



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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Malcolm Drummond

Malcolm Drummond who gave a talk on the White-Winged Flufftail at our AGM held on Saturday, 18 July has had an association with Wakkerstroom over many years.

Malcolm grew up on a farm in England and developed a love of Nature from an early age. He immigrated to South Africa in 1968 and spent the next 35 years in the computer industry, 16 of them with IBM. Ten years ago he changed his career and started writing for a living. Two early projects were the research and writing of a book for Gold Fields to celebrate its 120th anniversary and this was followed by a book to assist BirdLife South Africa with its fundraising efforts. Malcolm now writes and edits for a number of corporates and government-owned entities, producing annual reports, magazines and all forms of written internal and external communications.



Shortly after arriving in South Africa Malcolm visited the Kruger National Park and immediately became fascinated with our extraordinary fauna and flora. This led to him becoming a part-time trail guide for the Wilderness Leadership School. An increasing interest in birds led him to a Monty Brett bird identification course in 1986. Monty and Malcolm subsequently formed Sandton Bird Club in 1987 and, over a period, Malcolm served ten terms as Chairman. He was asked to take over Chairmanship of the Southern African Ornithological Society in 1995 and served until 2000. Malcolm was in the chair when the society first hired professional staff and became an environmental organisation in 1996, in which year it also changed its name to BirdLife South Africa.

Together with Deon Coetzee, Malcolm formed Middelpunt Wetland Trust in 1993 for the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail and its habitat. This has been a consuming passion and pastime for the past 22 years.

Wish List:

We have decided to institute this new section in the newsletter in the hope that some of our members are able to help us acquire certain bits and pieces that are not always easily available to purchase commercially.

The item we are looking for this month is a small piece of used conveyor belting or similar. This is needed for the inside of the Sprayer Trailer to protect it from too much wear and tear. A piece approximately 1metre by 1,8 metres would be perfect. If anybody can help it would be much appreciated.

Length of Newsletter: It's a short one this month! Why? That's *because there's a dearth of material*. Please would you help us for future editions?

Diary of Forthcoming Events:

Saturday August 1 – monthly Vlei Walk. This ever-popular outing will start at 08h00 (or earlier if you're keen) for the next couple of months in deference to the weather!

Tuesday outing - August 11 – Something different – take a short stroll with us from the Kruger Bridge picnic site to the WOW Hide then on to the Clive Beck Hide, returning to the picnic site for tea. Your leaders will use this opportunity to not only spot birds but also to inform you of current projects as well as the value of important future projects and plans.

Wednesday 19 August – monthly meeting - another episode from “Africa – Eye to Eye with the Unknown” – remember we showed the excellent “Congo” track a few months ago. This time we have chosen “Kalahari”. There will be a “Bring ‘n Braai” beforehand, fires to be ready to cook on by 13h00 to hopefully socialize in the best of the day's weather. For those that want to skip the braai then the DVD will commence at 14h30.

October 22-25 – keep these dates free if you would like to take part in an Atlas Bash for our area. Atlas Bash is the term used for a concentrated effort by a group of birders to Atlas a number of pentads in a short space of time i.e. pentads that are lacking coverage in an area. This will be organized by Ernst Retief of BirdLife South Africa and details will be passed on as soon as they become available.

NOTE: Saturday Outings – in response to the suggestions made at the AGM we intend to re-introduce some Saturday outings as soon as possible.

From the Cape – on a wet winters day!

A catch up from the beautiful Overberg region where from those early days of my arrival in May, when it was so dry and glary, it is now a “vision in green and gold”. Although of course it would be SO much nicer if it were all indigenous, we do not live in the ideal world with ideal situations and have to accept that this is still most lovely.

Hopefully, permit permitting, we will be attempting to catch four or five Blue Cranes to attach trackers to them. Besides the information hoped for, this will be a learning curve for many of us as they will be using toe-nooses to catch adult birds for the first time on this continent. These nooses have been used worldwide on a variety of birds for this type of project. Two of the people who will be with us are very experienced and will be “teaching” the rest of us the technique as they will not always be available to help. Ben, the man from KZN who designs and makes the trackers will also be in the team this time around to make sure the harnesses are put on correctly and that the tiny little tracker and its accompanying solar panel are all working well! This has been tested and refined on a captive crane in KZN for some time and the solar panel appears to be working well – the problem had been that the feather may cover the panel. Having its own solar panel will, all being well, give up to 3 years



Canola on a stormy day

reports – amazing!

The last big toe-noose capture project here was with Ludwig's bustards and it produced satisfactory results so here is hoping the same happens for the cranes.

Toe-nooses are made of thin rope with nooses attached at regular intervals and it is laid out where the birds are often found i.e. here, around sheep feeding troughs! (To the farmer's



View from a Wine Farm

dismay). When they walk over the rope, a foot gets caught by a noose and the team race in to catch the bird as quickly as possible to do all the blood sampling, colour ringing and attaching the tracker before it is released again.

Cape Nature have to approve a permit which has not come through yet but if it does happen soon, the above will take place the first week in August with something of a large team as besides the above mentioned, Tanya and me, Peter Ryan from Fitz and some students will be there as well. So next time, I will let you know the results of this exercise.

Yesterday I saw my first Blue Crane that had been hit and killed by a motor vehicle! This is the only area that has ever reported such incidents. It was a young bird and hopefully died quickly!

Am enjoying this area more and more as I get to know it better. There is so much of interest not far off. I am going to visit a long-time friend from the past in Oudtshoorn for a few days – 3 hours away; Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Somerset West – 2 – 2.5 hours away, the sea half an hour! Last week I joined the Botanical Society for a 67 minutes for Mandela day which we spent in a most beautiful, natural, massive reserve on the slopes of the hill at Bredasdorp – I did not know it existed = what a treasure. There are lots of walking trails and a cycling track through the reserve with benches here and there and of course an incredible variety of plants which attract lots of birds. It seems that many small and big towns have similar places.

Hope you are all well – winter is well past half way through, so keep smiling! Glenn Ramke.

Our 3rd Annual General Meeting was held on July 18 at De Oude Stasie and was attended by approximately 35 people. After the formalities Malcolm Drummond gave an interesting talk on the current situation with White-winged Flufftails, including some of his experiences of Ethiopia and his visits there to study this iconic bird.

Abridged Chairman's Report for Year End 30 June 2015.

Welcome to everybody present and the apologies received are noted.

Thanks for joining us for our annual report back on the year's activities and what we have done with your subscriptions and donations. We will try to keep the meeting as informal as we can, no proxies, nomination forms etc. because we are still an independent Club and have no one to answer to OR pay any of our income to.

I think we have had a successful year, increasing membership numbers, increasing revenues from marketing to R5640 (2013 R4244) and the highly successful Trailer Competition which raised sufficient money to purchase it. Included in the sum raised is a wonderful donation of R3000 from Kevin Twomey in memory of Sandy.

A special word of thanks here also to Johan and Ronelle van Eeden of Forellenhof for donating the first prize of a weekend at their lovely establishment, won by John and Judy Ryder.

Our major expenditure apart from the trailer was the purchase (R5240) of timber for the improved walkway to the Drummond Hide. Work will commence properly when the surrounding grass has been cleared and the burning in that area completed. The price of treated timber has rocketed since the improved, wheelchair-friendly ramp was mooted.

I must thank some of our "unseen" helpers who, though not Committee members, are also helpful in many ways:

Judy Ryder for taking on the job of recording sightings for the Pentad Survey, and hopefully for the recording of arrival/departure dates for our migrants?

Len and Hannelie who were the biggest sellers for the Trailer Competition last year and for their support at Vlei market etc.

Sean Pyott and the WNHA for their continued support for the spraying programme,

The WTA for organizing markets at which our book sales raised considerable funds.

Graham Spencer, Keith Davidson, Manie le Roux and Walter Engelbrecht for their past (and future) contributions. Glenn Ramke for her newsletter contributions, Kristi Garland and her Working on Fire Team and a whole lot of others. If I have forgotten anybody, please forgive me.

The Committee; obviously we couldn't have accomplished all this without a supportive committee and we must thank them for their great work. Thanks to each of them!

FUTURE PLANS Include:

Extensive spraying on the vlei to improve viewing conditions, this should start in early spring. Spraying will be a major focus of our activities this year, funds permitting.

Continued eradication of aliens and re-growth,

Continued clearing of grass along the bridge,

Maintenance of the picnic area,

We are hoping to start a system of testing and monitoring the quality of water entering the vlei,

Continue the Pentad Survey which is at the beginning of its final year,

Continue with the logging of migrant arrivals and departures,

The Committee was then re-elected and we welcome a new member, Claudine Tavelet who will be handling the monthly outings.

The meeting closed at 12h00.

Cape Parrot

According to the booklet "A Birder's Guide to Wakkerstroom and Surrounds which the Editor relies on for his articles on local species, The Cape Parrot is one of two "Locally extinct" species here; a condition that the Editor can sometimes relate to.

The Cape Parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*) or Levaillant's Parrot is a large, temperate forest dwelling Poicephalus Parrot endemic to South Africa. It was formerly grouped as a subspecies (along with the savanna-dwelling Brown-necked Parrot (*P. fuscicollis fuscicollis*) and Grey-headed Parrot (*P. f. suahelicus*)) but is now considered a distinct species.

Description: The Cape Parrot is a short-tailed moderately large bird with a very large beak used to crack all sorts of hard nuts and fruit kernels, especially those of African yellowwood trees. This contrasts with the closely related savanna species which feeds on and a wide variety of tropical woodland trees such as Marula. These species are sexually dimorphic, with females typically sporting an orange frontal patch on the forehead. Juveniles also show a larger orange - pink patch on the forehead but lack the red on shoulders and legs of adults.^[2] These plumage characteristics vary among individuals and among the three recognized forms.

Distribution and habitat: The Cape parrot is endemic to South Africa. It occurs in Afromontane forests at moderate altitudes in eastern South Africa from the coastal escarpment near sea-level to the midlands at around 1000m. These forests occur as a series of small patches around the south and east of South Africa and are dominated by Yellowwood trees (*Podocarpus latifolius*, *P. falcatus* and *P. henkeli*). Cape parrots have a disjunct distribution with the largest population around in the Amathole mountains of the Eastern Cape Province and extending east, with several large gaps, through the Mthatha escarpment and Pondoland in the Eastern Cape and the southern midlands of KwaZulu-Natal Province to Karkloof, near Pietermaritzburg. A very small population, of around 30 individuals occurs over 600 km to the north in the Magoebaskloof area of Limpopo Province. Cape parrots are absent from large areas of afromontane forests such as those along the southern coast of South Africa, near Knysna, the higher altitude Afromontane forests in the Drakensberg mountains of KwaZulu-Natal, or the moderate-altitude forests of northern KwaZulu-Natal province and Swaziland, which separate the KwaZulu-



Picture taken by Alan Manson at Benvie, Karkloof, KZN

Natal midlands and Limpopo escarpment populations. All of these areas are within the dispersal range of the parrots and there are old records of Cape parrots from northern KwaZulu-Natal.

Aviculture: Over one hundred *P. robustus* parrots are kept as cage birds, most of which are wild-caught birds although they do breed reasonably well in captivity. To date there have not been any successful releases of captive birds and the survival of this species is dependent on habitat conservation to maintain wild populations. Trade and export of wild-caught Cape parrots from South Africa has been made illegal by the international CITES agreement (appendix list II) and by South African law. They are rare as pets, despite low-levels of ongoing illegal collection and trade. Those that are kept have demonstrated wonderful personalities, and a talking ability that rivals their larger cousin the African grey parrot. A small trade still persists in the related Grey-headed and brown-necked parrots.

Interesting Web/facebook Site/Publications:

Two interesting websites relating to vultures and the plight they find themselves in are: www.projectvulture.org and www.vulpro.com and the latter in particular seems to have very current information and access to their newsletter. Projectvulture has an extensive amount of material in their archives.

Another site I found stemming from the Cape Parrot item elsewhere in this newsletter is: lifesciences.ukzn.ac.za//research/Research-initiatives/cpwg which also has some excellent background information.

Other pending printed publications from BirdLife South Africa are: The Red Data Book and also the new IBA (Important Bird Areas) Directory. Approach BLSA directly for copies.

In Search of Blue Swallows:

(The following article is copied from the Annual Report 2014 of BirdLife South Africa)

Finding new pairs of Blue Swallows is not as easy as it sounds as only 30-40 pairs of this enigmatic bird remain in South Africa and less than 10% of its preferred habitat intact. Recent studies conducted by Ezemvelo Kwa-Zulu Natal Wildlife revealed 3 areas, Harding, Umzimkulu and Donnybrook where a possible new site was identified, Ebuta Valley. The survey also confirmed that the species was foraging over a wider area than previously thought and the possibility remains that a number of previously overlooked breeding pairs remain in the area.

The result of the survey is good news for a species that faces an uncertain future in South Africa with a small population and limited range. BLSA will start trying to obtain formal protection for as many of these breeding sites as possible.

This species is a small swallow at 18–25 cm. The adult birds have a highly lustrous dark metallic steel-blue appearance with long tail streamers, which are particularly noticeable in males. White feathers are visible on the rump and flanks when the birds are preening and especially during courtship. In poor light, blue swallows appear almost black and therefore can be mistaken for Black Saw-wing Swallows (*Psalidoprocne spp.*) which occur throughout its breeding range. Young blue swallows start life a brownish-grey, acquiring their blue colour as they mature. This species has a musical "bee-bee-bee-bee" call when in flight.



JOHN BARROW – EDITOR.