

# lark whisperer

Lucky Ngwenya

There are three key elements to a successful birding trip: what to see, where to go and, most importantly (especially if there are uncertainties about the first two), who to go with. If you're in the Wakkerstroom area of Mpumalanga, there's a name you should try to remember.

Based at the BirdLife South Africa Centre in Wakkerstroom, Lucky Ngwenya is the go-to man when it comes to bird guides in the region, especially when you arrive in the town and realise that it is just the focal point of a much larger area that promises a wealth of birding opportunities. To make the best use of them, though, you have to travel far out of town on a mosaic of seldom-used dirt roads – and there are very few maps and quite a few fences.

It is no accident that the region Lucky operates in is referred to as 'Larkland' – sometimes affectionately and sometimes less so. The uncommonly high diversity of lark species in the vicinity of Wakkerstroom has given rise to the name. This group of cryptically coloured and hard-to-identify species has been known to make even the sharpest of birdwatchers mumble incoherently into their binoculars when asked their opinion about an ID. In fact, some birders have allegedly even stapled together the pages in their bird books that feature larks and pipits – the archetypal LBJs – because they regard the species as impossible to identify and best left to the experts.

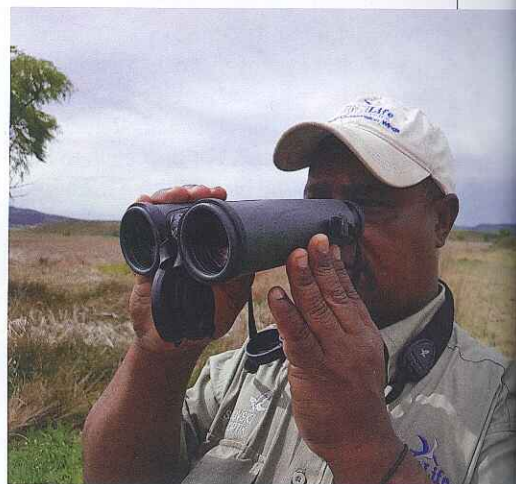
Over the past decade or so, Lucky has gained a very well-deserved reputation as one of those 'experts'. By combining his comprehensive knowledge of a



bewildering number of ID points, a keen ear and a small touch of wizardry, Lucky has been able to decipher the complex world of larks and in turn bring joy to an untold number of birders from around the world.

Perhaps my fondest memory of Lucky was when he nailed the identification of a distant Botha's Lark in the middle of a desolate field on a cold, blustery August morning. He subsequently stalked the bird and got images that confirmed his identification, causing the late Ben de Boer to turn to me and mouth some unprintable expletives.

In addition to having an uncanny ability to identify larks, Lucky knows just where to go to find the birds at a specific time of year – and he'll take you there. His personality is such that he is well



KRISTI GARLAND (2)

*Lucky Ngwenya, widely considered the lark whisperer of the Mpumalanga grasslands.*

known and liked by farmers and communities throughout the Wakkerstroom region and he is allowed into areas that many visiting birders would not be able to access on their own. Not surprisingly, there is high demand for his guiding services, especially during the summer months.

During the off season Lucky helps with maintenance tasks at the BirdLife South Africa Centre and assists with a range of environmental education programmes that reach numerous young learners in the Wakkerstroom area. Few people will be aware that he has been a staff member of the organisation longer than most others, and he is certainly one of the most valued and best liked. Swarovski Optik is extremely proud to provide support for this exceptional guide and conservation ambassador.

To book the guiding services of Lucky Ngwenya, contact Kristi Garland at [kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za](mailto:kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za)

For more information about BirdLife South Africa's Bird Guide Training Project, visit [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za) or e-mail [martin.taylor@birdlife.org.za](mailto:martin.taylor@birdlife.org.za)

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