



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER 19–FEBRUARY 2014

Secretarybird Project Wakkerstroom By: Eleen Strydom (AKA The Secretarybird Lady)

Wakkerstroom is not only famous for its birds, but is also one of the six remaining areas where one can find the Vulnerable Secretarybird. For this reason Tshwane University of Technology (Department Nature Conservation) and BirdLife South Africa came together to start this project. On the 5th of November 2013, I started the Secretarybird Project. The objectives of this study are to study the diet, productivity and nesting success.

Wakkerstroom with its four seasons in one day and sometimes inaccessible roads was not at all what I expected. To say the least, the kick-off of the project, like the roads, was rather bumpy. The first nest on my study list was on Gary Lavarack's farm. Unfortunately this nest failed just before the eggs had been expected to hatch. A second potential nest close to Zaaihoek Dam collapsed in a storm. To top this all off, I discovered a third nest with two deceased birds underneath it. Just as I started to lose all hope, Glen Ramke and Marius van Rensburg helped me to locate my first active nest, complete with two eggs. One of these eggs has hatched. The chick is alive and healthy and on the 17th of January 2014, at seven weeks old, it has been fitted with a tracker by Ernst Retief from BirdLife South Africa. We can now determine the movements of this juvenile and receive valuable information on its distribution.

The two weeks of constant rain at the end of November kept me out of the farms. With a heavy, drenched heart I went back to Pretoria in December. On my return in 2014, I found that the sun can indeed shine in Wakkerstroom and that made my monitoring so much easier. To my delight, I discovered that one of my inactive nests became active over December 2013. This nest boasts three very healthy and beautiful chicks. To date I have thus found seven nests in total.



3 beautiful Secretarybird chicks

I am curious of what 2014 has in store for me and the Secretarybirds in beautiful Wakkerstroom.



Secretarybird juvenile fitted with a tracking device

The weather may be unpredictable in this quaint little town, but the same cannot be said for its people. When those dark clouds pull in over the village, one can be sure that the characters in town will fill the sky with the most interesting colours. I can always expect a helping hand or a friendly nod wherever I go.

A warm word of thanks to the locals and the farmers for all their support, wine, advice and unconditional friendship. I have been welcomed into the community from my first day and I am looking forward to the rest of the study period. I would also like to thank Tshwane University of Technology and BirdLife South Africa for this wonderful opportunity.

To report any sightings of Secretarybirds in the Greater Wakkerstroom area contact me at [072 563 2738](tel:0725632738) or strydomme@tut.ac.za

The recent CAR Count – Judy-Lynn Wheeler, (CAR Wakkerstroom Precinct Coordinator)"

"Greetings Everyone,

Thank you to all CAR participants for getting "out there" and counting. Your dedication to this project allows accumulation of data which, when collated, is showing significant changes in expanding rural development/expanding crop fields/new plantations and mining operations.

Whilst the above factors play a critical role, the additional factor of unusual weather patterns contribute to increases/decreases in our figures.

A general overview over the past four summer counts is showing that the species are still there. The added species of Black-shouldered Kite/Jackal Buzzard/Steppe Buzzard/Cape Crow/Long Crested Eagle boost the number of overall birds seen, but, if we subtract these species, then this summer the recorded numbers are low.

The birding you do, whether for Atlassing or pleasure is vitally important to monitor the avian/habitat changes and I would ask that you all continue to submit your findings to the relevant projects, whatever they may be, on a regular basis.



Cape Crow (Wikipedia)

For those who were at the CAR briefing on Friday 24th January 2014, you are aware of my concerns regarding the numbers of Black-shouldered Kite counted country wide during winter (end July 2013). Our Field Guides state that this bird is a resident, common grassveld bird.

Note the numbers for this bird for summer (end January 2014). Only 3 (three) routes counted BSKT's (Quantity 7 birds) – against 6 (six) routes in winter 2013 (Quantity 20 birds). Most certainly we have to take into consideration that the birds are breeding/females on eggs.

Oops! Lost a BSKT to a truck on the road to Volksrust! If this was one of a breeding pair – bang goes this breeding cycle.



Rufous- chested Sparrowhawk (Wikipedia)

Of further interest, I have been studying on my plot, for the past 3 years, the inter-relationships between a pair of resident/breeding Cape Crow: resident/breeding Black Sparrowhawk: Resident/breeding Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk: resident/breeding Black-shouldered Kite: Visiting African Harrier Hawk.

The Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk does not involve itself in confrontations. The bird soars overhead or flies through but Pied Starlings take alarm and give chase and the raptor quickly moves out of the area.

The Cape Crows harass the BSKT nest site daily from early dawn but the female sits tight while the male threatens vocally.

The Black Sparrowhawk hates the Cape Crow and vice-versa. Aerial combat occurs. Black Sparrowhawk harasses the Cape Crow nest sites often, at speed and encourages its offspring to do the same. Losses of Cape Crow have NOT been noted. Cape Crow have successfully raised 2 to 3 chicks a season.

However, the Black Sparrowhawk has killed a BSKT juvenile as it left the nest for the first time. The BSKT juvenile just does not have the speed or strength against a Black Sparrowhawk .

Just to paint you a picture: 1km from me (towards V/Rust) is a breeding pair of Black Sparrowhawks. I have a pair of Black Sparrowhawk on my farm. 4kms from me (In Wakkerstroom) is a breeding pair of Black Sparrowhawks And these are the breeding pairs I know of.

John Burchmore and I birded Luneburg for CAR count. As we completed our count we found a stunning specimen of BSKT sitting on the wire. Not 20metres past this bird we encountered a Black Sparrowhawk foraging in the GRASS!



Black Sparrowhawk feeding on a Red-eyed Dove (Wikipedia)

There appears to be little in the line of raptors that will tangle with a Black Sparrowhawk. They are superfast and hunt before dawn and after dusk. I have monitored this bird going back to the nesting/roosting site, with my binoculars, but it's been almost dark and the raptor barely visible. Doves make easy prey for the Black Sparrowhawk and are my breeding pair's main source of prey. Common Shrike is often preyed upon.

It doesn't pay to be caught napping or to flash too much white while there's a Black Sparrowhawk around!

Warning: Please do not go searching for nest sites without experience with this raptor. The will attack humans/dogs if too close to

a nest site.

The African Harrier -Hawk will try its best to take nestlings from the Cape Crows but can't compete with the mobbing and bills of the Cape Crow. The Cape Crow will continue to harass a perched African Harrier- Hawk until it flies from the area. It also plays havoc with Hadeda Ibis chicks and often preys upon them despite the mobbing.

On Saturday evening, I witnessed the interaction between the male BSKT and two Southern Crowned Cranes. My BSKT's are breeding and the female is sitting on eggs just off the top of a pine tree. The cranes chose this spot to roost. The female BSKT tucked her head in and sat tight while the male BSKT hammered the cranes, screeching furiously. The cranes almost toppled from their perch with the onslaught with wings spread trying to regain their balance. Their raucous displeasure was LOUD. This went on for 10 minutes or so before the cranes flew off and the male BSKT perched next to his mate. Quite an amazing sight!



Black Shouldered Kite

Now that you have a bit of background, we – the Bird Club and any interested parties - will be researching the following birds in our area: Black-shouldered Kite, Black Sparrowhawk and Cape Crow. Within the next two weeks there will be a pentad board at BLSA which we will control using data submitted through CAR counts/Atlassing/Bird outings and sightings

I firmly believe there is a correlation between these 3 species and would like to build a local data base in order to monitor this. Please watch out for these 3 species in particular, giving attention to the date and accurate place of sighting.

Many thanks for your assistance.

New members since the last Newsletter:

We welcome Daphne Pyott, Glenn Ramke and Adriaan Botma to the Club.

Outing for March

We're doing our usual trip to the Vlei on Saturday, 1 March 2014, meeting at the bridge on the Amersfoort Road at 07h00.

Bring the usual accoutrements.

Judy-Lynn has still not been able to confirm the outing to Hunt Essentials and therefore, the outing in March will be birding along the Jantjieshoek road just outside Wakkerstroom. We will give more details later on.

Interesting Local Sightings

Graham Spencer – On Saturday 25th January, this year, I took a walk to the vlei at about 6.30 am. I sat on the crash barrier on the Amersfoort road where we usually have the monthly gathering of avid birders. During a stay of 30 minutes I was rewarded with some really nice sightings.

2 Crowned Cranes in the long grass on the other side of the vlei - a further 3 Crowned Cranes then flew over the first 2. Next was a Little Bittern quite close on the near side of the vlei on the edge of the reeds. Then a Purple Heron a bit further out in the reeds and in a pose which was strikingly similar to a Pointer dog doing what he does best! (I particularly liked the one leg raised!) Next up was a group of about 6 or 8 Whiskered Terns giving a lovely aerobatic display over the water. As I was about to leave, the finale was another group of Crowned Cranes (possibly 6 or 8) flying over the road. Of course, interspersed with all these, it goes without saying that there were the usual swallows, warblers, weavers etc

All in all a fascinating start to the day.

Brian Guerin was pleased to see a group of about 36 South African Shelduck on the near side of the vlei, quite close to the Amersfoort road bridge. He drove on slowly and then heard more of them calling and flying to join the first group. I reversed to my original position and was amazed to count at least 74 of these colourful water birds.

On a short visit to Drummond Hide this week Brian Guerin and I recorded Hottentot Teal and African Snipe, which were not recorded since Week 51 and Week 49 respectively. We also saw Black Crake which has also been scarce of late. - John Burchmore.

Our outing to the Newcastle Ponds A splendid outing to Newcastle in the morning of 8 February 2014 in conjunction with BLNN (Birdlife Northern Natal) on a very warm day.

They showed us around a large area, mostly on Arcelor Mittal's property. We recorded some 56 species on the outing, including Greater and Lesser Flamingo, Ruff and the smaller female, the Reeve, Cape Teal with young, White-faced Duck, Fulvous Duck, Black-winged Stilt and a number of birds we don't commonly see around "our ponds". Many thanks to Rina Pretorius and the other member of BLNN who showed us around. We will be back.



Female Ruff i.e. a Reeve

Bees :

During this week the club received an urgent request for assistance to remove a swarm of bees from Kairos Retreat, in town, otherwise they were to be exterminated. After chasing up all the avenues we could think of we came up empty. Even a call to the nearest vet yielded nothing. With our bees in their current predicament this situation has likely turned in to extermination for this swarm. If anybody knows of a local bee-keeper or person experienced with bees who would be prepared to help, we would like to have that person's name on record. We again make a plea for anyone who knows of a beekeeper to contact Estelle Corns at Kairos Retreat. (0824604175)

Bird of the Month.

Red-chested Flufftail.

Scientific Name/Meaning: *Sarothrura rufa*, *Sarotron* = Greek – a broom or brush; *ura* – a tail. *rufa* = Latin, red.

General: One of five local species whose closest relatives are the rallids i.e. rails, crakes and gallinules. Only two species occur in our area, this and the even more elusive White-winged Flufftail.

Description: Small, 15-17cm and weighing about 37g. They are the only rallids in which colour differences (or sexual dimorphism) between males and females occur. The adult male's head, neck, mantle and breast are a deep rufous red, the rest of the upperparts are black with white streaks turning to spots nearer the tail. Adult females are black to brownish black and heavily spotted brown, see picture. Usually best located by its call, described as a short, high-pitched hoot, often rising in pitch.

Status/Conservation: Considered "not globally threatened" but no doubt under pressure from loss of its freshwater, marshy habitat. This bird has not yet been recorded in our Pentad Survey, also good reason to go out and look (listen?) for them!

Food : They eat a wide variety of food items, earthworms, crustaceans, spiders and insects. Grass seeds may form a portion of their diet in winter; it is believed that the hard seeds help to grinding other food matter.

Habitat : As mentioned, freshwater and marshy conditions, and require permanent dense cover. They seem to prefer areas of mud, firm ground or short vegetation for foraging.

Breeding : Mostly September to March, occasionally May in South Africa. Red-chested Flufftails are monogamous when breeding and the pair-bond may be seasonal or permanent. They are very territorial when breeding with the males defending the nest with hisses and growls. 2-3 eggs are laid and incubation starts when the last egg is laid, the males incubate by day, the females by night. The eggs hatch together and the chicks are precocial i.e. hatched at an advanced physical stage and able to move and leave the nest shortly thereafter thus requiring minimal adult care.

ATLASSING PENTADS AROUND WAKKERSTROOM. - John and Penny Burchmore

Penny and I started with the **Lynx Bird Ticks** app during November 2012. We used the map at the back of the "Wakkerstroom bird and nature guide" by Warwick and Michéle Tarboton, to locate the pentads in our area, which I then marked on the large map at The Crow's Nest. I then transferred this information onto the relevant maps on the back page of the guide, and laminated the two pages. We use this to assist us to find the pentads in our area that have not been covered, according to SABAP 2 information.

When we started a new pentad we gave it a name relating to a specific landmark in the area, remembering a name was easier than the pentad co-ordinates. Up to the end of December 2013, we had completed 47 full protocol cards covering 25 pentads and have recorded 305 birds.

Some of our highlights were: a Black Harrier seen on the 4 June 2013 and another on the 23 May 2013. Verreaux's Eagle was seen on the 3 September 2013, African Crowned Eagle on the 21 November 2012, and Black Winged Lapwing on 11 November 2013. Secretarybirds were seen in 8 different pentads and Denham's Bustard and Yellow-breasted Pipit on 22 October 2013. Olive Pigeons on 11 June 2013 and 26 September 2013.

During the winter months, there seemed to be a decrease in the numbers of African Pipit, African Wattled Lapwing, Banded Martin and Yellow-billed Egrets. However, there was a definite increase in, Red-capped and Spike-heeled Larks, and Cape Buntings in the pentads.



Picture by Wikipedia

More on the Grey Crowned Crane

It was a sad day for the Wakkerstroom residents last Sunday when the Grey Crowned Crane family that for six weeks had successfully fed and protected their young of, an incredible **four chicks, lost them all**. A number of people had seen them all on Saturday but on Sunday – nothing! Many people knew of and had seen them and were constantly watching for them and reporting sightings.

These cranes normally have between 1 and 2 chicks and sometimes three but *four* is very unusual and it was quite amazing, considering their historic breeding site so close to roads and houses (let's not forget that a pair of Crownies have probably nested in *that* place since long before humans lived in Wakkerstroom!!) that after six weeks they still had the four chicks and we had high hopes that the seldom heard of would happen and they would all fledge.



If the chicks had disappeared “naturally” it would have probably been one at a time but this was all four in one fell swoop – which points to human interference and makes it even more difficult to accept. Grey Crowned Cranes are losing ground in other African countries but here in South Africa we are doing a good job in containing our populations and something like this is very disappointing. - By Glenn Ramke

Talk on Antarctica – The last great wilderness by Special Guest Speaker, Claudia Holgate.

This talk will interest birders and non-birders alike as you are taken on a journey to the last great wilderness. This harsh, unforgiving environment is also one of the most biologically productive regions on earth, supporting millions of birds from the magnificent Wandering Albatross to the amazing, comical penguins. All life in the Antarctic needs to be specially adapted to survive in these extreme conditions, so the talk will touch on some of the adaptations and fascinating life histories of Antarctic Wildlife, against the setting of iceberg sculptures and calving glaciers. Antarctica is a destination that touches everyone who visits, as the raw, pristine beauty cannot be adequately described, nor captured on film, it needs to be experienced. This talk will, however, bring you closer to experiencing the most amazing place on the planet.

Join the Wakkerstroom Bird Club for this interesting presentation on

Date: 21 March 2014.

Venue: BirdLife, Wakkerstroom

Time: 17:30 for 18:00

Cost: R20:00 per person

(All funds raised will go to Projects of the Wakkerstroom Bird Club)



Claudia Holgate Bio:

Claudia's love for birds started at a young age and at 15 she started training as a bird ringer. She was one of the first women in South Africa to qualify as a fully fledged ringer more than 24 years ago. After a varied existence, where she qualified for the Olympics in Fencing, worked for Provincial government, managed a water project for the United Nations, managed the Greening of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, ran an environmental consultancy and worked as an academic, she made a life changing decision. She now works for six months of the year as a polar guide (Lecturing in climatology and ornithology) on expedition ships to the Arctic and Antarctic (And some of the bits in between). Her other job is as Environmental Manager for the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), where she is responsible for environmental management, operations and inter-governmental relations for Antarctic Tourism. When in South Africa, she also works as an operational Advanced Life Support paramedic and instructor of advanced life support courses. Of course, every minute of spare time is spent birding, Wakkerstroom being one of her favourite birding hangouts.

Claudia holds an MSc and Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, is an Adjunct Research Associate in the School of Geosciences at Monash University (Melbourne) and is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Wakkerstroom Pentad Survey Report, February 2014 :

Since our report in the January newsletter (Number 18) the total number of species recorded has risen to 190. This is a creditable number in this small area, increased obviously due to the number of species occurring on the vlei. Additions were Common Peacock (ugh!), White-winged Flufftail which was ringed at the vlei and Black Kite.

Please remember that we are also attempting to log the mammal species seen in the pentad (see the reverse of the Survey Checklist).

This survey will be a valuable research initiative on completion and is already being used for SABAP 2, the MyBirdPatch project and will be used for the upcoming Black-shouldered Kite monitoring project. - Brian Guerin

JOHN BARROW - EDITOR