



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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Trip Report.

Kempenveldt Vulture Restaurant, near Dundee, Saturday March 16th '13.

Was the 4am start worth it?

"The best outing we've ever had". "Great to see three species of Vultures together". "What an incredibly good Hide, best I've ever seen". "The reflection of the Sunrise in the lake at Hattingspruit was worth the early rise".

These were just a few of the comments from the 15 members that attended the outing. We were a little concerned about the early start but members rose (pardon the pun) to the occasion and all set off cheerfully for the 2 hour journey to the farm. The hide, which looks as if it could have been built by a Hobbit, resembles a large rock and blends in with the terrain beautifully. Inside the hide had ample seating, large picture windows, and a camera section with openings for lenses etc. and most important, a kitchen and a toilet.

We arrived to find about 50 vultures immediately in front of the hide about 30 meters away with a further 100 + in the trees on either side. They were predominantly Cape Vultures with a few White-backed Vultures and about 10 Lappet-faced Vultures. This gave us a good opportunity to compare the different species and to closely observe their behaviour and feeding habits. There was much squabbling amongst the Vultures and also with a small group of Crows. Interestingly there was a single Sacred Ibis that they took not the slightest interest in and, as an added bonus, a Tawny Eagle preening itself in a nearby tree.

Was the early start worth it? It most certainly was. Will we go again? Yes, it's already on the list for next year!



A.M VLEI WALK – 2 MARCH

Saturday morning's weather turned out more pleasant than expected given the heavy rain during the week. Birding again didn't look too promising considering the high water levels we have experienced during most of the summer. Surprise, surprise when we ticked 59 species, exceeding our "record" of 54 on December 1st 2012. An analysis of the monthly totals will be revealing. Not many chicks – a pair of Common Moorhens with 2 sub-adult birds as "helpers" (probably from their previous brood), with 4 little black balls of fluff walking on the vegetation was a nice sight. The Grey Crowned Cranes are successfully raising their lone chick.

Bird of the day would undoubtedly be the Horus Swift that Ann Cleal saw and John and Penny Burchmore were also able to see it. Some people have all the luck!

Don't forget the next walk is on Saturday April 6th!

Meetings and Outings for April

6th April '13. Saturday. Our Monthly Vlei Walk. Meet on the Amersfoort Rd Bridge at 7am. Always very interesting, this time we should see if the migrants are on their way back from whence they came!

9th April '13 Tuesday. Outing to Fickland's Pan. Meet Wakkerstroom Library 7am.

This will be our first outing to "other side of the Pan". Not to be missed.

17th April '13. Wednesday. Film Evening. "Travelling Birds". BirdLife Centre Wakkerstroom

Meet at 17h30 for Coffee and a Chat. Film starts promptly at 18h00. This very good film about bird migration has not been shown in SA.

Ornithological Observations – or OO for short!

OO is an electronic journal published by BirdLife South Africa and the Animal Demography Unit of Cape Town University. There are now some 75 papers in the four editions that are on line. This journal is specifically for the publication of contributions by Citizen Scientists (that's you and me!) on interesting bird related observations.

The latest edition reports on the **Nesting habits of Southern Bald using artificial nest sites**, a bird that members of the WBC have been involved with monitoring for many years. The paper by Kate Henderson and co-authors is of particular interest because it details the use of sites that are characterised by significant levels of human disturbance. The photographs show the various sites that are so different to the sites we monitor every year.

The paper can be read on line or Downloaded from <http://oo.adu.org.za/content>

The Animal Demography Unit, formerly called the Avian Demography Unit, has a most interesting, must visit, Website.

Go to <http://adu.org.za> for information on the many projects that the "Citizen Scientist" can take part in.

COLLECTIVE NOUNS

Strange how apt some of these are! They were originally published in The Swazi News, Saturday 12th December 1962 and recently appeared in a Friends of Nylsvley Newsletter. Thank you, Marion.

A zip of Flycatchers

A junction of Rails

A double-tot of Twinspots

A synod of Bishops

A yawn of Openbills

A ladder of Steppe Buzzards

A harem of Moorhens

A welly of Booted Eagles

A reef of Knots

A hula of Hoopoes

A loom of Weavers

A fright of White faced Ducks

A duster of Flufftails

A herd of Bulbuls

A crick of Wrynecks
A kellog of Corncrakes
A cleavage of Tits

A regatta of Dabchicks
A parliament of Dikkops

If anyone has any more, let us know. We'll publish them too.

WHITE-THROATED SWALLOWS – BRIAN GUERIN

Some weeks ago I took a series of pictures from the WOW Hide of White-throated Swallows feeding three young. The action was hectic during the time I spent watching with the adults returning over and over with tasty morsels for the hungry mouths. An adult took mere seconds to deliver the food and leave to gather the next course.



These birds are multi-brooded in South Africa and the same pair may raise broods from several nests at the same time in rotation, making these attractive little birds truly hard working parents!

Bird of the Month

Whiskered Tern

General

Terns belong to the Suborder LARI, and the family Laridae along with Skuas and Gulls. Skuas and gulls usually have strong bills, hooked at the tip whereas terns have pointed bills. Terns have slender bodies with forked tails, tails wedge shaped in skuas and rounded in gulls. Food gathering differences also appear; skuas favour piracy, gulls scavenging whereas terns usually acquire their food by diving or plucking their food from the surface. Gulls and skuas are essentially marine birds (the Grey-headed Gull however will breed inland, e.g. on Vaal Dam) whilst the Whiskered and White-winged terns are widespread inland.



Description : The size, black cap, strong bill (29-34mm in males, 25-27mm and stubbier in females) and more positive flight recall Common or Arctic Tern but the short, forked-looking tail and dark grey breeding plumage above and below are typical marsh tern characteristics. The summer adult has white cheeks and red legs and bill. The call is a harsh *krekk*

Status: Fairly common resident, nomadic according to conditions.

Red Data Book Stats :Not Threatened

Scientific Name: Chlidonias hybrida (hybrida because it was originally considered a hybrid between Black and Common Terns).

Threats: Not threatened. Cattle can be major cause of disturbance, especially at the pre-laying stage, when nests will probably be abandoned.

Habitat: An essentially inland species (as is White-winged Tern) preferring marshes, vleis etc. for breeding but will also forage over estuaries.

Diet: The whiskered Tern eats small fish, amphibians,

insects and crustaceans.

Breeding: Nest usually on floating or emergent vegetation, usually 2-3 eggs, breeding success is considered low. Adults defend nests aggressively, even attacking humans and dive-bombing cattle.

Opportunity: These birds will breed on farm dams if conditions are right and if there is no disturbance from domestic stock. This elegant and dashing bird is a master of flight and a joy to observe around our area.



More on the Wattled Crane

You will remember that the Wattled Crane was our Bird of the Month in our last Newsletter. We've now got more information from John McAllister on this fascinating bird.

“As you may know Wattled Cranes are on the South African Red Data List - Birds. They really are a species looking for extinction - in South Africa at least. Here they have developed into the ultimate habitat specialists. Not only are they high altitude grassland specialists, but they specialise in grassy wetlands within the highly threatened grassland biome for breeding purposes.

They are very fussy about which grassy wetland they breed in as well. Generally they are isolated grasslands where the disturbance levels are absolutely minimal. Wetlands that I know of that have been deserted were close to a main roads (and in one case a railway line) near Dullstroom, crop fields encroaching on wetlands (Dullstroom, Draaikraal, Amsterdam, Wakkerstroom) and even disturbance by birders (and researchers) has been alleged. In addition to being isolated the wetland has to be grassy not reedy. It should be reasonably open so that the brooding bird's view is not impaired, but too much open water is also not good. It has to have a sizable pool of open water for their moated nests, i.e. the nests are built in the middle of the pool and are surrounded by water. The water cannot be too deep as the nests are fixed to the pool floor and are not floating nests like many other pool nesters. I have never seen them fly onto a nest and they always seem to wade through the water to reach or leave the nest so this is another consideration on the depth, although I have seen cranes swimming across a stretch of deep water. It must also be deep enough to deter mammalian predators like mongooses and jackals.

Apart from their fussiness in choosing breeding sites there are a number of other features that makes one wonder how much longer our wetlands will be graced by these beautiful creatures. Firstly the birds mate for life. Hardly a dangerous trait I hear you say. Well if you are a highly threatened species this can be a problem. When your mate dies you often sit around moping and refuse to take a new mate. A wonderful trait if you're a human and there are too many of us anyway, but a terrible idea if you are a South African Wattled Crane and your numbers are dwindling to dangerously low levels. To compound this problem a Wattled Crane pair takes ownership of their chosen wetland and always return to it to breed. Not a bad thing I hear you say. Well remember that suitable wetlands are in quite short supply so when one of the birds die not only does the remaining partner refuse to take a new mate, but he (or she) defends the wetland against all newcomers that may pitch up and so prevents them from breeding as well.

Another huge problem is that the chick cannot fly until after it has reached full adult size by which time it is around eight months old. This means that large youngsters are easy prey for a range of mammals from jackals and dogs to protein-starved humans. There have been quite a few tales of birds being hunted and although most of them remain anecdotal and perhaps apocryphal the possibility of birds meeting their end in this way is obviously pretty good. Poisoning, whether deliberate or accidental, has been the

cause of a lot of crane deaths in the past, but this threat has doubtlessly receded as people become more aware of the value of these birds both aesthetically and economically.

Studies of ringed birds have revealed that Wattled Cranes only start breeding when they are around nine years old. This means that the birds have to survive for quite a long time before they will start producing offspring. Once they start breeding they often lay two and sometimes three eggs. Unlike Grey Crowned and Blue Cranes, Wattled Cranes desert the nest as soon as the first chick hatches so they only raise one youngster each breeding season. This would be a wonderful trait among humans (in my opinion anyway), but among Wattled Cranes it is a recipe for disaster. I doubt if there are as many as 100 breeding pairs (and perhaps another 50 or so floaters or non-breeding birds) left in South Africa, but I have been out of birding conservation for some years now so my knowledge may be dated. With such low population levels when one Wattled Crane dies that represents a significant part of the South African population and with such a slow breeding rate I'm afraid that the birds are on a slippery downward slide into extinction.

While it is true that the excess eggs can be (and often are) harvested and incubated remember the low resistance that Wattled Cranes have to disturbance that I mentioned earlier. Cranes also have a notorious penchant for imprinting on their breeders and this is particularly so in the case of Wattled Cranes. In spite of elaborate measures on behalf of the breeders and caregivers they still often imprint on humans and can thus never be truly wild birds again. A male Wattled Crane raised at the International Crane Foundation's centre at Baraboo, Wisconsin was flown out to South Africa and released onto Memel Nature Reserve, where there were two female birds some time ago. These female birds regularly laid eggs which of course never hatched. It was hoped that the male bird would resolve the situation. For whatever reason the females left Memel after this introduction and never returned.

A captive breeding station was established at Vellore Vallei Nature Reserve some years ago and adult birds were released on breeding wetlands that had previously held Wattled Cranes. To the best of my knowledge none of these birds survived. I believe that the captive breeding effort here has since been abandoned.

So the next time you see these beautiful birds be aware of just how privileged you are. Your grandchildren are only likely to be able to see them in you photographs."

Dr Austin Roberts

Austin Roberts, (1883-1948) the author of *Birds of South Africa*, first published in 1940, in his career at the Transvaal Museum (as it was then known) suffered considerable financial hardship as the Museum was underfunded and his formal qualification were not sufficient to move him up the pay scale. As a result, he frequently applied for salary reviews, most of which were too modest to help for long.



One day, a family friend sent him a copy of an article from the November 1924 edition of *Popular Mechanics* magazine. This gave details of a foot-high model of a policeman, whose arms were raised and lowered from a control on the dashboard, indicating the driver's intention to turn left or right or stop. The Yellow Car Company offered 50 thousand US Dollars for a perfected version

Dr Roberts was moved to design his own version of the "Turning Device" for fitting to the sides of a car and which utilized a padded box to receive the arms and protect them when not in use. This was successfully patented in South Africa, Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. He realised that many other countries had a need for such a device but could not raise the necessary finance.

It seems that his patent found little acceptance in the market and did nothing to ease his financial position

There we go! We hope you enjoy this newsletter.

The Committee