in a fence, patagial tagging project resulting in a slow and agonising death © Ian May. documented some post-fledgling mortality records

(de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015). A young bird found in distress was rehabilitated and fitted with a satellite tracker before release, but was found dead shortly thereafter (de Swardt and van der Westhuizen 2015, de Swardt and Howes-Whitecross 2021).

Secretarybirds are Red Data species and are currently listed as Vulnerable, with an estimated number of mature individuals ranging from 5,584 to 11,166, possibly around 10,000 (Carstens and Rose 2025). These estimates

were primarily derived from analysis of the SABAP2 atlas data. Concerned that their populations are declining, BirdLife South Africa initiated a project on this species to monitor individuals by fitting satellite trackers to selected nestlings and to monitor nest sites by building a nest database countrywide (Whitecross et al., 2019; C. Carstens, personal communication). A few of these were done on Free State birds, which are listed in Table 1. The major threats to this species are

collisions with fences in grasslands (Figure 7), collisions with power lines and wind farm turbines, habitat loss in grasslands, and disturbances at nest sites (Carstens and Rose 2025).

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# MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

## Demography and Populations: Life Span and Survivorship Cape Batis longevity record - correction

Since I published my note on a longevity record of the Cape Batis in *The Lark* 61 (Engelbrecht 2025), I was made aware of an error in the AFRING database that resulted in incorrect longevity records. This has since been corrected, and the record I reported is, in fact, the 7<sup>th</sup>-longest longevity record. The longest record is 13 yr, 1 mo, 7 d, an adult male ringed and recaptured at Buzzard Mountain Retreat in the Soutpansberg (Paijmans et al. 2019). There are three longevity records exceeding 10 years: the second and third longest are 12 yr, 0 mo, 20 d, and 10 yr, 2 mo, 4 d, respectively.

*Acknowledgements.* I wish to thank Dieter Oschadleus for drawing my attention to the error.

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Daniel Engelbrecht • [danielengelbrecht101@gmail.com](mailto:danielengelbrecht101@gmail.com) (received 15 November 2025).

## Sounds and Vocal Behaviour: Vocalisations Dusky Lark vocalisations on the nonbreeding grounds

Dusky lark vocalisations include a flight song, a soft foraging call described as *wek wek wek*, and a flight call *chuk* or *churruck*. On 25 December 2025, I came upon a pair in the Hoedspruit Wildlife Estate and was able to follow them for ~30 min. During this time, they never vocalised audibly, despite me being at a distance of ~15 m for most of the time. At one point, both flushed and perched in a tree where at least one of the birds called a soft *dzju* call. After a while they landed in a clearing about 30 m away and resumed their foraging. One of the birds was chasing an insect it flushed in a short, low flight, and during the very brief chase, it uttered a harsh, scolding *trrrrrrrt*.

Derek Engelbrecht • [faunagalore@gmail.com](mailto:faunagalore@gmail.com) (received 26 December 2025).

**Diet and Foraging: Diet**

**African Green Pigeon eating leaves of *Senegalia burkei***

African Green Pigeon is primarily a frugivore, but dry seeds, small pieces of flesh, and the dried blood from a Nyala carcass have also been reported (see Dean 2005). These are very rare events though. On 19 November 2025, I observed a pair loafing in a Black Monkey Thorn *Senegalia burkei* in my garden. Although they have been garden birds for many years, I have never seen any African Green Pigeons in this tree. At one point I noticed one bird plucking at the fresh leaves of the tree, and then started stripping a few leaves off, and eating it. Both birds were seen eating the leaves. This seems to be the first record of folivory in African Green Pigeon.

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ABOVE One of the African Green Pigeons busy stripping the fresh leaves off and eating them © Derek Engelbrecht.

**Diet and Foraging: Food Capture and Consumption**

**Red-billed Oxpecker taking alates**

Oxpeckers are known to get almost all their food from their hosts, but they do occasionally hawk termite alates or catch invertebrates flushed by their hosts. On 26 November 2025, I saw a group of Red-billed Oxpeckers hawking emerging termite alates, but also simply perching on a dead branch and catch them as they pass. One bird lost its balance while trying to catch a passing alate, and ended up hanging upside down on its perch. I should also add that they are equally clumsy at hawking as they are snapping at mobile prey.

Derek Engelbrecht • [faunagalore@gmail.com](mailto:faunagalore@gmail.com) (received 18 November 2025).



ABOVE A Red-billed Oxpecker catching alates as they pass © Derek Engelbrecht.



RIGHT The bird in the photo above lost its balance leaning too far forward in his efforts to catch an alate, but regained some dignity by doing a full forward roll © Derek Engelbrecht.



**Interesting sightings**  
**16 October 2025 - 15 December 2025**

Share your interesting sightings seen within the Limpopo Province.

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

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

COMPILED BY Derek Engelbrecht

**NON-PASSERINES**

**Abdim's Stork** - 26 November 2025. Several at Soetdorings (Leonie Kellerman).

**Black Cuckoo** - 23 November 2025. Returning migrant at Soetdorings (Leonie Kellerman).

**European Roller** - 25 November 2025. A pair was seen near the Sand River bridge on the Soetdorings road (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**Great Spotted Cuckoo** - 12 November 2025. One in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).



European Roller © Daniel Engelbrecht

**Levaillant's Cuckoo** - 21 November 2025. One in Bendor (Susan Dippenaar)

**Red-chested Cuckoo** - 16 October 2025. Returning migrant in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Saddle-billed Stork** - 25 November 2025. A juvenile seen in the Polokwane Game Reserve (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**Woodland Kingfisher** - 18 November 2025. Returning migrant in Welgelegen. In 3 of the last 5 years it returned on 18 November (Derek Engelbrecht).

**PASSERINES**

**Orange-breasted Waxbill** - 27 November 2025. A small flock seen at the Eduan Park wetland (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**Red-backed Shrike** - 19 September 2025. One seen near Nobody east of Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Yellow Canary** - 27 November 2025. A pair seen at Eduan Park wetland (Derek Engelbrecht).



Saddle-billed Stork © Daniel Engelbrecht



Woodland Kingfisher © Derek Engelbrecht



Orange-breasted Waxbill © Daniel Engelbrecht

**BEST OF THE REST**  
**LIMPOPO PROVINCE**

**NON-PASSERINES**

**Caspian Plover** - 21 November 2025. A single individual was seen at the Mooiplaas Waterhole in the northern Kruger National Park (Ankia Pusey).



Yellow Canary © Derek Engelbrecht

**Dwarf Bittern** - 10 December 2025. One seen at Khaya Ndlovu, Hoedspruit (Simon Price).

**Eurasian Whimbrel** - One seen at Kambaku Lodge, Balule Game Reserve (David Lubbe).

**Harlequin Quail** - 7 December 2025. One heard calling in the Hoedspruit Wildlife Estate (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Three-banded Courser** - 29 November 2025. One seen at Stockpoort (Erik van der Walt); 11 December 2025. Seen at Marataba in the Marakele National Park ([SA Rare Bird News Report - 11 December 2025](#)).

**White-throated Bee-eater** - 11 December 2025. One seen at the Selati Game Reserve (Alan Webster).

PASSERINES

**Common Starling** - 27 November 2025. One seen near Shingwedzi in the Kruger National Park ([SA Rare Bird News Report - 1 December 2025](#)).

**Golden Pipit** - 5 December 2025. One seen south of Klopperfontein on the H1-8 in northern Kruger National Park ([SA Rare Bird News Report - 08 December 2025](#)).

**Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark** - 27 November 2024. At least seven individuals near Klopperfontein in the Kruger National Park ([SA Rare Bird News Report - 27 November 2025](#)).



Dwarf Bittern © Simon Price



Eurasian Whimbrel © David Lubbe



Three-banded Courser © Erik van der Walt



White-throated Bee-eater © Alan Webster



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/>



9 September 2025  
 Percent of target reached: 41.6%  
 Sponsored Hectares: 12,489 ha  
 Sponsors: 2569

4 November 2025  
 Percent of target reached: 42.3%  
 Sponsored Hectares: 12817 ha  
 Sponsors: 2587

# UPCOMING EVENTS



## Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting and AGM

Date: 3 February 2026

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

## Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting

Date: 3 March 2026

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

## Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting

Date: 7 April 2026

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

### Club outing

Where? Wolkberg  
Date: 10 January 2026  
Contact: Richter van Tonder  
Cell: 082 213 8276



**Shopping list:** The ever-popular Wolkberg outing is ideal to start off your birding year with Tree Pipit probably the most sought-after. Other specials include Gurney's Sugarbird, Nicholson's Pipit, Striped Pipit, Buff-streaked Chat, Cape Rock Thrush, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Red-winged Francolin, Cape Bunting, and many more.

### Club outing

Where? Van Waveren Farm  
Date: 14 February 2026  
Contact: Richter van Tonder  
Cell: 082 213 8276



**Shopping list:** This is one of those places where you can expect the unexpected. It's a relatively new venue on our calendar, but past outings delivered European Honey Buzzard, Black Stork, Cape Grassbird, African Wattled Lapwing, lots of waders and waterfowl, Banded Martin, Cuckoo-finch, Levallant's Cisticola, and Short-clawed Lark, to name a few.

# 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.



Trumpeter Hornbills allopreening © Hugh Chittenden.