



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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CONTROLLED BURN IN THE WETLAND – John Burchmore

On Tuesday 14th October, a controlled burn was successfully carried out near the bridge on the right hand side of the Amersfoort road, next to the poplars.

In this specific area there is some Salt Marsh Rush, *Juncus kraussii* (incema Zulu). The thin strong stem of this reed is one of the favourite weaving materials in KwaZulu–Natal, especially for making the traditional sleeping mats or incansi and is an important source of income for rural people. These mats made from incema stems are of high quality and they last much longer than similar mats made from other sedges.

The reeds were dying back due to the increase of moribund material around the rhizomes, possibly because of very few fires in this area of the wetland during the last ten years.

Towards the end of summer some of the residents in eSizameleni harvest the reeds, and they requested that the area be burnt to stimulate the growth of the plants.

The burn was carried out by the Working on Fire team which is based at BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre, after permission had been obtained from the Fire Chief in Volksrust.



The Sandy Twomey Memorial Photographic Competition.

Sandy Twomey sadly passed away recently. She was so well known and respected for her love of birds and her skill as a photographer that we have instigated what we hope will become an annual photographic competition in her honour to be called The Sandy Twomey Memorial Photographic Competition. This event has the backing and support of Mr Kevin Twomey and the family.

All entries will be exhibited in The Crow's Nest for the duration of the competition. Please select 2 of your favourite photographs taken in and around Wakkerstroom (N.B. pictures don't have to be bird related and scenery, architecture, portraits etc. would be welcome). Entry is free but please have your photos printed on A5 photographic paper at Ditjies and Datjies in Volksrust (next to Mica). Excellent prizes to the value of +/- R2000, are detailed below. Judgment will take place immediately prior to the Christmas Market on December 13th and prize winners will then be announced.

Professional entries will not be permitted. The competition will be judged by Norman Dennett and a critique of selected photographs will be given.

First Prize :

Sunday Lunch for 2 at De Oude Stasie
Framed A4 picture of the winning photo
One year's free membership of the Wakkerstroom Bird Club
Crow's Nest Hamper

Second Prize :

Breakfast for 2 at Wetlands Country House & Sheds
Ye Refill Shoppe Hamper
4 Block pictures of your choice from "Just Because"

Third Prize :

2 bottles of wine from Wakkerstroom Country Inn
1 copy of "Robins of Africa" donated by BirdLife South Africa, Wakkerstroom Centre



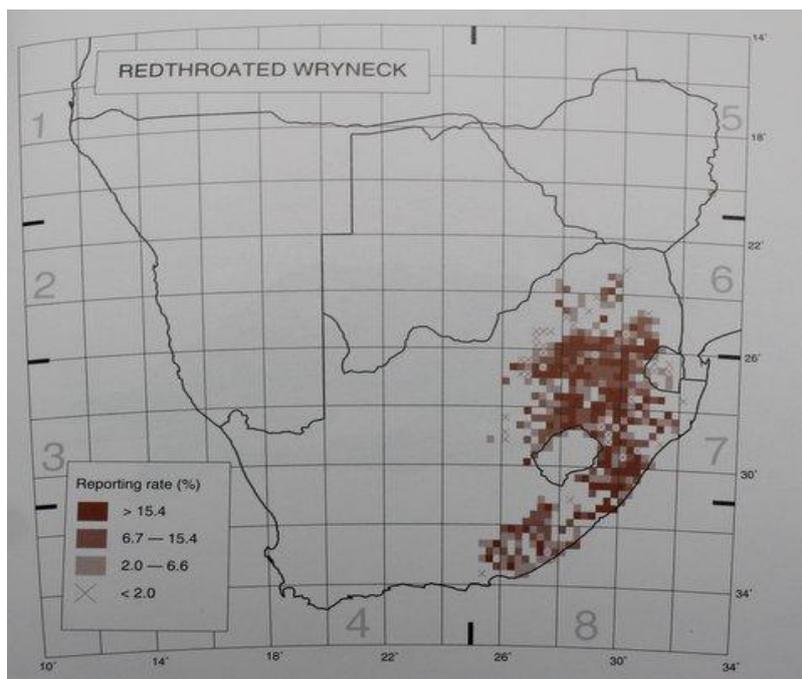
Our Trailer Competition

We mentioned in last month's edition that we are running a competition in order to purchase a trailer to house our new sprayer. The competition is now in full swing and tickets are R20.00 each. Prizes are 2 nights accommodation for four people at *Forellenhof*, a R500 meal voucher from *The Bistro*, a Birding Morning with Lucky Ngwenya, renowned Birding Guide and a copy of "Robins of Africa" by Terry Oatley, illustrated by Greame Arnott. Donated by BirdLife SA Wakkerstroom Education and Tourism Centre; totalling R3750.00. Tickets are available from The Crow's Nest and De Oude Stasie. Or, contact me personally. It is intended that the draw will take place during the Country Fair in December.

Bird of The Month: Red-throated Wryneck (Afrikaans: Draaihals)

The scientific name of the Red-throated Wryneck, *Jynx ruficollis*, is something of a mixed bag. *Jynx* is the Latin name for the bird which was used in witchcraft, hence to put a jinx on someone; although it was also believed that the bird could restore the affections of a wayward lover. *ruficollis* in Latin means rufus – red; *collis* – neck. The English name, Wryneck, refers to its ability to twist its head backwards to about 180deg.

One of only two Wryneck species in the world this one has a very scattered distribution in Africa as far north as the Sahara Desert. There it overlaps with the Northern (European) Wryneck, which is generally yellow underneath but otherwise similar. This is a fairly unobtrusive species but its characteristic loud call (sometimes audible for 500m) usually reveals its presence. Their closest relatives are the woodpeckers but the Wryneck's bill is not strong enough to excavate their own nest-holes in trees. Also, their tails are not stiff enough to use as a prop so they have an adaptation of the toes (two pointing forward and two pointing back) to allow them to grip when in a vertical position.



Red-throated Wryneck.

The throat and upper chest are rufous, a diagnostic feature, the bill is horn coloured and the upper parts are a dull greyish brown suffused with rust and flecked with black. An indistinct black line runs from the crown and down the back. They are 18-20cm in length and there is no sexual dimorphism

Wrynecks are not considered not threatened in their range and it is likely that as a result of afforestation of formerly treeless areas that that they may have increased substantially in numbers.

Their food is principally gained on the ground, consisting mainly of ant, their eggs and pupae, securing their prey by their sticky tongues, they sometimes eat termites.

Wrynecks prefer grassland with sparse trees; preferred areas have short grass and available cavities for nesting or roosting

In breeding they are monogamous with protracted pair bonds and are regularly multi-brooded. Breeding occurs from August to February with a peak in October. Incubation is done by both sexes, the male doing the night shift. They nest (especially) in old holes of Black-collared and Crested Barbets or woodpeckers. 1 to 6 eggs are laid, usually 3, and the young are brooded and fed by regurgitation by both parents. Nestling period 25-26 d; juveniles disperse soon after fledging. Large nestlings perform a threat display resembling a striking snake: the head, with bill open, is slowly extended towards threat, and then rapidly recoiled, while opening the beak wide and hissing. Wrynecks are sometimes parasitized by Lesser Honeyguides.

Pentad Survey- October:

The total for the first 15 weeks of the second year stands at 131 species, an increase of 10 species since last month's report. Submission of lists has been a little slow this last couple of weeks, not the best of weather though. Only 4 species have been recorded this year and not last year – Lesser Flamingo, Black-bellied Bustard, Cape Rock-Thrush and Golden-breasted Bunting. 78 species were seen last year and not yet this year – but we have 37 weeks left this year!

What proportion of a bird's population dies each year?

Usually between one-third and two-thirds, though this varies from species to species and depends on environmental conditions such as a harsh winter or food shortages. Seabirds tend to have very low annual mortality rates (five to ten per cent), while amongst small passerines up to three-quarters of a population may die each year.

Interesting Local Sightings:



Malachite Kingfisher

23 September -I often take my dogs for a walk on the bridge at around 4pm., As we set out on our walk on the 23rd September, I heard a strange call that I could not place. Just as I looked over the side where the Night herons sleep, I caught the bright tiny movement out of the corner of my eye. There were 2 Malachite Kingfishers squabbling over land/fishing rights at the Otter Tunnel. We completed our walk back to the car at a very quick pace so I could put the dogs in and grab my camera.! After sitting quietly for about 20 minutes, I was worried that I would lose the light, as it was 5pm by then, I was rewarded with a lovely colourful view right in front of me! Naturally I wanted to go and show Mike on the weekend where I saw the Kingfishers, but Sunday was a drizzly day out, !We saw the Otters instead.

I also had my first view of a Snipe in flight that day! – Jenni Maxted-Smith.

Black-bellied Bustard – Early one morning-just after sunrise-a Black-bellied Bustard was seen flying low from the vicinity of BLSA to the “Airport” hill where it commenced feeding. This is my third such identical sighting, admittedly over a number of years but there does seem to be a pattern. Has anybody else had this experience? Ann Cleal.

7 October – Thick-billed Weaver – Jenni Maxted-Smith, with pictures, and subsequently by John Burchmore. This is a very unusual record for our area and has been submitted to the ADU, Cape Town.

Otters – a very large otter has been seen in the vleis area on two separate occasions, once by Ann Cleal and once by John Burchmore – and we are anxious for further reports and, hopefully, some photographs!

14 October – White form of a male Ruff spotted by Rina Pretorius of BirdLife Northern Natal Club. Seen at the Newcastle Ponds outing. Photographs were submitted to Trevor Hardaker of SA Rare Bird News who confirmed the sighting.

16 October – 1 immature Wattled Starling, amongst usual feeding birds in the garden. My last record of this species in the garden was on 30 December, 2010. Brian Guerin.

29 September - Eleen Strydom and I went into the village on the 29th Sept at about 11am and on our return we spotted this Thick Billed Weaver at my feeder- which I believe is not on the Wakkerstroom List!Jenni Maxted-Smith

I have taken to driving the dirt road back from Newcastle on occasion and last week I had 3 special sightings; I was watching the Black - headed herons eating their favourite tidbits of lightly roasted bugs in a recently burned grassland when they all went to ground, seconds later a Martial Eagle flew overhead and circled the area for 15 minutes before flying off.

On the second occasion I was returning home after an evening function at approximately 22H00 about 10km before Zaaihoek Dam I came across a pair of Honey Badgers on the road.

The following day returning home at about 17H30 at almost the same place I saw a Black-bellied Bustard; unfortunately I was too slow to get a photo before it disappeared into the grass.-Mike Maxted-Smith



Thick-billed Weaver

“HEARTBREAKING” – Glenn Ramke

As a follow up to Glenn’s disturbing report last month regarding the deaths of 11 Grey Crowned Cranes we received the following e-mail from her:

“Had an email from Johan yesterday and he is still waiting on the vets but will let me know as soon as he knows - will let you know then. Not sure why it’s taken so long, just hope they find something! - Glenn”

Diary for Balance of 2014:

Saturday 01 November – Monthly Vlei Walk, 07h00 on the bridge.

Tuesday 11 November – Monthly Outing, details to be advised.

Wednesday 19 November – Evening Meeting– Wendy Watson will be showing pics of her travels to the four of the seven World Heritage Sites in Tanzania - Serengeti, Bagamoyo, Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar at BirdLife SA, Wakkerstroom from 18h00.

Saturday 06 December - Monthly Vlei Walk, 07h00 on the bridge.

Also on that day, Saturday 06, – our Annual Function, again at Forellenhof by popular request, a Bring and Braai. More details at a later stage!

Saturday 13 December – Christmas Market. Please come along and support our great book stall. **AND** it’s the day we want to draw the winner of our Trailer Competition to see who wins the weekend at Forellenhof. Don’t forget, if you win it and can’t use it, it would make a great Christmas gift!

The “new” Crow’s Nest:

Norman Dennett’s picture to the right shows the bird section display which has been moved from the left side of the shop to the right hand side, as you enter. Among other things this allowed better light on the large map of the district and the pins detailing locations of sightings. Our new banner is on view high on the left and will remain there, when not in use, as our advertising medium. The move is not quite finished as some posters still need to be put up.



How do birds sleep?

Pretty well, if their consciences are clear! Seriously though, much like us, they drop off in all sorts of different ways: from brief ‘cat-naps’ to extended slumbers. But it is a myth that birds doze off with their head tucked beneath their wing. In fact most sleep either with their head turned back and tucked beneath their shoulder feathers, or with their head slumped back onto their shoulders in a hunched position.

Second offering of some educational material on Migration for our members (The first offering was placed in Newsletter No 25).

Do all birds from one species migrate?

No. Some species are partial migrants, with different populations following different strategies. For example Robins from Scandinavia migrate to Britain for the winter, while many British Robins stay put. Alternatively, males and females of the same species may go their separate ways: female Chaffinches leave Sweden in the winter, while males stay on or near their breeding areas. This led the scientist Linnaeus to give the species the scientific name *Fringillacoelebs*, meaning ‘bachelor finch’

How did migration come about in the first place?

It is often said that migrating birds head south for the winter – but this puts the cart before the horse. In fact it is thought that many migratory birds evolved in equatorial regions, and first headed north to avoid competition with other species there. By doing so, they could also take advantage of the long daylight hours and plentiful food supply of the northern summer. But they still had to return south again every winter, when the weather closed in. Thus migration was the key that opened up new lands for birds. It soon became a viable way of life for many species.

Why do birds go so far?

Surely migrants heading north in spring would be better off stopping to breed around the Mediterranean, than pressing on to the Arctic? Well, many of them do. But those which do travel to the Arctic Circle gain the advantage of even longer hours of daylight and less competition from other species. This explains why birds such as the Red Knot undertake a huge journey from the southern hemisphere to the edge of the Arctic to breed – food is abundant there, and far fewer species are competing for it.

What proportion of the world's birds is migratory?

Approximately 4,000 species – roughly 40 per cent of the global total – are usually considered to be migratory, though not all undertake long-distance journeys. Of the 220 regular British breeding species, around 40 (roughly 18 per cent) are long-distance migrants (to sub-Saharan Africa). Of these, more than one in three is a warbler, flycatcher or chat. Britain is also home to many species of wintering wildfowl and waders, which breed to its north and east, and come there to take advantage of its mild winters. Britain also plays host to several passage migrants, such as the Red Knot, Little Stint and Curlew Sandpiper, which pass through in spring and autumn on their way to and from their breeding and wintering grounds.

How many individual birds migrate?

Taking the species which undertake major north-south journeys in the Old-world, up to five billion birds of more than 200 species travel south to Africa each autumn. Of North America's 20 billion or so birds, it is thought that about one-third, or more than six billion individuals, migrate at least as far as Central America.

Taken from the RSPB publication "Everything you always wanted to know about birds..... but were afraid to ask!" by Stephen Moss.

Why don't waterbirds get frostbite?

Waterbirds such as ducks and geese sometimes face a special challenge: keeping warm while perched on ice. They do so by reducing the blood supply to their legs and feet, thus minimising heat loss. They also have fewer nerve endings in their feet, so they do not feel the effects of the cold.

Yellow-breasted Pipit

You may recall from Newsletter No. 24 that we were approached by Dr Ian Little of the "Threatened Grasslands Species Programme, Endangered Wildlife Trust," to assist in recording/advising all sightings of Yellow-breasted Pipit to him. It is hoped that the above will assist in identifying this elusive species. This could be "birding with a purpose" for members, in the summer months particularly, and we urge all keen birders to participate. The Club would like to collate all sightings and forward a monthly report to Dr Little, or alternately your sightings could be sent direct to him on his e-mail address: ilittle@ewt.org.za. Accurate position points are important, GPS if possible.

Membership

We are sad to report that of the second month running, we have not attracted any new members to our Club. Please encourage your friends and family to join. Also, a thought – Christmas is approaching fast! Why not give a year's subscription to the Club to your bird-loving friends and family? Contact me for further details.

Some Interesting Websites:

If you would like to follow the progress back to Wakkerstroom of the tagged Amur Falcons, Red-footed Kestrels (or other species such as White Storks) check out www.satellitetracking.euthen then change the language to English and carry on searching.

OK, not a website but a facebook page! Peter Greaves, our speaker this month, put me onto a page called "Bird Club Resources" which is full of interesting information and well worth a visit.

As reported previously www.africageographic.com is always worth checking, this week's posting shows a female leopard pouncing down from a tree into a small herd of Impala and the result.

THE EDITOR

JOHN BARROW