

# THE L A R K

Club outings

Polokwane GR  
Inkonka  
Mahela

BBD 2022

Club results

Birding  
Letaba

BBD emotional turmoil

Cape Gannet in the Makuleke Contractual Park • Finfoot field notes from the Tzaneen region • A request for assistance: Arrow-marked Babbler and Levaillant's Cuckoo • First breeding record for Gurney's Sugarbird in the Limpopo Province • Field notes: Scaly-feathered Weaver



Affiliated to Birdlife South Africa



The Lark is the newsletter of Birdlife Polokwane and is published bimonthly. It publishes reports of club activities, trip reports, photographic contributions and any natural history notes of birds or events involving birds. Contributions are accepted in English or Afrikaans and are accepted at the discretion of the editors. Non-members are also welcome to contribute, especially if it is of relevance to birds or birding in the Limpopo Province. When submitting images, please submit high resolution images without any borders, frames or signatures.

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The opinions expressed by contributors in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the editors, the Birdlife Polokwane committee or Birdlife South Africa.

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

**15 FEBRUARY 2023**

This newsletter is best read in a 'two page view' format.

COVER Nicholson's Pipit  
© Daniel Engelbrecht.

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# For a lark ...



Happy New year - bottoms up! © Jody De Bruyn

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# Editors' chirps

Happy 2023! May this year be filled with plenty of birding adventures and amazing new lifers. Let's forget about some of the gloom of 2022 and reflect on what a crackerjack year it was for our club and birds and birding in the Limpopo Province. We added three new species to the Limpopo Province bird list: Wood Warbler, a first for southern Africa overwintered in Phalaborwa, a bizarre record of a Cape Gannet in the northern Kruger National Park (see Duncan McKenzie's note in this issue), and most recently, Short-tailed Pipit on the southern border of the province not too far from Loskop Dam (more about this in an upcoming issue). For the second year in a row, a Birding Big Day team from our club was the overall winner of the 38<sup>th</sup> running of this event. What's more, they also set a new BBD record with 336 species in 24 hours! Birdlife Polokwane also had three teams in the Top 10, the third consecutive year we achieved this feat.

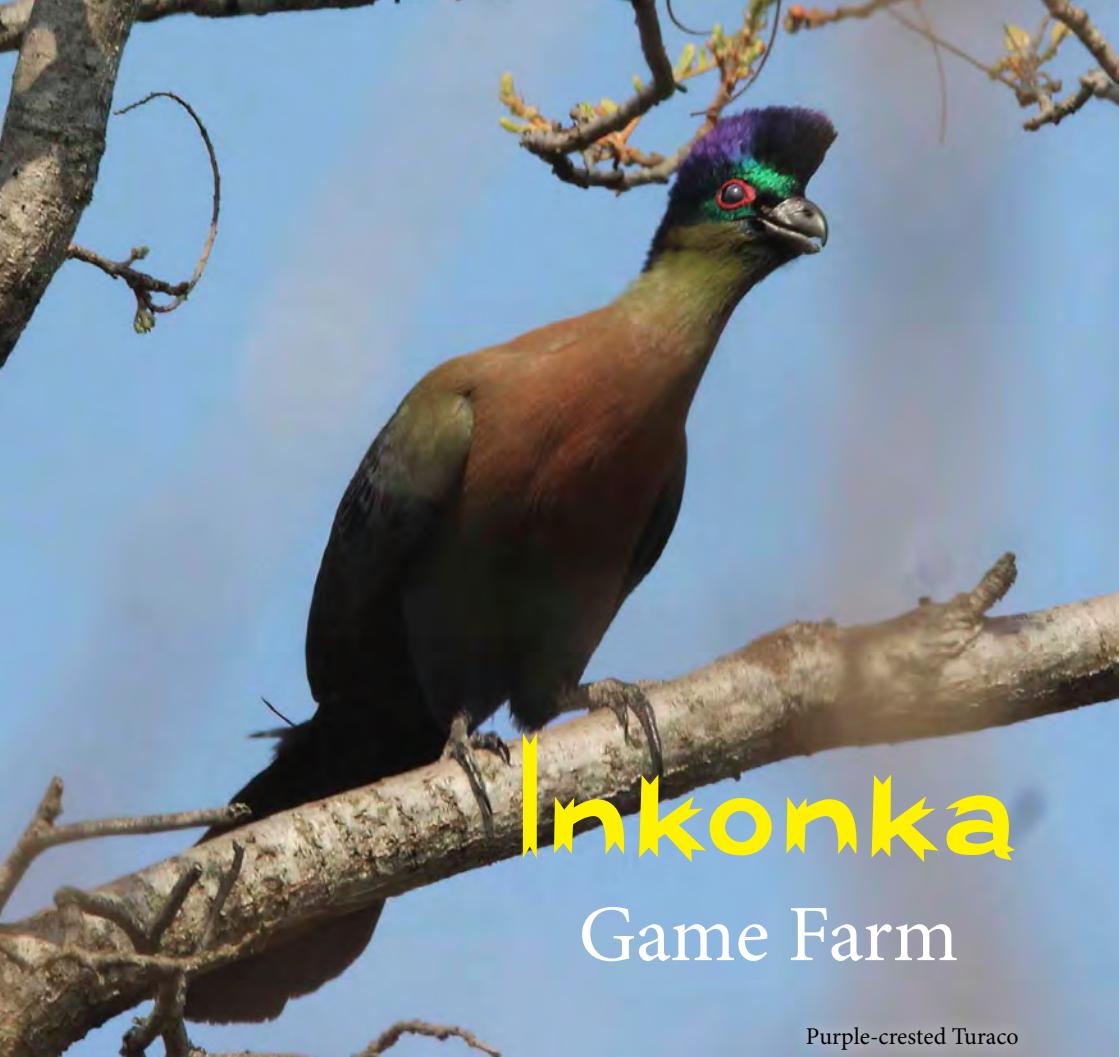
This year sees Birdlife Polokwane celebrating its Silver Jubilee - yes, everyone, we are turning 25 years old in 2023. We are planning some fun events to celebrate our club's birthday but also the birds that make the existence of the club possible. Keep your eyes and ears open for announcements, but be sure to check *The Lark* too, as we will also feature the events.

Birdlife South Africa's Bird of the Year is the Cape Parrot. It is a very popular choice, especially since the Cape Parrot is a stone's throw away in the Magoe-baskloof region. Make sure you attend the club meetings to hear more about this very special species – and keep a few weekends in May open for the annual Cape Parrot census.

In 2023, *The Lark* is taking a bold step. At Birdlife Polokwane, all birds are equal and beautiful in their own way, so this year we will be swapping our traditional back cover species (the LBJs and allies) and giving them some front cover limelight for a change. Look out for some of our LBJs and other species that may never make it onto the cover of a newsletter, magazine or book. If you want to see the colourful or charismatic birds, page to the last page -you'll find them there in 2023. We hope you enjoy this edition of *The Lark*, and as always, we look forward to receiving your contributions.

Raelene and Derek





# Inkonka Game Farm

Purple-crested Turaco

TEXT AND PHOTOS Johan Janse van Vuuren

**O**n the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 2022, eight birders met at the Dalmada Garage for possibly one of the last official Birdlife Polokwane Club outings of the year. The destination was Inkonka Game Farm in the Mooketsi Valley, and the aim

was to generate a birding list for the people that are renting the farm from the Makgoba Community. They want to advertise the lodge not only as hunting farm, but also as a birding destination.

Just past the Kurisa Moya turn-off, we stopped at a viewpoint

where we could see the farm in the valley below. At this spot we were treated vocally by the first bird of the morning that we could log namely the Red-chested Cuckoo. On the decent into the valley, we also spotted a pair of Mocking Cliff Chats and European Bee-eaters.

We were met at the Lodge by Rodney Sabatier and Enos who showed us around the farm for the day. There is a group of breeding Red-headed Weavers at the lodge, and it was interesting to

RIGHT Inkonka has beautiful streams, waterfalls and pools.

BELOW The view from the deck at the lodge.





watch them building nests in the cover of the palm tree leaves. A Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird also entertained us with his persistent calling, and we had some great sightings of the bird. After a quick leg stretch, we split into two groups, and started the serious business of trying to log as many as possible birds started.

The terrain on the farm consists of valleys with waterfalls, steep hills and also old farmlands, catering for quite a big variety of birds. One group first covered the higher ground while the other group scouted the lower-lying areas. The group of Leoni, Les, Oom Jan and Alan had a

ABOVE A very obliging Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird kept us entertained for quite some time.

very nice sighting of an accipiter that had just killed an African Green Pigeon. They spooked the accipiter, which left the headless pigeon on the ground. Unfortunately, everything happened so fast they could not positively ID the predator.

In total, we logged just over 70 bird species for the morning, but the Crowned and Verreaux's Eagles eluded us. We will have to go back for them. Special sightings of the day were Narina Trogan,

four Gorgeous Bush Shrikes at the rustic campsite, Orange-breasted Bush Shrikes and Purple-crested Turacos. At approximately 12:00 we called it a day and ended with a boerie roll braai before we returned home.

Inkonka has huge potential as a birding spot and great facilities to make it a place for a weekend trip for a group of friends. The lodge is fully equipped and can accommodate 16 people on single beds. There is also a rustic campsite that can be utilised, and the 'Blue House' can also

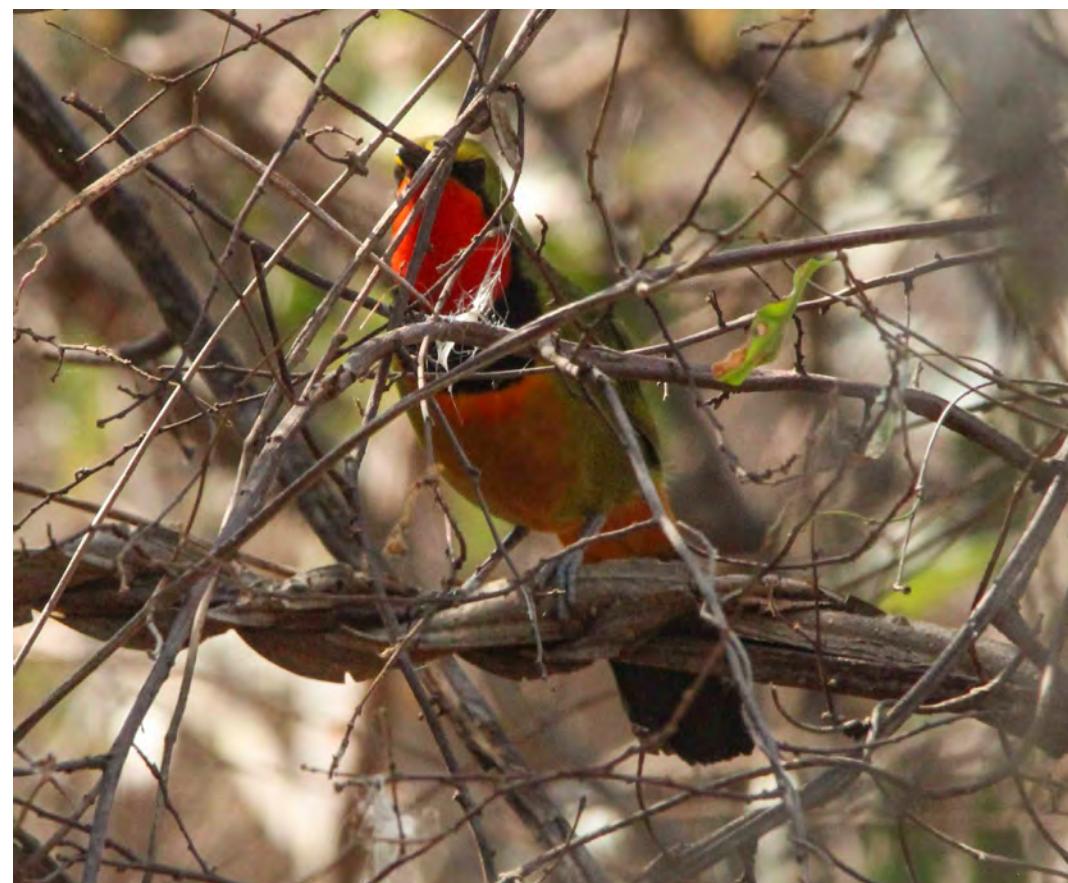
sleep approximately 8 people. Should you be interested to visit the farm please contact Andre le Grange (082 322 5388).

We want to thank Andre for inviting us to the farm and Rodney and Enos for the guiding us. A good day was had, and we all agreed about that. Another visit to this gem farm is most certainly on the cards.

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BELOW The supreme skulker, Gorgeous Bushshrike.



# Mahela Magic

A black bird with red eyes and orange beak perched on a branch.

TEXT Willem Van der Merwe

PHOTOS Jody De Bruyn

The ever-popular Retz's Helmetshrike.

We were a small group, six people in two cars, that set off at around half past four the morning to Edward Vorster's farm, Mahela, close to Letsitele. We didn't see the sun rise, as the day was rather overcast. It was actually quite cold upon our arrival, a rare feeling for the Lowveld! The region's wild habitat is primarily well-developed woodland, dominated by Mopane trees, with a few others like Knob Thorn, White Syringa, and beautiful, big Sycamore Fig trees along rivers. There was plenty of water, so we mainly were looking at specials for Lowveld woodland, and many aquatics.

As we drove in, we found a large flock of Pin-tailed Whydahs, who were either females, or juvenile males, since they lacked the snazzy breeding plumage. It was still a treat to find so many together. Our first stop was at a dam with lots of old, dead Mopane trees sticking out of the water. Such trees provide great roosts for birds that hunt in the water, and of those we saw the usual suspects - Reed Cormorants, White-breasted Cormorants, and African Darters. In evidence were numerous Western Cattle Egrets also. At first, we found few ducks, only the ever-present Egyptian Goose, but this improved later on. Close to and over the water, swallows were flying, primarily Lesser Striped, but we also spotted



Purple-crested Turaco.

Red-Breasted, Wire-tailed Swallows, Barn Swallows and African Palm Swifts swooped past as well.

For me, a nice sighting was when I went into the bushes and flushed a Water Thick-knee! It flew towards the other birders; later we saw two together, and I got a very good view of them, both standing and in flight. Their mournful cries, like those of the Spotted Thick-knee, are often heard around waterbodies in the Lowveld.

The fig trees close to the water attracted Purple-crested Turacos. We heard them calling upon arrival and later had fine views of a couple exploring the trees. Every time they flew, we were treated to their brilliant crimson wing feathers. The lush, waterside vegetation also

harboured birds like African Green Pigeon, Southern Black Flycatcher, Sombre Greenbul, Grey-headed Bushshrike, Green-backed Camaroptera, and White-throated Robin-Chat. Though not particularly rare, the exceedingly pretty Yellow-breasted Apalis and Chin-spot Batis gave us excellent views.

Our chief targets for the day were the Arnot's Chat and White-breasted Cuckooshrike. We'd easily seen the chats on a previous outing, in a section of dry Mopane veld, with lots of dead trees, in the cavities of which they breed. That time we saw several males and females, clearly showing us their different plumage patterns. This time, we looked, looked and looked some more amidst the trees. We encoun-

tered many other species – all three of the small hornbills, that is to say Southern Yellow-billed, Southern Red-billed and African Grey, were there, and were calling incessantly. We heard calling, and soon also saw, the lovely Black-headed Oriole. Southern Black Tits were both audible and visible. Brubrus were also making themselves heard, and we were teased by the special Stierling's Wren-Warbler, which unfortunately did not show itself. Another special bird that was seen and also heard all over the place was the Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow, with its characteristic three-note chirp. The lovely little Striped Kingfisher was calling, and we spotted one sitting high up in a tree, where we could appreciate it



Striped Kingfisher.

well. Starlings included the beautiful Violet-backed, which not all of us saw, and both Cape and Greater Blue-eared Starlings. The Greater Blue-eared is difficult to distinguish if not seen well, but its nasal, moaning call is quite unlike that of the Cape Starling. When I first heard the call, I confused it for that of the White-fronted Bee-Eater, but that one we saw too.

But look as we did, and despite the perfect habitat, we neither saw nor heard a single Arnot's Chat! We were still scanning the mopane trees in growing frustration when a bird suddenly flew up and

perched high in a tree. Binoculars went up – and no, it wasn't an Arnot's Chat, but it was our other target – a White-breasted Cuckooshrike! It looked like a female or a young male, since it was uniformly dull white below, lacking the grey throat crisply demarcated from the clean, white breast in the adult male. But it was beautiful enough! The lighting wasn't the best, since it remained cloudy and rather dim, but some of us got excellent photos of it. The cuckooshrike kept flying from tree to tree, now moving away from us, but then coming towards us again,



One of the many specials at Mahela - White-breasted Cuckooshrike.

for multiple excellent views. It was a lifer for most of us.

After the departure of the cuckoo-shrike, we kept hunting for the chats, moving around the farm and repeatedly returning to this main section of Mopane woodland. Sad to say, no chats. But we found a great many other satisfying sights! It was an amazing place for raptors. At the entrance, near the dam, we first spotted a Yellow-billed Kite flying over. From there, the raptors just kept coming! They included African Harrier-Hawk, Shikra, Lit-

tle Sparrowhawk, Gabar Goshawk, African Hawk-Eagle, Brown Snake Eagle, Wahlberg's Eagle, Lizard Buzzard and even a Bateleur! Most of them were seen in flight, but we had great views of a perched Dark Chanting Goshawk, which allowed a close approach. There was an exciting altercation between the Shikra and some Purple Rollers. An African Fish Eagle called in the distance, but I'm not sure if any of us saw it.

We also saw many vultures flying above, mostly White-backed, but

also Hooded! It is a special gift to be able to see these globally threatened and extremely valuable birds.

Suffice it to say that in the end, we dipped on Arnot's Chat. But there were many other sightings to compensate for this. Some of our country's most charismatic birds are the helmetshrikes, of which we found a small flock of White-crested Helmetshrikes, and also a group of Retz's Helmetshrikes! The latter is mostly found in the Lowveld and is always a prize sighting. We saw them up close and heard their strange, mechani-



Dark Chanting Goshawk.



Red-billed Firefinch.

cal-sounding calls too. Another unusual sighting was the Broad-billed Roller. A stunning bird that showed off to us was a very brightly coloured Red-headed Weaver.

Notable waterbird sightings included a Dabchick with three tiny chicks, one of which occasionally rode on the back of (I presume) its mother. She dove down and fetched some small prey animals, which she passed to them. We remedied the initial lack of ducks by spotting a large group of White-faced Whistling Ducks, and a solitary but fine Spurwinged Goose. Waterside birds included African Jacana, Blacksmith Lapwing, Black Crake, Three-banded Plover and Wood



Sandpiper. Larger aquatic hunters included Hamerkop, Little Egret, Great Egret, Purple Heron, African Spoonbill, and two handsome and unusual species, African Openbill and Woolly-necked Stork! In the reeds, Little Rush Warblers sounded their call, hiding from sight as always.

In total, though not every one of us saw everything, we saw about 130 species in the morning.

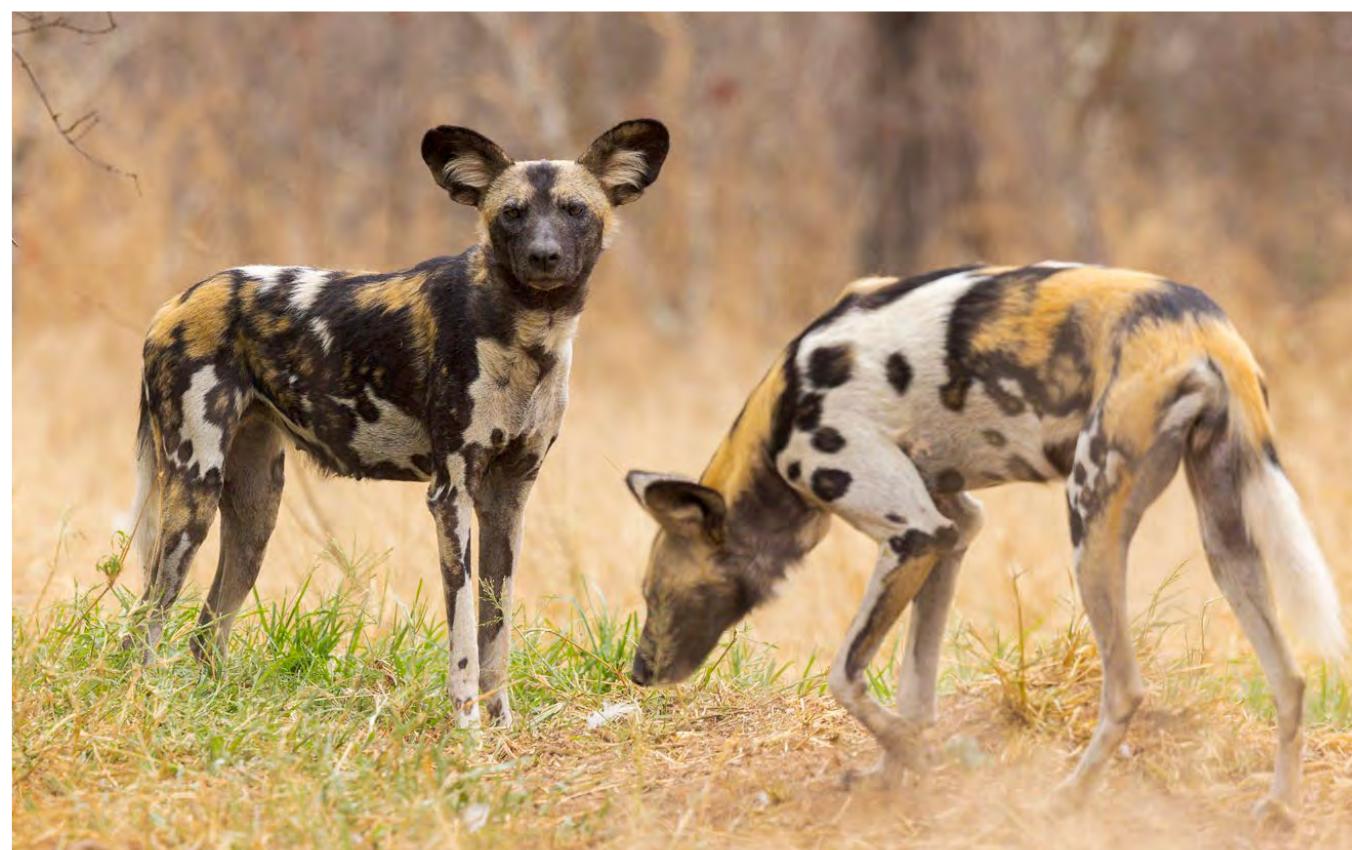
There were more than birds. Wild mammals on the farm included monkeys, squirrels, Impala, Nyala, Hippos and Giraffe, of which

ABOVE Some of the waterbirds seen, including an African Openbill.

RIGHT Mahela is also a breeding centre for the endangered African Wild Dog.

we saw several, including a beautiful calf! There is also a couple of large camps in which African Wild Dogs are kept, which we got to see well – amongst which were some puppies! It was also a treat to be out in some beautifully pristine, tall Lowveld woodland. Reptiles included a swimming Nile Crocodile and a big, boldly coloured Water Monitor Lizard lounging in a tree, reminding us of a leopard. I found quite a few plants of interest; noteworthy are the numerous African Tiger Orchids, one of our largest and hardiest, that grew in big clumps on trees, both living and dead. It is a fascinating environment, and we all appreciated the outing on many levels. I hope that the next time we go, we can have a somewhat larger group!

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# Letaba is for the Birds



African Barred Owlet © Mark Friskin.

TEXT Mark and Julia Friskin

**H**aving checked into Letaba Rest Camp, we set up camp and then made our way to the Elephant Hall Auditorium to meet the birding group. We enjoyed refreshments before we were briefed on the program of the next few days (20-23 October 2022) by Honorary Rangers Charles Hardy and Bruce Goetsch. This was followed by a presentation by Derek Engelbrecht, editor-in-chief of the 8th edition of the Roberts Birds of Southern

Africa project. He and two other co-editors will update the species accounts of the 990 bird species recorded in southern Africa. After the presentation, there was a fun quiz about the Roberts 8 project, and a bird identification quiz of birds of Letaba Rest Camp. The winners of the respective quizzes won books.

BELOW A Kruger sunrise - so special!



In camp, at dusk, a few of us witnessed a Wahlberg's Eagle catch a bat as it left the bat box, an unexpected sighting.

The days ahead comprised two daily outings, an early morning and a late afternoon drive, in a SANParks vehicle. On our first morning, we left Camp at 6 am, with John Adamson at the wheel, and the birding weekend started in earnest.



ABOVE A livid Martial Eagle giving the Black-backed Jackal (RIGHT) that stole his kill a good old stare © Mark Friskin.



The highlight of this trip for us was watching a Martial Eagle swoop down onto a Helmeted Guineafowl. It could not subdue it, and the injured guineafowl managed to escape, only to be caught by an opportunistic black-backed jackal.

A delicious brunch was set up under a shady tree, a time to relax before we set off again, adding to the bird list. Soaring White-backed, White-headed and Hooded Vultures were spotted along the Letaba River, and many waterbirds were noted: Great Egrets, African Openbill, Saddle-billed and Yellow-billed storks, White-fronted Plover, Ruffs, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper and Common Greenshank, to name but a few. The distinctive '*victor, victor*'

'*victor*' call of the Greater Honeyguide seemed to follow us as we heard it several times on our drive.

The late afternoon drive was nothing short of spectacular! We arrived at an incredibly scenic spot along the river, lined on both sides with pink water lilies, where we added Knob-billed Duck, White-faced Whistling Duck, Spur-winged Geese, Squacco Heron, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stints to our list. Unable to alight from the vehicle due to a well-concealed hippo close by, we moved onto the next turn-off, where we enjoyed sundowners as the light faded. A Black Cuckoo called, and then, to our delight, we heard and saw the Square-tailed Nightjar as it came to rest on the road.

This amazing day ended with sightings of a few nocturnal creatures, namely Springhare, Scrub Hare, Lesser-spotted Genet, Side-striped Jackal and Spotted Thick-knee.

We were ready and keen for our next morning's excursion, which did not disappoint! The Olifants River and surrounding areas allowed for excellent sightings: a Grey Tit-flycatcher's appearance delighted us, and the Black Herons entertained us with their unique 'umbrella' fishing technique. At the water pump station near Balule, we saw a breeding pair of African Skimmers. So special! This was followed by hard work to find the Pel's



African Cuckoo © Mark Friskin.

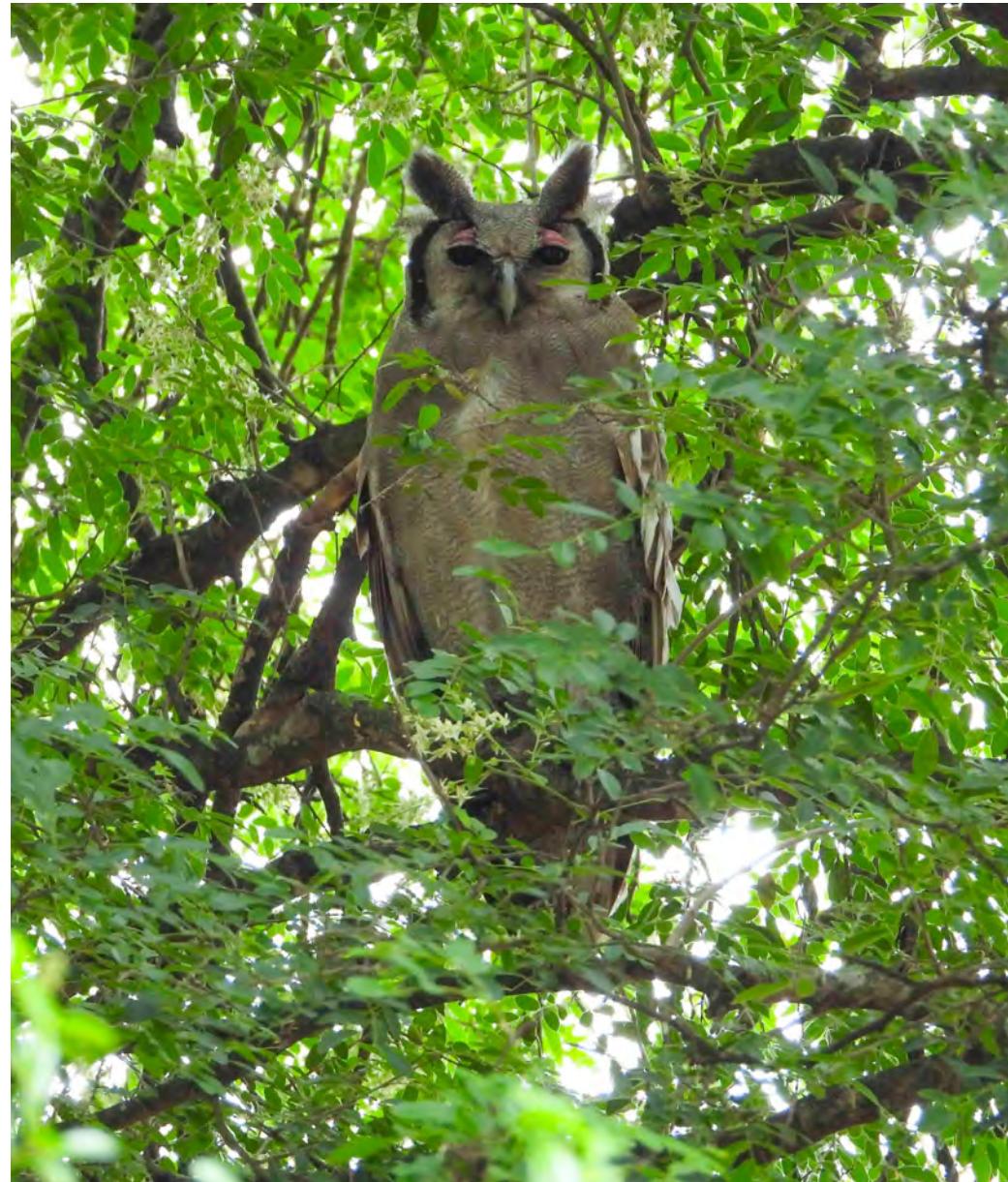


ABOVE Enjoying sundowners and the birds on the banks of the Letaba River © Julia Friskin.

LEFT An African roo, the Springhare © Mark Friskin.

Fishing Owl. Under John's guarded supervision, we ventured along difficult paths and through muddy terrain and were fortunate to catch a fleeting glimpse of the Pel's Fishing Owl before it took cover

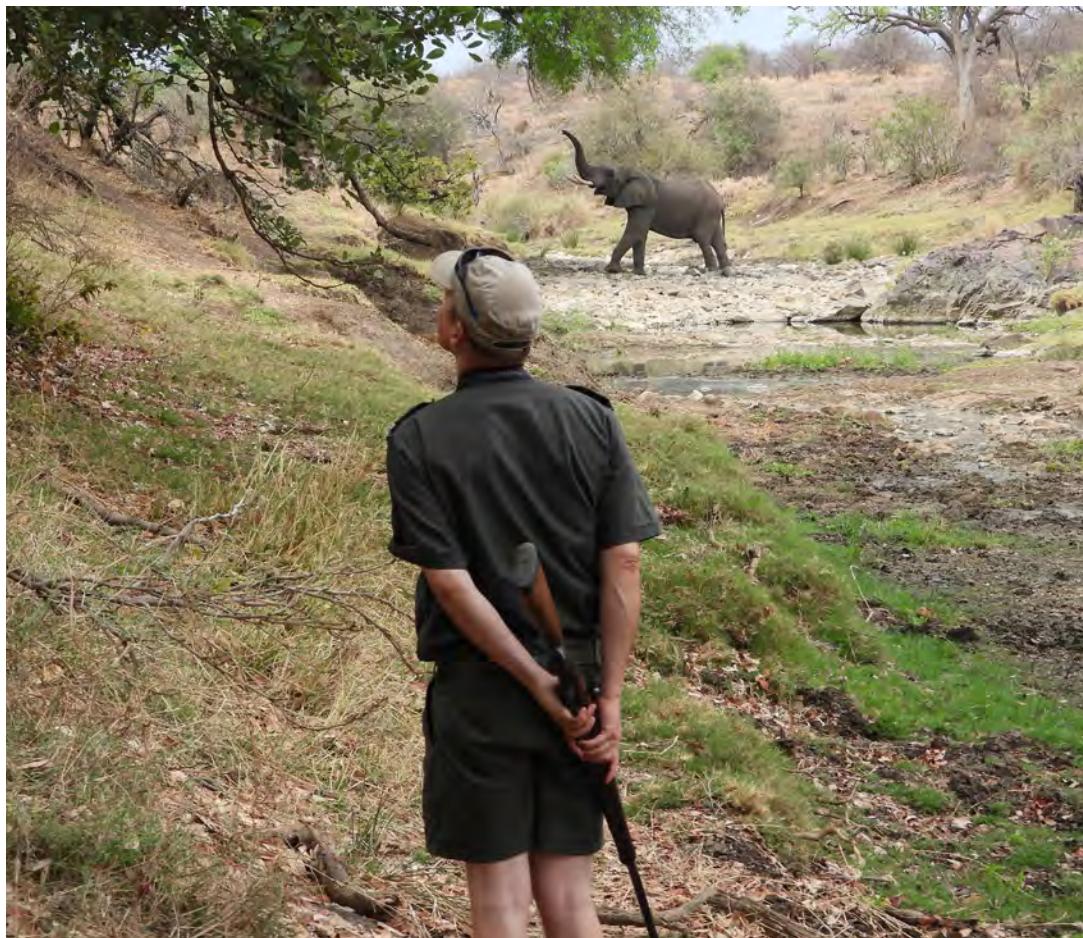
in a distant tree. The Verreaux's Eagle-Owls weren't as skittish and allowed us the opportunity to photograph them. An elephant blocked our path, which delayed our brunch and much-needed refreshments! A



hot and tired group arrived back at camp, somewhat later than expected, but so grateful and satisfied with the morning's excursion.

Our afternoon drive was to the Letaba Bridge to enjoy sundown-

ABOVE Although we only had a fleeting glimpse of a Pel's Fishing-Owl before it took flight, the Verreaux's Eagle-Owls were far more obliging © Derek Engelbrecht.



ers and watch the resident pair of Wahlberg's Eagles catch bats at dusk. Their skilful aerobatic manoeuvres as they snatched bats out of the air were astonishing.

On our last day, Derek guided us on an early-morning walk around camp, pointing out interesting behaviours of certain birds and seeking out the African Barred and Pearl-spotted Owlets.

After a most enjoyable birding experience, we bid a fond farewell to the group and the outstanding

ABOVE Our way back to the vehicles were blocked by an elephant and we had to wait a while for it to move off

© Derek Engelbrecht

guides, Derek Engelbrecht and John Adamson.

Our final tally for the weekend was 180 species!

Thank you to the Honorary Rangers Charles Hardy and Bruce Goetsch for organizing this special event.

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Yellow-billed Oxpecker © Derek Engelbrecht.

# Birding **BIG**day

# 2022

All the Birdlife Polokwane teams, all the results



Birding Big Day 2022 saw five teams from Birdlife Polokwane participating. Most teams opted for the tried and tested Polokwane Plateau-Escarpment-Lowveld route, with one team, Vriende Van Blouberg, participating in the 6 km radius category with the Blouberg Nature Reserve as their focal area. For the third year in a row, Birdlife Polokwane had three teams in the Top 10 overall: The E-birders (overall winners), Wat-Kyk-Jy (4<sup>th</sup> place), and the Red Billed Rocket Tails (10<sup>th</sup> place). Four of the Top 10 teams and three of the first four teams in the country operated between the Polokwane Plateau and the Lowveld. The E-birders also set a new BBD record, breaking the previous record of 335 species, set in 2020 by The Raven Dikkops, by one

species (read more about The E-birders' record-breaking day in this issue). Like last year, six teams clipped the 300 mark in 2022: three from the Limpopo Province, one from Mpumalanga, one from Gauteng, and for the first time and setting a new provincial record, a team from KwaZulu-Natal. The Trippin' Trogons, in overall ninth position, also set a new provincial record for the Western Cape. Well done to all the teams involved.

A summary of the Birdlife Polokwane teams' results follows.

BELOW The distribution of the Top 10 teams on BBD 2022. Team Oculi in Avem from KwaZulu-Natal is the latest team to be inducted into Club 300, and one of the Western Cape teams ended in a respectable 9<sup>th</sup> place overall.



# THE E-BIRDERS

336



## MEMBERS:

Daniel and Derek Engelbrecht, Selwyn Rautenbach

## AREA:

Polokwane-Wolkberg-Woodbush-Letsitele

## HIGHLIGHTS:

Greater Flamingo, Bronze-winged Courser, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark, Blue-spotted Wood Dove, African Cuckoo-Hawk, African Grass Owl, Freckled Nightjar, Arnot's Chat, Garden Warbler

## Dips:

Grey Go-away-Bird, Southern Pied Babbler, Red-backed Mannikin (we had a nest), Magpie Mannikin, Quail-finches, Black-headed Heron, Long-crested Eagle, Red-capped Robin-Chat, Striated Heron, Lesser Masked Weaver



RIGHT African Cuckoo-Hawk  
© Derek Engelbrecht

# WAT-KYK-JY

318

4<sup>th</sup>

## MEMBERS:

Marcia, Richter and Rowan Van Tonder, Jody De Bruyn,

## AREA:

Polokwane-Woodbush-Letsitele

## HIGHLIGHTS:

Dwarf Bittern, Green Sandpiper, Olive-tree Warbler, African Spoonbill, Secretarybird, Booted Eagle, Maccoa Duck, Lesser Kestrel, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Blue-spotted Wood Dove.

## Dips:

Tinkling Cisticola, Red-headed Finch, Giant Kingfisher, Black Saw-wing, Olive Woodpecker, Long-crested Eagle, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, Pale Flycatcher.



Dwarf Bittern © Jody De Bruyn

# RED BILLED ROCKET TAILS

256 10<sup>th</sup>

## MEMBERS:

Mark, Julia and James Friskin, Willie Van der Merwe

## AREA:

Polokwane-Haenertsburg grasslands-Woodbush-Letsitele

## HIGHLIGHTS:

Being mesmerized by a pair of Rufous-cheeked Nightjars calling as they flew just over our heads near "The Koppie" in the Polokwane Game Reserve, adding Olive-tree Warbler to our list, a BBD first for us, the Marabous and waterbirds at Vencor, the three special owl sightings (Western Barn, African Wood and Spotted Eagle-Owl) on the Agatha road.

## Dips:

The lack of raptors, fire-finches, sunbirds, ducks, kingfishers - all unseen and unheard! The windy conditions and torrential rain in Tzaneen which spoilt our progress.



RIGHT Green Sandpiper  
© Mark Friskin

# THE DIKKOPS

230 21<sup>st</sup>

## MEMBERS:

Stan Madden (95) Bruce Goetsch (82) Rob Crosbie (70), Charles Hardy (78).

## AREA:

Polokwane-Woodbush-Letsitele

## HIGHLIGHTS:

Dwarf Bittern, a melanistic Blacksmith Lapwing near Vencor, excellent views of Southern White-faced Owl, Narina Tropic and Olive Woodpeckers. And of course, for our team, seeing both Speckled and Water Dikkops (we don't recognise Thick-knees!) are always a highlight.

## Dips:

Red-headed Weaver (again!), Cape Longclaw and Yellow-billed Stork. We also dipped on nearly all the owls.

It was a pleasure and privilege to spend Birding Big Day with 95 year-old Stan Madden. He is as sharp as ever and remarkably, keeps on the go all day long. He is most definitely a birding legend and an inspiration to all. Another milestone was that The Dikkops now has an average age topping 80 years old. This surely makes us eligible to use the birds' "old" names! We are very happy with this year's sightings total which, as with other teams, could have been higher but for the storm in Tzaneen.



# LUNACHICKS

## 24<sup>th</sup>

# 219

### MEMBERS:

Minkie, Corné and Neléne Prinsloo, and Riana Odendaal

### AREA:

Polokwane-Woodbush-Lowveld

### HIGHLIGHTS:

Greater Painted-snipe with three tiny chicks, Rufous-cheeked Nightjar that landed 3 m from us and called his little heart out, Maccoa Duck, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Cape Parrot

### Dips:

Long-crested Eagle, Green-winged Pytilia, Yellow-billed Kite, Ruff, Short-clawed Lark.



Cape Parrot © Minkie Prinsloo

# VRIENDE VAN BLOUBERG

# 157

(6K CATEGORY)



### MEMBERS:

Leonie Kellerman, Les Reynolds, Saartjie and Danie Van Rensburg, Susan Dippenaar, Jan Fourie, Allen Harrison, Elize and Mossie Mostert.

### AREA:

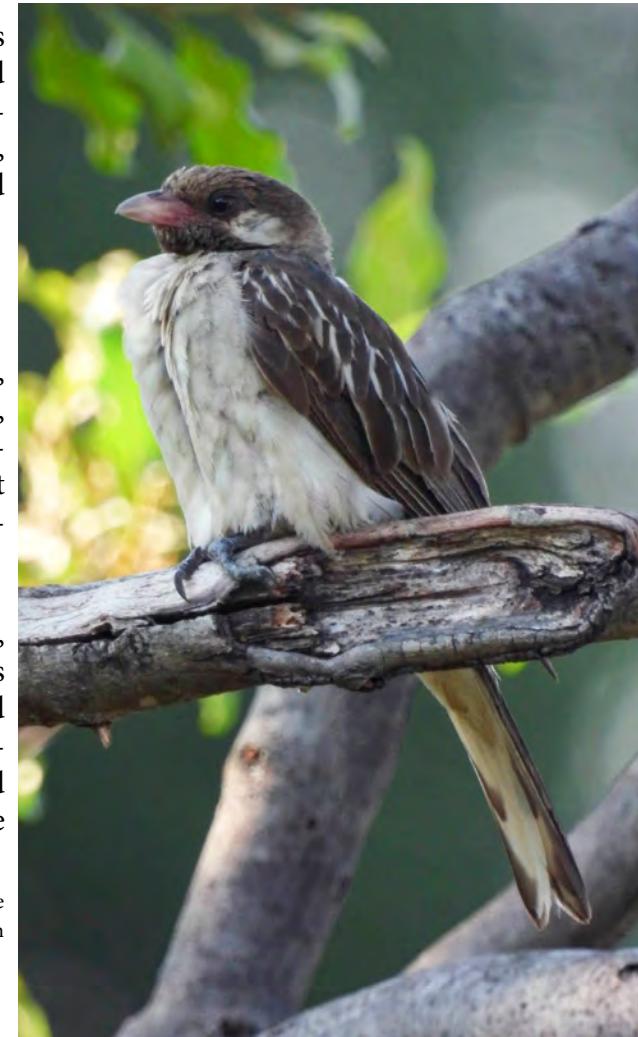
Blouberg Nature Reserve

### HIGHLIGHTS:

Pearl-spotted Owlet, Bearded Scrub Robin, Greater Honeyguide, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Lapwing, Lappet-faced Vulture

### Dips:

Three-banded Courser, Kori Bustard, Ostriches (again!), Lesser Striped Swallow, Willow Warbler, Orange-breasted Bushshrike, Magpie Shrike



RIGHT Greater Honeyguide  
© Leonie Kellerman



# POLOKWANE Wildtuin

TEKS EN FOTOS Richter Van Tonder

**D**it was lekker om weer 'n draai te maak in ons agterplaas saam met die klub. Omdat die wildtuintjie eers 7:00 oopmaak vir besoekers met voertuie, was dit 'n baie rustige afskop. Ons was slegs vyf lede wat die uitstappie mee gemaak het. Dit het gemaak dat ons in slegs twee voertuie beweg het en kon dus met gemak al die spesies uitwys. Die dag was koel met moontlike reën oppad. Daar het reeds al 'n klomp reën gevallen en ons was effe bekommerd oor moontlike nat paaie. Mens sit maklik hier vas.

Ons eerste stop was by die dammetjie by die aalwynkoppie. Hier het ons 'n skaars somerbesoeker opgejaag, 'n Witgatruiter (Green

Gevlekte Ooruil



Piet-my-vrou

Sandpiper). Die outjie maak nou al 'n paar jaar na mekaar 'n draai in ons wildtuintjie. Ons was baie bly ons kon hom weer kry. Rondom die dammetjie het twee koekoek spesies ons ook vermaak: Piet-my-vrou (Red-chested Cuckoo) en 'n Gestreepte Nuwejaarsvoël (Levallant's Cuckoo)

Ons het hierna verder gery en toe by die plaaslike staproete 'n entjie

in gestap. Hier het Willie 'n skilpad gewaar en 'n paar fotos is geneem. Verder met die pad af het ons by 'n operige gedeelte in die veld gestop en die Kortkloulewerik (Short-clawed Lark) het ons met sy kenmerkende roep gegroet. Soos ons met die pad af stadig aan beweeg kon ons almal lekker staaltjies deel oor wat ons al in die verlede beleef het in ons wildtuintjie en veral oor



Swartkopwielewaal

hoe ons dié jaar Birding Big Day gaan aanpak.

Ons volgende stop was by die pieniek plek agter in die wildtuintjie. Hier is altyd heelwat spesies en ons het onder andere Kleinheuningwyser (Lesser Honeyguide), Suidelike Swartmees (Southern Black Tit), Bontroklaksman (Brubru) en nog vele meer gesien.

Ons het toe besluit om die uitstappie kort te hou as gevolg van die reën wat vinning oppad was. Ons het direk na die Dries Abrahamse lapa gery. Daar is 'n Bruinarend (Wahlberg's Eagle) nes oppad soontoe en ons kon mooi sien hoe 'n kuiken in die nes gevoer word! Na nog so 'n paar draaie het ons terug beweeg na die

hoofhek toe en daar in die kampterrein het ons 'n Swartkopwielewaal (Black-headed Oriole) gesien wurms vang.

Ons stap toe net 'n entjie verder en jaag onverwags 'n Gevlekte Oor-uil (Spotted Eagle-Owl) uit 'n boom uit. Hy was nie baie beïndruk met ons nie, maar dit het ons darem die geleentheid gegee om 'n paar fotos te neem.

Dit was toe ook ons laaste spesie vir die dag en het mekaar gegroet. Dankie aan almal wat deel was van die uitstappie. Dis ongelooflik wat ons net 'n klipgooi van ons stad af het. Maak asseblief die moeite om daar te draai. Jy sal nie teleurgesteld wees nie.

Outeur se e-pos: [richter.mcuse@gmail.com](mailto:richter.mcuse@gmail.com)

# THE ROLLER

24 hours of  
dips and surprises,  
disappointments and delights



TEXT Daniel Engelbrecht

**I**t is a quarter past eleven and we are standing at a roadside stop near Haenertsburg, "I'm pretty sure I just heard an owl calling, probably just a barn owl", I said. "Let's give it a minute, maybe it'll call again ... you never know, we could be in for a surprise here", said Derek. Then, suddenly, it called again, much closer, we all looked at each other, was this actually happening?

23 hours, 15 minutes earlier ...

I had barely slept a wink, and here my alarm was going off, it

was go-time! What lay ahead was 24 hours of nonstop birding. Our first goal was to break our own previous record of 326 species set in 2021 and giving us an overall second place, then to have a strike at gold by winning the 2022 edition of BBD, but in the back of our minds we were secretly hoping to break the all-time BBD record of 335 species, set in 2020 by the The Raven Dikkops from Mpumalanga. Given our mildly rotten luck in 2021, we knew our route had it in it to deliver us the record. To execute our plan, we needed to start earlier than last year, and at 00:22 we left

the city lights of Polokwane behind and set off along the Tweefontein road, spotlights at the ready.

This would be our third year on 'the new route' – for those who are not familiar with the rules of Birding Big Day, any competing team has a 50 km radius that they can place anywhere at their own discretion. The challenge then, is simple, 24 hours to find as many species within the chosen area. In 2020, we decided to move our radius centre point a few kilometres further east. It was a gamble; we were giving up the tried, tested and multiple winning route from Polokwane to Let-

sitele, in exchange for something new and exciting. Now, in our third year birding this route, I had no doubt about the potential for a record-breaking score. Was this going to be our year?

As we crossed the imaginary boundary of our 50 km radius, we stopped the car and listened. A Blacksmith Lapwing soon gave away its presence, species #1 for the day, soon followed by one of the big targets on the Polokwane Plateau, Rufous-cheeked Nightjar. Planning is essential on Birding Big Day, and we had a colour-coded target list for each stop on the day. Red-cod-

ed species were species that could only be seen at that specific site, these were of utmost priority and missing a red-coded bird would mean no opportunities to see it later in the day. Yellow-coded species had one alternative site, and green species were likely to be seen at several sites during the day.

So far, we were off to a good start and had seen all of our red-coded species, including Marsh Owl, Temminck's Courser, Southern White-faced Owl and Freckled Nightjar (a species that we hadn't seen in 2021), in addition to an absolute bonus - Bronze-winged Courser falling under the unofficial 'WTF category'. Spirits up! We arrived at our dawn chorus site at 04:00 and scored another red-coded

bird - Pearl-spotted Owlet on arrival. Our mood was then quickly dampened, literally and figuratively, when a thunderstorm that had been threatening all night decided to quit bluffing, bringing with it a cloudburst, strong wind, and pessimism! Spirits down! Our end total would be directly dependent on our dawn chorus, and it simply had to stop raining - thankfully, it did, and in the nick of time too. Our list grew quickly with the usual Acacia veld suspects and a couple of unexpected bonuses thrown in the mix,

BELOW The grasslands at Dik-gale were cooking and we saw several groups of White-bellied Korhaans.



including Common Swift, Icterine Warbler, Amur Falcon and Karoo Thrush (not that easy in our radius), pushing us up to 85 species at 05:45. Unfortunately, we also had to accept our first red-coded dip - Southern Pied Babbler, a species I was almost pathetically keen to have on the list and was seen at the spot two days before. From the dawn chorus site, we set off to Dik-gale, an area of overgrazed grassland and a goldmine of red-coded species. It was an overwhelming success: White-bellied Bustard, Cape Crow, Pink-billed Lark, Orange-breasted Waxbill, Greater Kestrel, Lanner Falcon, Red-capped Lark (#100), Chestnut-backed and Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark, Great Egret and Shaft-tailed Whydah - none of which were seen again on the day. Spirits up! The birding that followed along the Rita Road was equally as spectacular; Pale Chanting Goshawk on the power-line, Yellow-bellied Eremomela on a stunted Acacia, Secretarybird in a fallow field, Great Sparrow drinking water in a puddle and a flock of 50 Greater Flamingo flying overhead!!! Spirits flying!

The wetlands of Makotopong and Sebayeng were next on our route, and we knew that this would be one of our only chances for many waterbirds - we had to make it work. The typical species cooperated well, and in quick succession. Some stand-out birds included



Yellow Canary on the Rita road

Black and Squacco Heron, African Snipe, Magpie Shrike, (again, not an easy bird in our radius), Gorgeous Bushshrike, Pied Avocet and our only pair of African Black Ducks for the day - a rare sight on the Polokwane Plateau and one which we hoped to see along the mountain streams of Magoebaskloof. We had a strict time schedule to stick to, and our last stop for the Polokwane Plateau was the campus of the University of Limpopo. This productive site delivered big-time with Garden Warbler, African Harrier-Hawk, Lesser Honeyguide,



Red-headed Finch, Orange-breasted Bushshrike and a Red-throated Wryneck. We left the Polokwane Plateau with a last-minute Ant-eating Chat on 194 species (at 09:00). It was time to tackle the escarpment. All looking good at this stage!

The Wolkberg is a roll of the dice, either you score big, or it derails your day. The reason is simple, it's an almost 2-hour round trip detour, and if the weather decides to play foul, your day is a write-off. As we approached the mountains, we were relieved to see that we had hit the perfect window, the weather was overcast, but crucially it wasn't raining nor windy, and the birds were vocal. We had a crazy few minutes on the pass into the moun-

tain, adding Striped Pipit, Mocking Cliff Chat, Short-toed Rock Thrush (not even on the cards) and Black Cuckooshrike (#200) in quick succession and before reaching our highest point for the day at close to 2 000 meters above sea level. These montane grasslands gave us Gurney's Sugarbird, Malachite Sunbird, Buff-streaked Chat, Nicholson's Pipit and a host of aerial feeders, including Common House Martin, African Black and Alpine Swift.

Optimism was running high, and a quick roadside session in Haenertsburg netted us Holub's Golden Weaver, Cape Grassbird, African Yellow Warbler and Drakensberg Prinia. Conditions were

sublime as we entered the forests of Magoebaskloof, we had thick cloud cover, and for the first time since trying this new route – no rain! Our first forest call delivered Chorister Robin-Chat, Brown Scrub Robin, African Emerald Cuckoo, Lemon Dove, White-starred Robin and Orange Ground Thrush, amongst others. From our first forest to Woodbush, a few stops along the way added Cape Parrots and Olive Thrush, and we even managed to score multiple vocal Red-chested Flufftails at one of the wetlands. Woodbush Forest chimed with Black-fronted Bushshrike, Barratt's Warbler and Narina Trogon. We were unstoppable at this stage, 30 species up from our 2021 score at

ABOVE Take whatever comes your way, like this completely unexpected surprise - a flock of Greater Flamingo, but accept that you will also be disappointed along the way.

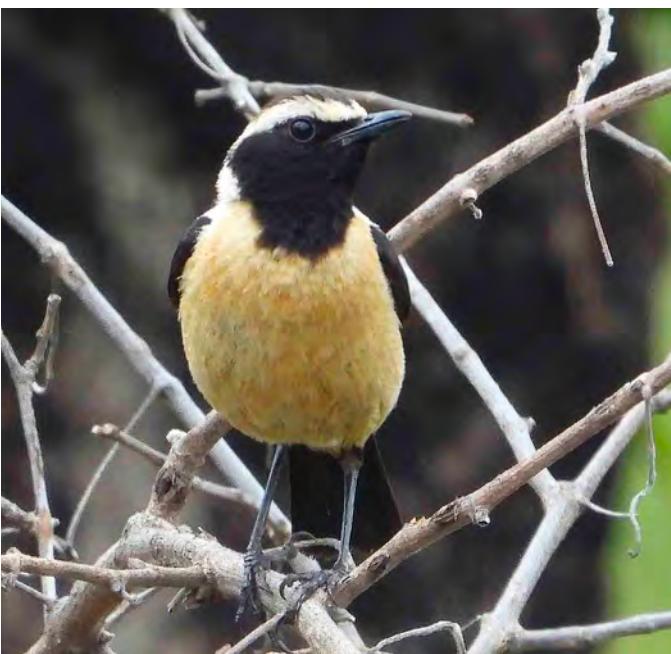
the same point, sitting very comfortably at 260 species at 13:00. And then ... the 'dreaded drought' struck, and it was a bad one!

It started with an unexpected dip, we had found a Red-backed Mannikin on a nest two days earlier, but on the day, it was a no-show! Then Magoebaskloof Dam was a dud, no new birds and several red-coded species dipped. Lushof was a disaster, no Magpie Mannikins, Ledzee



ABOVE This 'sentinel' Rock Kestrel welcomed us to the highlands section of our route.

LEFT The highlands delivered the goods, amongst others, Buff-streaked Chat.



was shameful. Over the next two hours, we only added ten species - one of which was Blue-spotted Wood Dove! But in this game, they all count the same, both the wood dove and the myna only add one. The mercury was ris-

ing to 40° C, and it was clammy with the high humidity. Was this change in our fortunes terminal? Were our hopes of breaking our own record, and perhaps THE record, crushed?

Letaba Estates was our last stop in the Tzaneen area, and after our poor performance at the previous sites, our spirits were now in the doldrums. However, the weather started to change, dark storm clouds appeared towards the southeast, and the temperature began to drop. Slowly, we were emerging as contenders again after adding some big ticks like African Cuck-

oo-Hawk, Dusky Indigobird, Black Sparrowhawk, Grey-rumped Swallow and Ashy Flycatcher. As we set off into the mature woodlands of the Lowveld, we were on 297 species, but you're never safe on Birding Big Day, and the clouds were looking menacing towards Mahela - our final stop during the daylight hours.

BELOW African Cuckoo-Hawk was the catalyst that saw us breaking our drought of the preceding 2 hours.





ABOVE After a late afternoon rainstorm threatened to derail our campaign, it was a race against time to find our Lowveld woodland targets before sunset. Fortunately, Arnot's Chats cooperated well.

Upon arrival at Mahela, we broke 300 species with Red-headed Weaver, subsequently followed by what started off as a light drizzle and soon transformed into heavy rainfall and much lightning. The emotional roller coaster ride we experienced turned to despair once more as we slowly added Wattled Starling, Green Wood Hoopoe, Bennett's Woodpecker and Brown Snake Eagle in

the rain. It was now a race against time, the rain slowly abated, but we were fast losing daylight. Thankful-

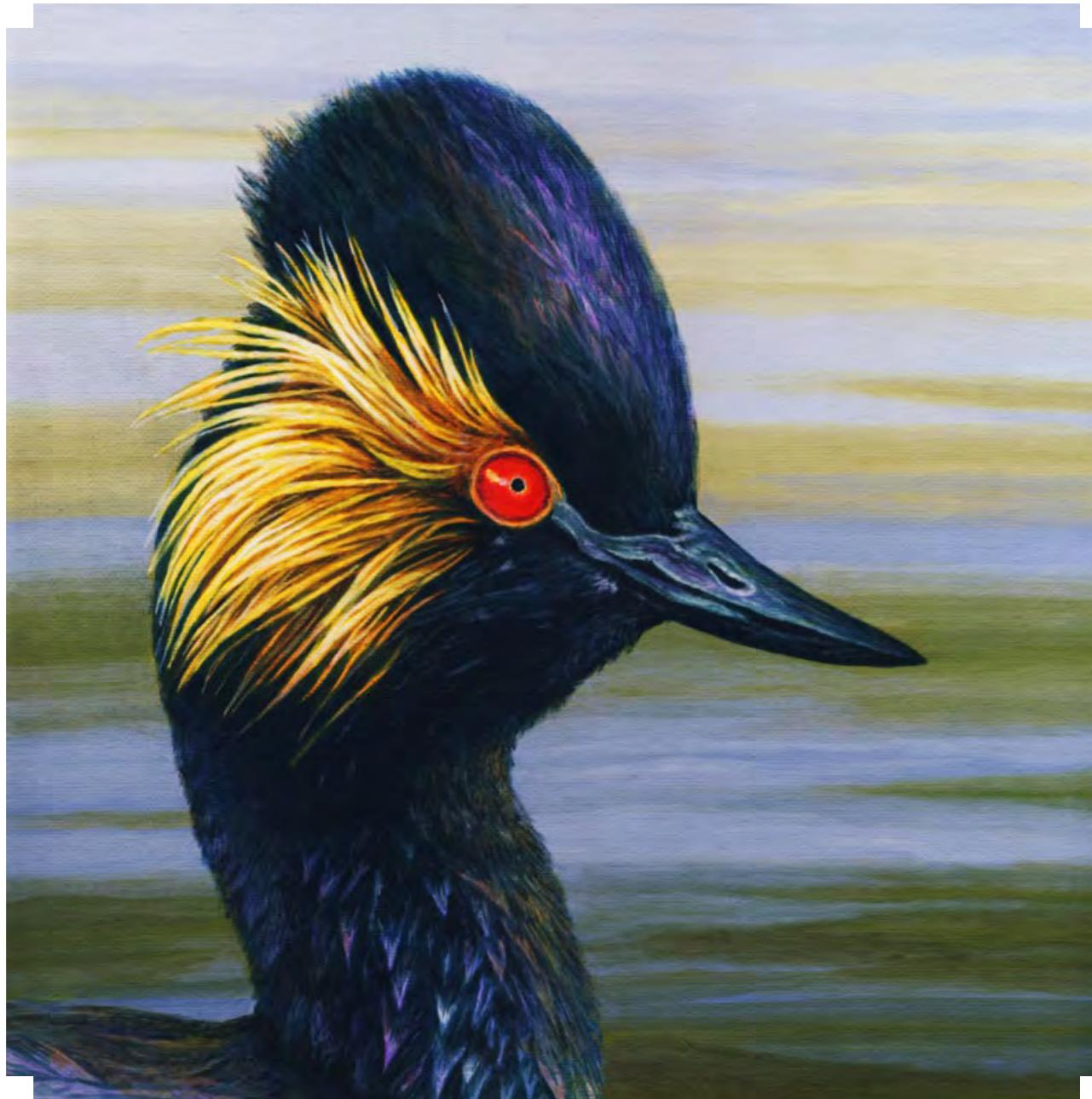
ly, as is often the case, the storm's aftermath brought a flurry of activity. We quickly added 25 species before sunset with highlights including Arnot's Chat, a large flock of Eurasian Hobbies, Hooded and White-backed Vulture, Green-capped Eremomela, Pale Flycatcher, Retz's Helmetshrike, Stierling's Wren-Warbler and Purple Indigobird (our third indigobird species for the day). As the sun sunk below the tall Mopane trees, we were serenaded by African Cuckoos and our last diurnal addition for the day - Groundscraper Thrush - taking us to 327 species and beating our 2021 score. Our first target achieved, but what now? Since we were out of cell-phone signal range, we had no idea of our position relative to the other teams, so we just had to focus on our game. We chatted about our options for the remaining nocturnal targets, and we realized that, if all our targets played ball, we could break the all-time record. So, we set off into the dark, and one by one, our targets got the tick next to their names. African Scops Owl was the first to start calling, followed by African Barred Owlet. A surprised African Spoonbill stood at the water's edge of a Lowveld dam, illuminated in the spotlight, and Water Thick-knees burst into call. We were up to 332 species by the time we left Letsitele and started heading back towards our accommodation near Haenertsburg - 4 species still needed. African Wattled Lapwing was a lucky addition near Taganashoek - 3 to go.

A parliament of African Wood Owls were vocal near Woodbush - 2 to go. A male Buff-spotted Flufftail called from a garden in Haenertsburg - record equalled, 1 species to go! And 1 hour to go. Could we find another species? Would we have to settle for an equalled record? "I'm pretty sure I just heard an owl calling, probably just a barn owl", I said. "Let's give it a minute, maybe it'll call again ... you never know, we could be in for a surprise here", said Derek. Then, suddenly, it called again, much closer, we all looked at each other, was this actually happening? "AFRICAN GRASS OWL!" Selwyn exclaimed. We had done it! 336 species in just under 24 hours, a new Birding Big Day record and what a species to do it with - a bird that wasn't even on our radar and last seen here in 2006. Target #2 achieved!

We had some time to spare to possibly extend our lead and the new record, our realistic options were limited, so we decided to call it a day - a very good day. Although we were in the lead at 23:30, it was a restless night as we awaited the scores of our closest rivals. The next day dawned, and, yes! We did it! We were the 2022 overall winners. Target #3 achieved too!

Birding Big Day 2022 was one for the books and a true testament to the incredible avian diversity along this spectacular route. What's next? Well, 340, of course!

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Black-necked Grebe

# Regulars

# Birds

# in Art

## Black-necked Grebe

Text and Artwork

Willem Van der Merwe

Our featured bird of the day is a Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*). In America, it is sometimes called the Eared Grebe. It is related to the Great Crested Grebe, which was featured here before, but is rather smaller, reaching only 33 cm in length. My picture shows it in breeding plumage, with a deep black head and neck, contrasting with the long, golden-orange cheek plumes. Both males and females have this breeding plumage. The rest of the body is black as well, except for the side feathers, which are deep ru-

fous-brown, and a whitish belly. Outside the breeding season, this grebe has a greyish to blackish colouration on the back and sides and white on the throat, neck and belly. It also then lacks the long cheek plumes. It has a characteristic habit that makes identification easy: it often rolls to one side to preen its flank feathers, exposing its white belly.

This is a species I haven't seen yet, even though it occurs very widely. They're rather patchily distributed over Africa but occur as resident or breeding birds over much of Europe, Central and Eastern Asia, and North America. It does occur over much of South Africa but is rare in the Limpopo Province, being more prevalent to the west and south. Its favourite breeding habitats are large, season-

al expanses of shallow water, often of high salinity, such as in the 'salt pans' found over much of the interior. These occur in rather arid regions and are often dry, only filling up in years of high rainfall. Consequently, Black-necked Grebes are nomadic, flying around to find the best spots each season. They can cover distances of as much as 6 000 km on migration. Despite this, they're not very good at flying, having rather short and narrow wings. They moult their flight feathers immediately after completing the migration, and until their new feathers are grown, they're flightless. But they feed enough for them to regain the strength and body weight lost during the migration. Sometimes they can double their weight! Outside of the breeding

season, they live on various kinds of open water and sheltered bays along the coast.

Having shorter bills than Great Crested Grebes, Black-necked Grebes feed on smaller organisms. They typically dive for less than 30 seconds at a time. They catch aquatic invertebrates both beneath and on the water's surface. They also pick them off the leaves of aquatic vegetation. They're fast enough to snap insects out of the air. While moulting on large salt pans, they feed on the abundant brine shrimp that thrive in such conditions. They take small fishes, frogs and tadpoles too.

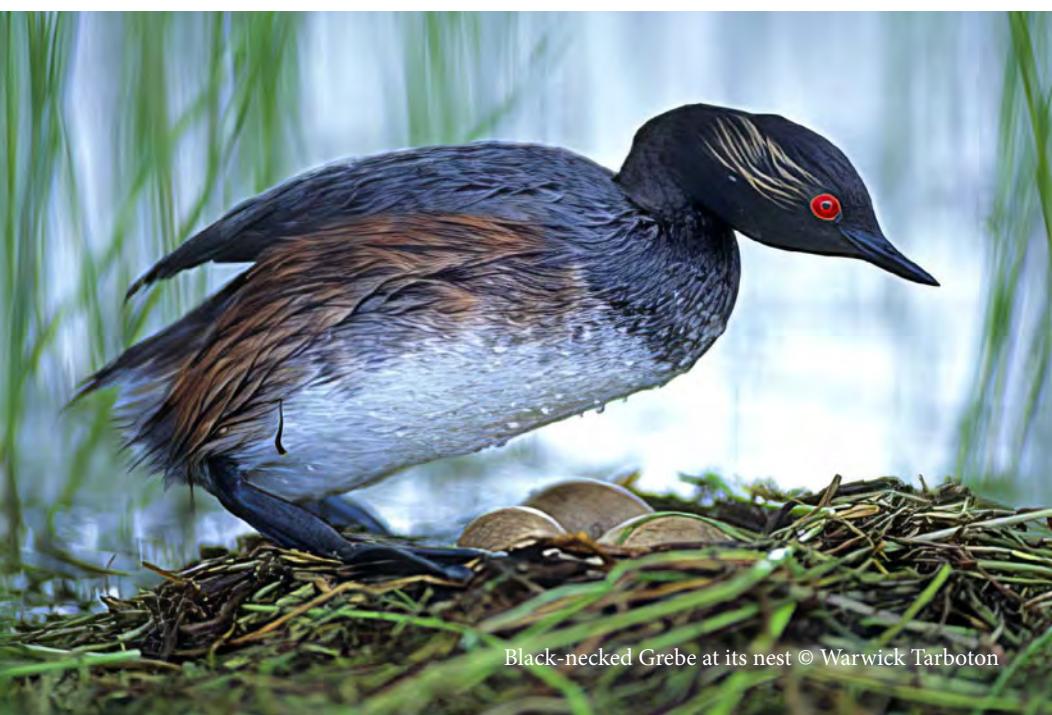
In South Africa, these grebes breed on large expanses of water with emergent vegetation and often some flooded trees. Like in the Great Crested Grebe, the male and female perform elaborate displays to each other to strengthen their bond. They utter courtship and territorial calls: a squeaky whistle and a trill. They build their nests singly or in colonies. The nest is a big heap of floating vegetation anchored to the bottom or to aquatic plants. The female lays two to four eggs but sometimes lays an egg or two in the nest of a different couple, so that nests may occasionally have up to six eggs in them. Both sexes incubate. As in the Great Crested Grebe, they may cover the eggs with vegetation if they leave the nests due to a disturbance. The chicks hatch with a downy covering and open eyes. Although they can swim

already, for a few days, they mostly ride around on their parents' backs. The parents catch food and hand it to the chick's beak-to-beak. They may also drop food items on the water surface for the chicks to pick up. This way, the chicks gradually learn to catch their own food.

The Black-necked Grebe may be the most abundant grebe in the world at present, with a population that might number over 4 million individuals. It occurs very widely and is not considered endangered. It did suffer in the past, as the Great Crested Grebe did, from being hunted for its soft plumage or 'grebe fur'. It is still hunted on a small scale in some places. It also is vulnerable to various outbreaks of diseases carried by the small invertebrates and fish on which they feed, such as the West Nile virus. But because these grebes can raise two clutches of eggs in good breeding seasons, they can rapidly recover their numbers after disease epidemics. They're occasionally harmed by oil spills along the coast.

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View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:



Black-necked Grebe at its nest © Warwick Tarboton

# Reflections BIRDS

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

## The S99 Mahonie Loop

Part 1 (the eastern and northern section of the route)

Chris Patton

In this first edition of 'Reflections - Birding in SANParks' Limpopo parks' for 2023, it would seem appropriate to wish readers a happy New Year... or as they say in Scotland, Happy Hogmanay...

Hogmanay Hogwash... Let's rather celebrate Mahogany...

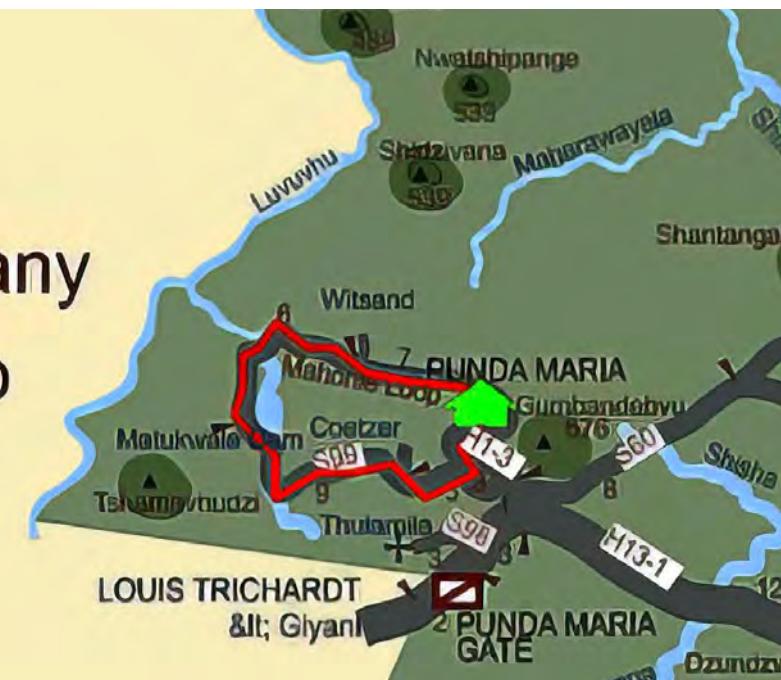
What am I jabbering about? As lovers of birds and wildlife and all things Kruger, we will all have our favourite drives... the ones that fill us with anticipation and stir wonderful memories of former sightings. Kruger has a whole plethora of wonderful roads, but for me, one that has such special memories and to which I feel an almost spiritual bond is the 25 km of gravel road that circles Punda Maria Camp in

the far north-western section of the Park.

Its official route code is the S99, but it is known by all as the Mahonie Loop, or by those who like to refer to the name in English, the Mahogany Loop, a tribute to the many magnificent Pod Mahogany trees *Afzelia quanzensis* that can be viewed when circumnavigating the Loop.

Some readers may recall that in my very first 'Reflections' article back in July 2020, I lauded my fondness for Punda Maria Camp, and that love has much to do with the proximity of the Camp to the Mahonie Loop, with its alluring vegetation, as the road ambles through rugged sandstone hills, and the memories of some of my formative wildlife encounters trav-

## Mahogany Loop



ABOVE Map of the Mahonie/Mahogany Loop (visit [https://www.krugerpark.co.za/Kruger\\_Park\\_Game\\_Visiting\\_Routes-travel/mahogany-loop-map.html](https://www.krugerpark.co.za/Kruger_Park_Game_Visiting_Routes-travel/mahogany-loop-map.html)).

elling its circumference... my first wild dog, my first pangolin, lifer sightings as a teenager of Narina Trogon, Gorgeous Bushshrike, Dusky Lark, African Golden Oriole, Pale Flycatcher, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, the grey-headed twins Brown-necked Parrot and Grey-headed Kingfisher), and even adult personal firsts after entering SANParks' employ in Pennant-winged Nightjar and Ayres's Hawk-Eagle. I have too many memories of birding (and beasting) this Loop to condense into one edition, so I am going to break my recollections into two parts ... This edition, I'll focus on the eastern and northern portion of the Loop as one drives anti-clockwise from Camp, as it was this portion of the route that produced my love

at first sight sightings in the form of that wild dog pack, and a Dickinson's Kestrel on my debut journey around it ... but more of those later.

The love affair started in April 1984, on my family's first-ever trip to Kruger's Far North. Just 13 years old (my birthday was actually during the trip), and on only our family's second visit to Kruger since our immigration two years earlier, this trip was unusual for a family visit, because it wasn't just the four



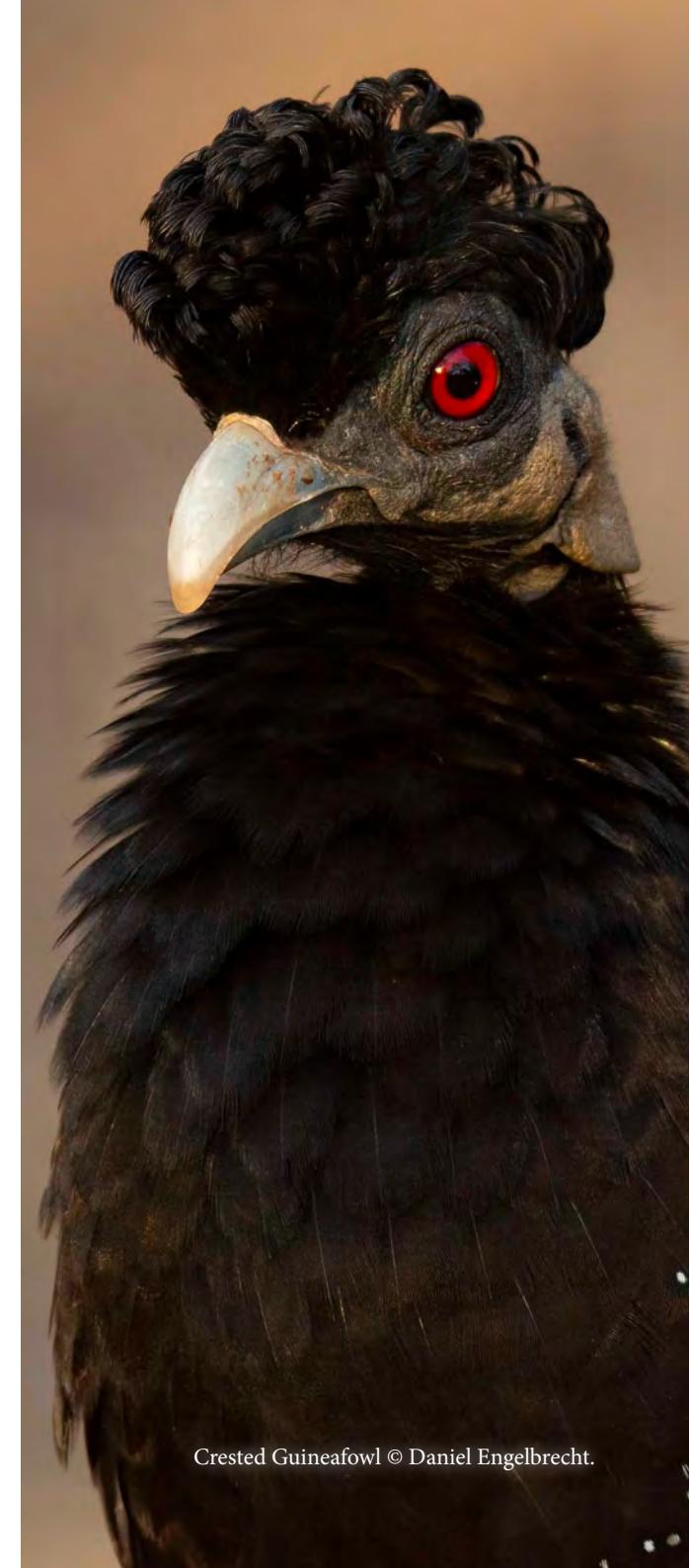
ABOVE One of many massive pod mahoganies that line the Mahonie Loop © Joep Stevens.

of us. We had a gentleman named Don Hanley with us, also from our native Northern Ireland, and one of my father's business colleagues. I've never seen him again since that trip. Still, I firstly remember his name as being almost the same as the front-man of 'The Eagles' rock group Don Henley, which of course, as a life-long birder, has always been among my favourite bands, as much for their name as their legendary music. But the real reason I remember Don is because he had a fancy camera, and under my urging, took a wonderful photograph of the Dickinson's Kestrel we saw on my maiden journey around the loop, and which he sent us out as one of a series of slides from his trip. I was

immensely proud of the image, because, given it was the mid-1980s, and pre-internet and digital cameras, it was, in my opinion, better than any of the other images of this species that were available at the time in the various bird books I had access to ... sadly almost four decades later, I have no idea where that DK slide is, so cannot share it with the readers ... But I've got way ahead of myself...

Over the years when I've enthused about the Mahonie, more than one misguided individual

who has driven it has remarked that they found the vegetation too dense in places and the route somewhat devoid of animals. This is heresy ... the vegetation is amazing, and much of the wildlife is found nowhere else in the Park, and it cannot be compared to the more open thornveld plains of Kruger's south, where the numbers of game animals might be greater. I believe part of the negative sentiment is that the Loop doesn't have many water points ... There are only four permanent water points on the route ... two bore-hole/troughs and two dams, although one of these is now breached in terms of the Park's evolving water policies, and so remains only as a natural fountain filled depression, that usually has little more than a pool of water. There are also a couple of creeks and streams that, in the rainy season, will create fords across the road, but they, like one of the troughs and the other dam, are in the western section and another article.



Crested Guineafowl © Daniel Engelbrecht.

But back to the route ... The turn-off from the H13-2 tarred access road into the Camp is only a short distance from the Camp's Gate. You turn left off the tar, and after passing some staff housing, the road hugs the southern base of Dimbo, the hill complex on which Punda Maria is built on the southwestern slopes. There is always a plethora of woodland species on parade, and if it is early in the morning, or also late in the afternoon when you drive this stretch, it is an excellent place to hear and see African Barred Owlet. And like the Camp itself, the slopes of these hills are often home to coveys of Crested Guineafowl.



The shadow of Dimbo doesn't last forever, with the dense woodland of its slopes, and the road soon moves into more open sandveld woodland, and bends from directly eastward to a north-westerly direction, towards the back slopes of Dimbo, while to the east, a little distance away is the looming hulk of the sacred mountain Gumbandebvu, which I will write about in a future article about the S60 and the road to Klopperfontein.

BELOW Moonrise over Gumbandebvu Hill from eastern Mahonie © Joep Stevens.



As one starts northwest, the first of the four water points is down a little mini loop to the left towards the south-eastern slopes of Dimbo Hill. This is the breached (and unnamed) dam I wrote of earlier. In the 1980s and 1990s, when the dam wall was still in place, it was a reliable place to tick Little Grebe, but now the volume of water is too little, and Three-banded Plover, African Pied Wagtail and Common Sandpiper are more likely to be what's found.

The dense woodland on the slopes of Dimbo is alive with numerous birds, and home to Narina Trogan. If you sit quietly, in the vicinity of this waterhole, it is not usually difficult to pick up the pulsing exhaled hoot of these colourful and

ABOVE Usually seen aerially, but this early stretch of the Mahonie could produce Long-tailed Paradise Whydahs feeding on the abundant seed content on the open ground  
© Chris Patton

ventriloquial birds. Brown-necked and Brown-headed Parrots, Purple-crested Turacos and Grey Go-away-birds should also be heard, while in the summer, there will be several cuckoo species.

There is also a tangled copse of bushes and trees on the left of the road that is particularly good for migrant warblers ... I have seen Marsh, Willow and Icterine here, although the first species is more a

case of listening to their diagnostic tic sound, as they seldom reveal themselves clearly. The open space around the waterhole is a good place to watch the dynamics between the various seed-eating species; with buntings, waxbills, weavers, pytilias, canaries, sparrows and firefinches bound to be present, and so too their parasitic cousins, the whydahs and indigobirds, the former with their extravagant plumes in the summer months that the Pin-tailed and Long-tailed Paradise Whydahs show-off.

I now take readers back to my matric holiday in December 1988, when my friend Anthony Mills, who, a few months older than me,

then just turned 18, and freshly got his driver's license. We thus negotiated the use of his mom's Volkswagen Passat station wagon and went on a 3-week camping tour of the Park, which included several nights in Punda Maria. Apart from a day trip to Pafuri, we mostly drove around the Mahonie multiple times and had the mind-blowing experience of finding African Golden Oriole and White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike on the same branch of the same tree, not too far from the breached dam. At one point, both were viewable in the same binocular view.

Being teenagers who had just finished high school, we did not yet have cameras fit for bird photogra-

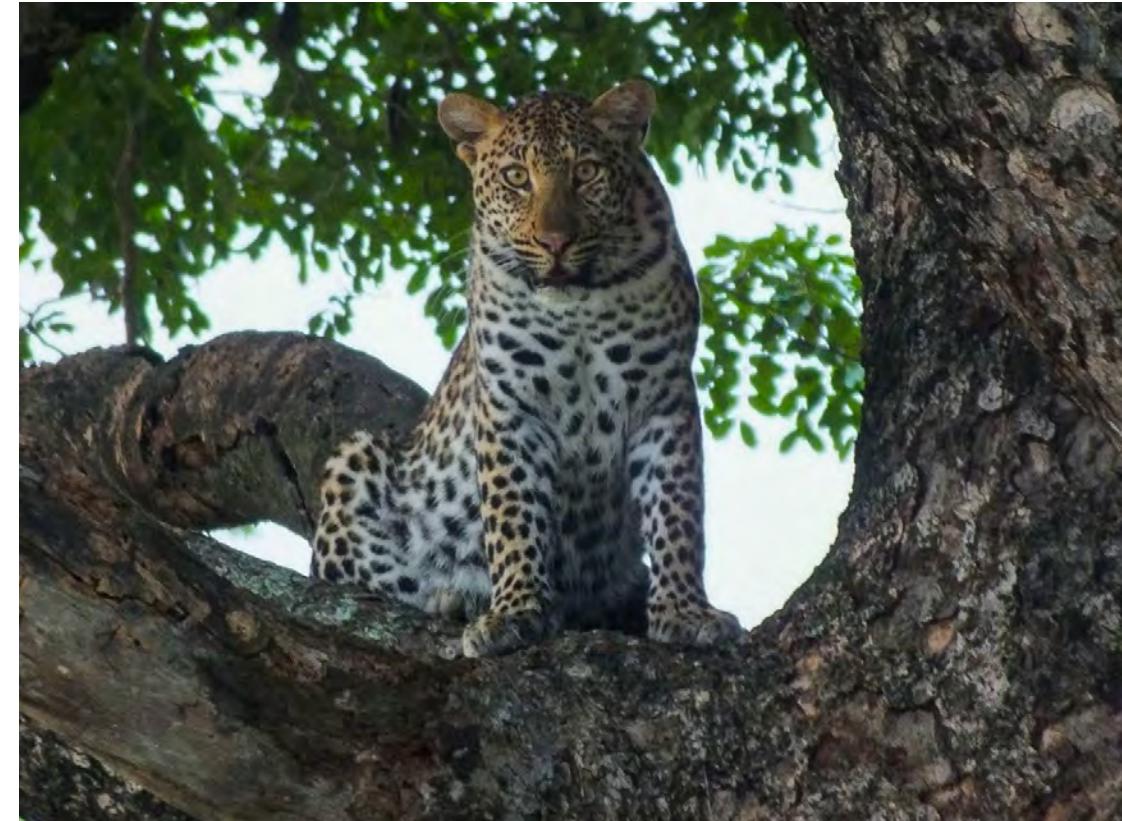
phy, as cameras in the 1980s were more precious commodities. Sadly, I have no images of these wonderful sightings, other than my own mental image. I spoke with Ant recently and reminded him of the enormity of our sighting. He gleefully recalled it with the same joy as I ... Although over the years of working in the Park I have seen both these species again, they are both scarce, and the sightings are always treasured ... but to see them alongside each other was something truly unique. I'm no tree expert, but I'm pretty sure it was in one of the magnificent pod mahoganies I wrote of earlier ... My former colleague Joep Stevens, now retired after over 30 years of service,

is arguably the Park's leading historian, running the Kruger History Facebook pages for his sins ... but he's also an accomplished tree expert. He sent me a photo of that very tree which he assures me is indeed one of the pod mahoganies, just with more open foliage than the one shown earlier in the article.

OPPOSITE The very tree that provided my first African Golden Oriole and White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike in a stupendous double act in December 1988

© Joep Stevens

BELOW A leopard in my lucky tree © Chris Patton.





LEFT Almost submerged in the mid-stratum of a tree at the end of the Witsand cul-de-sac, this African-Hawk Eagle obligingly posed for photos  
© Chris Patton.

that emerged when the borehole was sunk. From a birding point of view, I'd never had any remarkable sightings at the trough, but it is forever etched in my brain as where I saw my first pack of wild dogs back in 1984 as they lolloped past the drinking trough on a hunt for nyala or impala (I can't remember which).

It must be my lucky tree, because in February 2017, I was gazing into the same tree, this time not at a cuckooshrike or an oriole, but into the soulful stare of a leopard. This time I did get a photo, which, although not bird related, I am sure readers will enjoy.

The next major landmark one comes to is a turn-off to the right/north. This is to the borehole and water trough called Witsand, and is 4 km northwest of Punda Maria, but 7 km along the Mahonie from Camp in an anti-clockwise direction. Sunk and named in 1973 by then ranger Johan Kloppers it is named after the fine white sand

But I have one more recent birding encounter of note from the tree-lined cul-de-sac at the end of the access road from December 2017. I was in the passenger seat of my car with my then 18-year-old daughter learning to drive. Like many teenage girls she's not been the biggest birding fan, but even she was excited by this encounter when she casually asked what's that huge bird above us Dad? To my astonishment, as I looked up, a couple of metres directly above the car, this imperious African Hawk-Eagle was staring back down at us.



ABOVE One of the countless baobabs along the Mahonie © Joep Stevens.

past where the Witsand cul-de-sac and S99 junction offer such an opportunity, particularly in the early mornings. They tend to be quite vocal, so they often give away their presence, but it is a delight to see them freshly emerged and serenading the new day.

The next 3 or 4 km are the most northerly section of the drive, and one has the northern hills of the Dimbo Hill complex on the left. At the same time, to the right, there are occasional views looking out over the Levhuvhlu River Valley, one of the Limpopo River's major tributaries. The woodland will be busy, particularly in summer, and the cornucopia of cuckoos is joined by a bonanza of bee-eaters, when European and Southern Carmine join the resident Little and White-fronted Bee-eaters.

This was also the stretch of the route where we found that Dickinson's Kestrel perched on a dead tree. On that matric holiday I reminisced about, it was also on this stretch that we found our first Pale Flycatcher (called Mouse-coloured Flycatcher in 1988) and our first Grey-headed Kingfisher (then called Grey-hooded). Unlike the oriole and cuckooshrike, I have managed to secure photos of this species over the years. But ironically, when I phoned up Anthony to ask for his memory of the oriole and cuckooshrike sight-



ing, he remembered that fondly, but his favourite memory was of seeing Dusky Lark on this northern part of the Loop. He lives in Cape Town and has lived there or overseas since we left school, and apparently, that sighting some 34 years ago is the only time he's seen a Dusky Lark, while for me, who spent more time in the Park, it was an uncommon and irregular species, but a bird that one is always pleased to see...

Another frequent and desirable sighting of this northern stretch of the route is the local family of

ABOVE Look closely along the horizontal branch of the above baobab, at a Grey-headed Parrot freshly emerged from its nest hole, and its mate flying off to the right  
© Chris Patton.

Southern Ground Hornbill. They are, of course, widespread over much of the Park, but there must be a local nesting site, and the dense woodland means they often march in the road, with their purposeful strut and seem quite used to cars and human presence. The



Summer migrants that can be seen along the Mahonie Loop.

ABOVE European Bee-eater

© Daniel Engelbrecht,

LEFT Grey-headed Kingfisher

© Daniel Engelbrecht,

BELLOW Dusky Lark - my friend Anthony's favourite reflection of birding the Mahonie

© Chris Patton.



below photo may not be an ideal pose, with both the adult bird and the juvenile looking away at the wrong moment, but their feather and eye-lash detail are so evident with them being so close, as well as showing the difference between the bill orifice between the adult and youngster.

About 4 or 5 km after the Witsand turn-off, the road will swing sharply left and starts heading directly south... One is now

ABOVE Adult and juvenile Southern Ground Hornbill on the Mahonie Loop  
© Chris Patton.

roughly at the halfway point and has completed the eastern and northern sides of the Loop's parallelogram shape, so this seems an excellent place to pause the story, until next time.

Author e-mail: [chris.patton@sanparks.org](mailto:chris.patton@sanparks.org)

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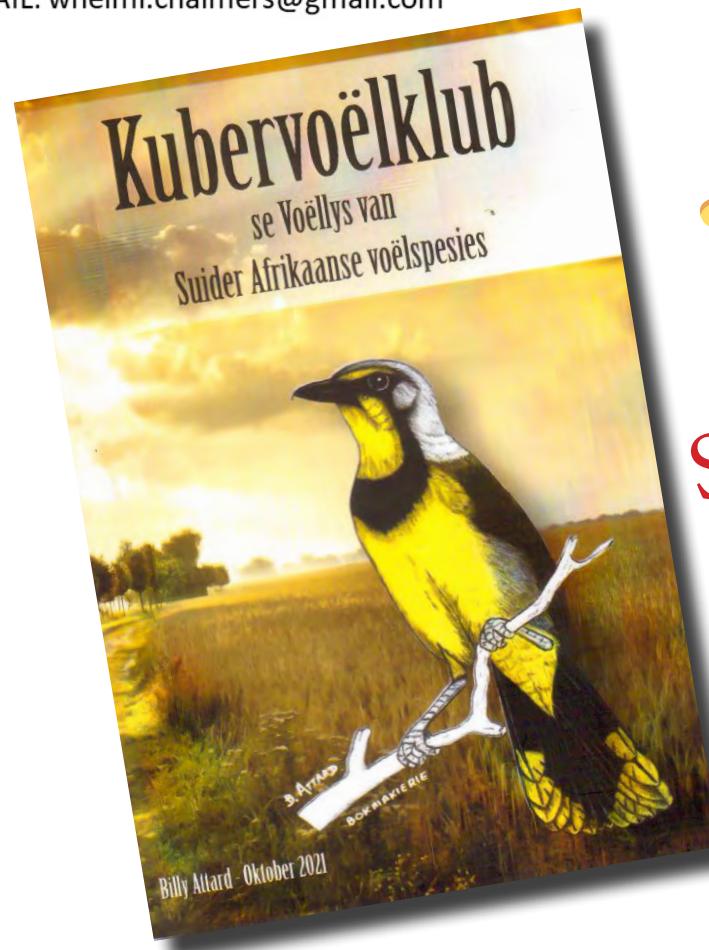
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# AFRICAN FINFOOT

## The obliging skulker

BY Derek Engelbrecht

Everyone has a story about one of Africa's most iconic and sought-after birds – the African Finfoot. And as with all stories, some have a happy ending and others, well, not (yet). If you are in the latter category, take heart, I don't know of any African Finfoot

story that didn't eventually end in elation. Some stories are just longer than others. Your time will come, and I am confident it will be when you least expect it. To me, African Finfoot is synonymous with the word 'surprise'.

I still have vivid memories of my first encounter with African

Finfoot – and it could not have been in a more unlikely setting – a beach! My girlfriend (and later to be my wife) and I were sitting on the beach at Mtunzini, close to where a small stream abruptly ends on the beach. Each lost in our own thoughts, staring at the waves crashing a few metres in front of us,

I noticed movement in my peripheral vision. I turned my head, and looked straight at a female African Finfoot, a mere 10 metres from where we were sitting! We were

A male African Finfoot  
© Daniel Engelbrecht

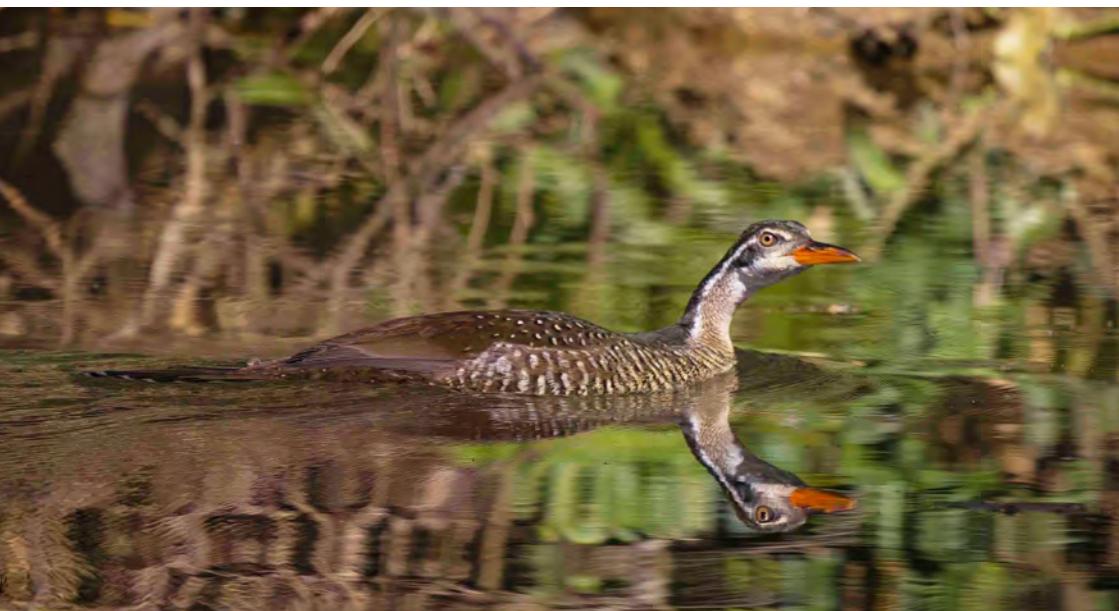


mesmerised as she walked along the edge of the little stream, constantly pecking away at tiny morsels unseen, eventually entering the water and slowly swimming upstream again. That is African Finfoot for you – when you least expect it, finfoot springs a surprise. Since then, I've had countless finfoot experiences, all cherished, and the common denominator with all of them is the word 'surprise'. Surprised by its appearance from seemingly nowhere but also surprised by how quickly it could vanish into thin air again.

There is also some concealed advice in the description of my first experience with African Finfoot. Although variously described as secretive, elusive, skulking, stealthy, and sly (and all of this is

true to a certain degree), it can also be surprisingly obliging once it is aware of your presence. But it is only obliging on its terms; if you remain motionless, it will treat you to a mind-blowing experience, if not, well, that will be the end of it. The secret to seeing finfoot is to sit quietly and be prepared to wait – I once clocked over 2 hours waiting for one to show itself! The finfoot often gives the impression of being somewhat myopic as it seems peculiarly slow in detecting a motionless object. It is not unusual to find one swim past you within 2 metres,

**BELOW** A female glides past within metres of us, giving us a cursory glance to see if we are playing by her rules of sitting still  
© Daniel Engelbrecht.



Special feature



**ABOVE** A male sunning on a partially submerged tree stump. Is this the origin of the family name *Heliornithidae*, meaning 'sunbird'?  
© Daniel Engelbrecht.

even if you are only fairly well hidden. I'm not saying they don't see you, in fact, they are all too aware of your presence and will constantly give a cursory glance in your direction.

The African Finfoot belongs to the order Gruiformes, the cranes and allies, a group of birds notorious for a disproportionate number of notorious skulkers in its midst, such as flufftails, rails, and crakes. The family name, *Heliornithidae*, literally translates to 'sunbird', a name strangely inappropriate for a species that, for the most part, seems to spend its life in the shadows of overhanging vegetation. But

there may be a clue to the origin of this apparent misnomer. Their foraging bouts are regularly interspersed with 'sunning' and preening for anything from 5–15 minutes while standing on an exposed log or rock. The preening is often interrupted by periods of 'just staring' and looking at them in this state, they seem to relish the sun. I have often wondered if there isn't some-

thing more to this sunning behaviour than meets the eye. Do their feathers perhaps get waterlogged? Another peculiar habitat, possibly related to glare from the sun or the water's surface, is the incessant use of its nictitating membrane. I was first made aware of this by Jody De Bruyn (see *The Lark* 33), and you'd be surprised to see in how many photos the nictitating membrane is partially or fully extended. The genus name, *Podica*, refers to the most striking feature of the African Finfoot – its disproportionately large, bright orange feet and yellow claws. The feet are lobate, like those of coots, grebes and phalaropes. It is not well known (not surprisingly), but the middle claw on each foot is pectinated, like the claws of nightjars and coursers. And while on

the topic of claws, let me blow you away by another Finfoot Fun Fact. African Finfoot has a short, bright orange claw (not a carpal claw), about 12–18 mm long at the end of an independently movable first digit. This claw and movable digit presumably enable finfoot to climb and clamber in vegetation, like the famous Hoatzin of South America. The specific epithet, *senegalensis*, refers to the type locality, which may have been Senegal, but back in the day, Senegal was loosely applied to much of tropical West Africa.



BELOW The pectinated middle claw of an African Finfoot. This photo is of a museum study skin held in the Ditsong Museum of Natural History  
© Mpho Malematja.



ABOVE The orange wing claw of this male is only just visible when he stretches his wings © Daniel Engelbrecht.

RIGHT The tiny wing claw of a 2-day old African Finfoot chick  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

The African Finfoot has a characteristic swimming style; it moves its head rhythmically back and forth in an exaggerated manner with each leg stroke, the broad, stiffened tail fanned on the surface. There is much speculation about the purpose of the stiffened tail feathers, and most suggestions focus on enhancing stability in the water and even reducing the wake behind the bird. You can take my word for it – a fanned tail most certainly doesn't prevent a wake from forming! Having watched it clambering about in and on vegetation,



I believe the stiffened tail feathers serve a more terrestrial function – helping to maintain the bird's balance when clambering about. To this end, the stiffened tail feathers are analogous to the stiffened tail feathers of woodpeckers, mainly serving a propping function. The excessive degree of wear on even moderately old tail feathers suggests they are exposed to much abrasion, more than one would expect from mere swimming. On land, the finfoot seems a bit clumsy, walking a bit like a duck. But my goodness, if it needs to, it can run at a great pace (I'd say a scurrying francolin's pace), as I found when I accidentally stumbled upon one on an island once.

African Finfoot is resident throughout most of the tropical and subtropical forest belt of West, Central and southern Africa, with localised populations in low-lying areas of East Africa and in Ethiopia. It is absent from the drier southwestern and northeastern regions of the continent. In southern Africa, it is found in most east or south-draining river systems, from the Zambezi River south to the rivers of the Western Cape, as far west as the Breede River System. The westward range extension has been somewhat remarkable. It was first reported from the Kouga River near Uitenhage in 1942 (Ostrich 13:166), the Groot Brak River near George in 1976 (Cape Bird Clube

Newsletter 125:3), Little Brak River near Mossel Bay in 1986 (Bee-eater 38(2):19), and the Breede River in the Bontebok National Park near Swellendam in 2007 (Promerops 271:21). The most westerly known record of the species in South Africa was first reported from the Breede River near Robertson in 2017 (Promerops 308:34) and is still present in the general area at this point in time. There is one intriguing record from the 1800s of a presumed vagrant from the Berg River in the vicinity of Langebaan.

The above-mentioned records and a few records from the Free State and the upper reaches of the Limpopo River system (Marico River), show that the species exhibits some local movements. These movements may be driven by the species biology, e.g., post-juvenile dispersal, or in response to unfavourable conditions such as droughts, poor water quality or alien invasive species such as water hyacinth infestation. This suggests finfoots must be able to fly strongly, but in all my years of observing finfoot, the closest resemblance to flight I ever witnessed is its almost comical attempt to get airborne by pattering away on the water, hence the Afrikaans name Watertrapper. I have never seen an airborne finfoot, but you never know, finfoot always springs a surprise.

Another somewhat contentious debate is African Finfoot's ap-



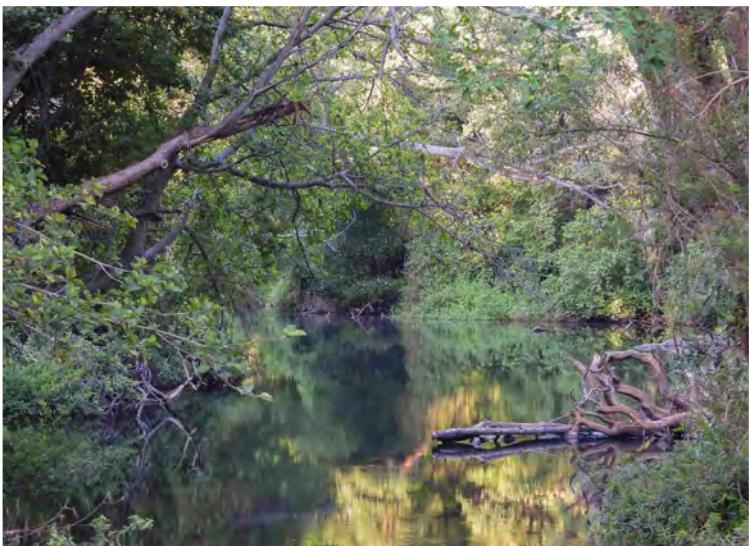
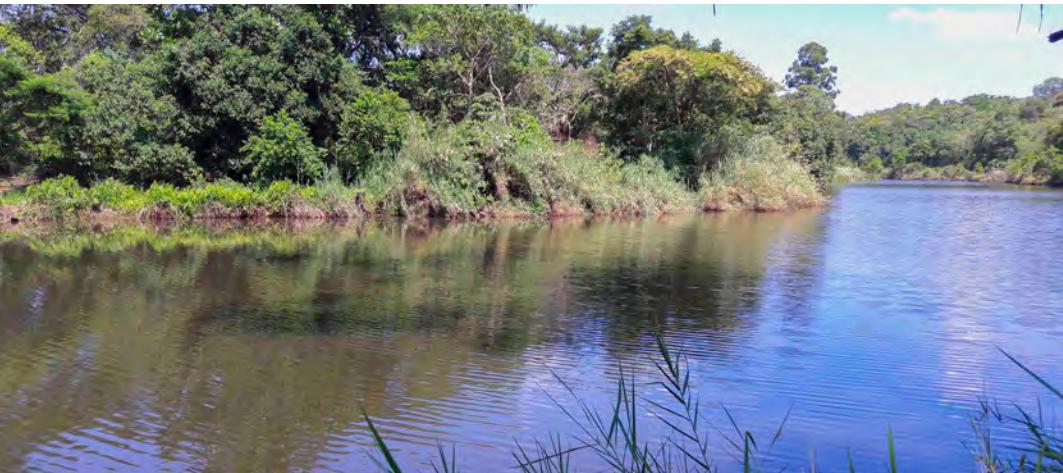
ABOVE A Google Earth image showing the westward range expansion of African Finfoot in the Eastern and Western Cape.

parent diving abilities. Again, I have never seen a finfoot diving, whether to escape a threat or pursuing prey. Yes, they occasionally capture prey below the surface of the water, but then it is seldom more than a beak's length deep. Their first response to a potential threat is to swim away, with head held low and heading for the closest cover, only resorting to the pattering flight as a last resort. So, although I have never seen a finfoot diving, I also can't see why they wouldn't use it as a last resort to escape a predator such as an African Fish Eagle.

Throughout its range, African Finfoot inhabits unpolluted, perennial streams and impoundments with well-vegetated banks and vegetation overhanging the water's edge. Although it prefers the slow-flowing reaches and backwaters of a river, I have

seen it foraging in the riffles of a fast-flowing stream. Stationary objects such as rocks, boulders and dead trees in the water are used for sunning and preening purposes, but also for cover. These objects are not a prerequisite as they may also retreat to a shady spot on the bank for self-maintenance activities.

While foraging, it keeps close to cover such as bank vegetation, dead or fallen trees, rocks and boulders, occasionally foraging on land, but never far from the water. African Finfoot is a restless forager and regularly picks or stabs at objects as it swims along. It will



Typical African Finfoot habitat on the Levhuvhu River (ABOVE), Blyde River (LEFT) and the Letaba River (BELOW)  
© Derek Engelbrecht.



ABOVE A female preening under the cover of some overhanging vegetation.

frequently go under overhanging vegetation or an undercut bank to forage there, where it may be out of view for several minutes before emerging again. They are known to associate with larger animals, such as hippos and forest buffaloes, in or near water, taking advantage of prey items disturbed by these animals. I once observed a female following in the wake of a crocodile moving through the shallows, picking up invertebrates disturbed by the reptile. It forages by picking up objects from the water's surface, vegetation, or other solid structures such as tree stumps, rocks, boulders, and dam walls. Although uncommon, they have also been recorded foraging in open water, far from the edge

of large impoundments like Lake Kariba in Zimbabwe and the Tzaneen Dam (see Clayton Cook's note in this issue of *The Lark*).

Their diet includes mainly a range of aquatic invertebrates such as beetles, snails, crabs, prawns, shrimps, dragonflies (a lot!), but also terrestrial invertebrates such as ants, termite alates, butterflies and grasshoppers. Vertebrates recorded in its diet include fish, frogs, and snakes - and there is even a record of a Bronze Mannikin eaten by a bird in captivity! So, anything goes, really.



Although not particularly vocal, it has quite a repertoire, but the context of many of the calls are still unknown. The most common call is a loud, duck-like *kwak-kwak-kwak* call and a faster chattering *tack-tack-tack* call increasing in tempo, and seems to have a territorial function. Females also call a soft nasal and monkey-like *chak* call to the chicks. African Finfoot also has a deep, booming sound, presumably a song, and is only performed at night – I'd love to hear it! When handled, reports have it that the bird seems to inflate itself and then produce a deep growling sound followed by a squeal resembling hissing as it deflates.

Being such a secretive bird, it is not surprising that little is known of its breeding biology, but I consider myself privileged to have observed

parental activity at four nests. Of the four, I couldn't get to the one nest but was able to observe the behaviour of the female, and unfortunately, I also don't know the outcome of this breeding attempt. Another nest failed after five days of incubation and, although not clear from the trail camera footage, it seems likely that Vervet Monkeys were the perpetrators. Of the remaining two nests, each containing two eggs, both fledged a single chick.

The female is solely responsible for nest construction, incuba-

ABOVE To find African Finfoot, slowly scan the vegetated margins, rocks and fallen trees in the water. This female is so well camouflaged that it would be difficult to see her unless she moves

© Derek Engelbrecht.

tion and rearing of the young. Occasionally, the male will briefly join the mother and offspring on the water (never at the nest), but otherwise, there is no interaction between the male and the rest of the family. At two nests, the male was not even seen near the nest over several days of observations. While monitoring a nest containing eggs on the Levhuvhu River, a different female and a young chick swam past me – no male. This made me wonder if African Finfoot isn't perhaps polygynous in some ideal 'finfoot' rivers. Let me explain. My impression is that female finfoots seem bolder than males, and in my experience, one tends to encounter them more often. Is this an inherent behavioural trait of finfoots, or are there more females than males in a given stretch of river (or at least in high-quality finfoot rivers)? In a polygynous mating system, one sex (the male in this case) would monopolize a resource, e.g., suitable habitat or nesting sites, and defend it. Females would be attracted to such sites as it is likely to maximize their reproductive potential. Returning to finfoots, is it possible that males monopolize a suitable stretch of river and attract females to nest in their territory? Such a scenario could explain why there appear to be more females than males.

The breeding season differs in different parts of Africa. It usually

coincides with the end of the dry season and the beginning of the wet season (October to December in southern Africa), so that the chicks can fledge before the risk of rising waters and flooding of the nest become a significant threat. There are reports of nesting at the end of the wet season, but it is unknown whether these records represent repeat brooding after a successful attempt earlier in the season or replacement brooding after earlier failure.

The nests are constructed over water (1–3 m above the water), either on a tangle of branches, a fallen tree or in a cluster of reeds. The nest is a loosely constructed platform of grass and leaves with a relatively shallow bowl. Material for the nest is obtained from the immediate vicinity of the nest. Despite its rather large size and bulky appearance, the nest is usually very well concealed. At least for the two nests in reeds, there was a kind of a ramp from the water to the nest, created by reeds that had bent over, probably as a result of the female's comings and goings.

The eggs, usually two or sometimes three per clutch, are laid at daily intervals. They are glossy with brown, red-brown and slate blotches and bear a remarkable resemblance to the eggs of Wattled and Blue Cranes. The eggs are perfectly camouflaged on the bed of dead leaves.



LEFT An African Finfoot nest containing two eggs  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

eyes are open. In two instances, two eggs were present the day before hatching, but only one chick was found in the nest on hatch day with no sign of the other chick or the eggshells. If the chick needs to defecate, it instinctively moves towards the

rim of the nest, turns around and defecates to the outside. Ants were observed at one nest but the female dealt with the issue by eating them. The chick is brooded regularly for short spells. The downy chick remains in the nest for four to five days, although by some accounts, they can take to the water when disturbed and swim well when they are 2 days old.

The post-fledgling dependence period is not known. Judging by online photos of young birds in the company of a female and the time of year the photo was taken, the young remain in their natal territory for several months before dispersing.

Its breeding success seems reasonable: of six eggs laid in three nests, two chicks fledged, giving a crude success rate of 33%.

The incubation period is unknown, but at least 21 days. The female sits extremely tight during incubation and will not leave the nest, even if you are within arm's reach. Instead, she relies on her camouflage to escape detection, the spots on her back providing perfect camouflage in the dappled shade provided by the overhanging vegetation. To further enhance her camouflage, she would tuck her bill in to rest on her plumage so that the reddish mandible does not betray her presence. Most incubation on-bouts are 90 to 150 minutes long, but it varies, with some bouts less than 30 minutes and the longest I recorded was 3 hours and 41 minutes. Most incubation recesses are between 45 and 75 minutes.

The semi-precocial chick can sit upright upon hatching, and its



ABOVE The plumage of an incubating female African Finfoot provides excellent camouflage in dappled shade. Note how she tucks her head in to hide the bright reddish mandible so that it does not betray her presence  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

RIGHT A 1-day old African Finfoot chick in its nest  
© Derek Engelbrecht.





The African Finfoot is listed as Vulnerable in South Africa. The irony is that it is not as rare or uncommon as most people think. Any relatively unpolluted rivers in the east and south of the country with sufficient cover on their banks are likely to have resident finfoots. The main threats facing it are a reduction in water flow through afforestation and excessive water extraction, clearing and destruction of riparian vegetation, and alien invasive species such

as water hyacinth clogging its waterways. In some parts, trampling and damage of the riparian zone by livestock and game, particularly elephants, is another source of concern. Contrary to the widely held notion that damming of rivers poses a significant threat to this species, my opinion is that dams, provided they fulfil the finfoot's habitat requirements of sufficient cover along the margins, actually benefit finfoots. The construction of dams has cer-

tainly helped finfoots to occupy areas that would normally have been beyond their range, and also sustained populations within its range in times of drought. I should stress that I hold this opinion for finfoot only, as dams do have adverse effects on ecosystems.

African Finfoot is a remarkable bird, and I still treasure every sighting of these birds. If you haven't seen a finfoot yet, I hope this note has shed some light on the secret lives of

ABOVE A female delivering a dragonfly, one of African Finfoot's main prey items, to her chick © Derek Engelbrecht.

finfoots and motivates you to have another go at it. Now, find a suitable spot on a quiet river with overhanging vegetation, sit still and wait ... It will come, and don't be surprised if it suddenly shows up right next to you. Author's email: [faunagalore@gmail.com](mailto:faunagalore@gmail.com)

# BIRD BRIEFS

## Bizarre Record of a Cape Gannet in the Makuleke Contractual Park

Duncan McKenzie

email: [duncan@digitalearth.co.za](mailto:duncan@digitalearth.co.za)

The Cape Gannet *Morus capensis* is a familiar species to most South African birders, being easily observed at several breeding colonies in the Western and Eastern Cape and was chosen as the Bird of the Year by BirdLife South Africa for 2022. It is also a regular non-breeding visitor to Kwa-Zulu-Natal, where it follows the annual sardine run just off the coast. It is described as a 'vagrant further north', i.e., Mozambique (Crawford 2005).

It, therefore, came as a huge surprise when one of the participants on a BirdLife SA birding weekend showed a photograph to myself and Robert Wienand of a single bird flying over the Eco Training Camp situated on the edge of the Limpopo Floodplain in the Makuleke Contractual Park in the far northern Kru-

ger National Park on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2022. The lucky photographer was JP (Koos) Van der Merwe, who is now the only birder who can 'tick' this bird on his Kruger list! The bird was heading in a westerly direction, presumably following the riverbed. One can only surmise that it was either blown inland or had lost its mind (birds apparently do suffer from dementia!). As far as I can tell, this is the first record for Limpopo Province, or any northern (inland) province, and not a bird that will likely be seen again soon.

### References

Crawford RJM. 2005. Cape Gannet. In: Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (eds), Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. 7<sup>th</sup> Edn. Cape Town: The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund. pp. 565–567.

RIGHT Birdlife South Africa's Bird of the Year 2022 even paid a visit to the Limpopo Province. This is a back of the camera image of the bird  
© Koos Van der Merwe.



ABOVE SABAP2 distribution of Cape Gannet. The arrow points to the locality where the Cape Gannet was seen (Image courtesy of SABAP2..

# Finfoot field notes from the Tzaneen region

Clayton Cook

email: [giant.bullfrog@gmail.com](mailto:giant.bullfrog@gmail.com)

During a limnological survey of the fish dynamics of Tzaneen Dam (1998), incidental observations of African Finfoots were recorded, mainly during the ear-

ly mornings (between ~5:00 and 6:00) and the sunset hours (~17:00 to 18:00). At the time, the Tzaneen Dam wall was much higher, and the higher water levels offered plenty of suitable habitat in over-



hanging vegetation for finfoots. African Finfoots were often observed swimming under the overhanging marginal vegetation or sitting on partially submerged logs. African Finfoots were recorded in early every small bay or cove. Whilst removing the fish nets, we sometimes recorded between six and eight African Finfoots on a morning boat drive. An adult was also observed within the deeper central parts of Tzaneen Dam and only took evasive action at the last moment, displaying the characteristic 'walking-on-water' flight.

During an ecological survey of the Debengeni River system in Magoebaskloof, I was electroshocking the runs and cascades, sampling the fish populations within the lower reaches of the river, just before the in-flow to Tzaneen Dam. Whilst electroshocking and

scooping shocked fish with a net, I noticed an adult African Finfoot, approximately 10 m downstream, foraging on the smaller stunned fish that evaded my net. I continued electroshocking the rank marginal overhanging vegetation when I observed the adult finfoot poaching fish from my collection bucket on the bank. It fed on the smaller minnows and an approximately 10–12 cm Red-eye Labeo *Labeo cylindricus*.

OPPOSITE When the Tzaneen Dam is at capacity, the many small bays and coves with overhanging vegetation provide ideal habitat for African Finfoot. During the time I was doing fish surveys on the dam, it must have had some of the highest densities of the species anywhere in Africa.

BELOW The Red-eye Labeo.



## A request for assistance: Arrow-marked Babbler and Levaillant's Cuckoo

Clive Barlow

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**A**s part of a study of the interaction between Levaillant's Cuckoo and its hosts, we kindly ask observers to look out for and assist if the chance arises with some video (with sound) of a fledged Levaillant's Cuckoo being fed by Arrow-marked Babblers? A visiting birder here in The Gambia has just had success with Black-cap Babblers feeding a Levaillant's Cuckoo, and we have some footage of Levaillant's Cuckoo with Brown Babblers for our sample. Some preliminary results were recently published in *Malimbus*, The Journal of the West African Ornithological Society: Barlow CR, Mann CF. 2022. Observations

of two Levaillant's Cuckoo *Clamator levaillantii* fledglings together, or of one or two together with host fledglings. *Malimbus* 44:85–100.

We are also looking for video footage and sound recordings of juvenile Arrow-marked Babblers being fed by their parents.

Sound and video recordings of a Diederik Cuckoo being fed by a weaver species are also eagerly sought. We have two images from The Gambia of Diederik Cuckoo being fed by Village Weaver/s.

Derek Engelbrecht who contributed to the above publication is kindly co-ordinating records from southern Africa for us. You can send your records to him at [fauna-galore@gmail.com](mailto:fauna-galore@gmail.com).



A Levaillant's Cuckoo fledgling being fed by its Arrow-marked Babbler foster parents  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

## First breeding record for Gurney's Sugarbird in the Limpopo Province

Dawid H De Swardt and Derek Engelbrecht

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**G**urney's Sugarbirds associate with *Protea* woodland (mostly *P. roupelliae* but also *P. caffra*) along the eastern Drakensberg escarpment as far north as the Haenertsburg region in the Limpopo Province. There are also isolated populations in the Waterberg and Soutpansberg ranges of the Limpopo Province, the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe and the Chimanimani Mountain in Mozambique. Sugarbirds use proteas almost exclusively for feeding, breeding and shelter (De Swardt 1992, De Swardt 1993, Brown 2005). Their breeding season mostly spans November to February in Mpumalanga (Lydenburg) and September to February in the eastern Free State. There are also aseasonal breeding records in winter in Mpumalanga (Dullstroom) and the KwaZulu-Natal escarpment (Nevill 1987, Skinner 2020). Tarboton et al. (1987) list a November to January breeding season for the former 'Transvaal' province. These breeding records probably refer to Craib's (1981) breeding records in the Machadodorp area of Mpumalanga. There

are no known breeding records for this species in the Limpopo Province. This note presents the first breeding records for this species in the Haenertsburg region of the Limpopo Province.

As part of a National Museum Bloemfontein research project on the ecology of Gurney's Sugarbird in the Limpopo Province, fieldwork was conducted at farm La Fleur (24°03'02.6S, 29°51'53.32E) on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2022 in the Wolkberg near Haenertsburg, Limpopo Province. Mist nets were set up in lines between flowering Silver Protea *P. roupelliae* trees to capture and ring sugarbirds foraging amongst the trees. A female sugarbird was captured at 07:30, and during processing for ringing, we noticed the female had a brood patch. As this indicates active breeding, we later searched the proteas in the vicinity of the mist net where the female was captured and found a nest containing a single egg.

The nest was placed in a fork created by some leafy branches, about 1.8 m above the ground, below the canopy and towards the southwestern side of the tree. The



LEFT The nest is only just visible through the cluster of leaves © Derek Engelbrecht.

Calf and Downs (2002). The egg mass of 3.02 g, however, differs markedly from the  $2.35 \pm 0.12$  g ( $n = 4$ ) given by Calf and Downs (2002). The age of an egg may affect egg mass as water evaporates from the egg over time, and the egg mass reported here is of a fresh egg that was weighed during laying and before appreciable mass loss could have occurred.

nest diameter was  $\sim 100$  mm, the nest depth was also  $\sim 100$  mm, the cup depth was 40 mm, and the cup diameter was 80 mm. The nest was lined with brown, fluffy protea seeds, a characteristic of this species nests. The egg mass and dimensions were: 3.02 g, 22.21 mm x 15.85 mm and compare well with the dimensions of eggs given by

the same week (on 16 November 2022), another two females were captured and ringed at Hwiti, a study site approximately 22 km north-northwest of La Fleur, and the most northerly site of Gurney's Sugarbird along the Drakensberg escarpment. Both females had brood patches, suggesting active breeding at this site too.



A view of the nest from above (LEFT) and a close-up view of the egg (RIGHT) © Derek Engelbrecht.

These observations represent the first details of the nest site and dimensions, egg mass and dimensions and breeding seasonality of Gurney's Sugarbird in the Limpopo Province.

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# Field notes: Scaly-feathered Weaver

Derek Engelbrecht

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**S**caly-feathered Weaver is a common to a very common inhabitant of arid and semi-arid *Vachellia* savannah. However, very little is known about its general biology. For example, there is no published data on egg mass, and the growth and development of nestlings are also undescribed. In this note, I describe pre-copulatory courtship behaviour, give a summary of Scaly-feathered Weaver egg data from the Polokwane Plateau, and also describe the growth and development of four nestlings in a single nest.

**Pre-copulation courtship behaviour**  
I observed pre-copulation courtship on one occasion, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2014. The courtship occurred in a small, 2 m tall Umbrella Thorn *Vachellia tortilis* bush. The male (based on his role in copulation) approached the female, singing excitedly with quivering wings held slightly away from the body. Every now and then, the male would alternately open and stretch each wing slightly. The female at first appeared to take no notice. The male then repositioned to a few branches lower in the same



The ubiquitous Scaly-feathered Weaver  
© Daniel Engelbrecht.



ABOVE The eggs of  
Scaly-feathered Weaver  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

bush, and the female followed suit, her wings now quivering too. She perched immediately adjacent to the male, and he wasted no time mounting. Copulation lasted surprisingly long, about 10 s. Both birds briefly shook their bodies vigorously and flew off together. The pre-copulation courtship display seems similar to the description given by Skead (1995).

## Nest sites

Nest site data were collected at five nests. Three nests were in Umbrella Thorn trees, one in a Common Spike-thorn *Gymnosporia buxifolia*, and one in a Hairy Caterpillar

Pod *Ormocarpum trichocarpum* tree. All the nesting trees were <2.2 m tall, and the nest height ranged from 1.5–1.9 m.

## Eggs colouration, clutch size and egg dimensions

The egg shape and colouration match the description of Tarboton (2011). The mean clutch size of six nests where laying was completed was 4.2

Table 1. Growth and development of Scaly-feathered Weaver nestlings.

Age	Description
0 (hatch day)	Newly hatched naked, skin pale pinkish with sparsely distributed, wispy, pale buff tufts of down on the dorsal, humeral, alar and capital pteryiae. No feather tracts visible below the skin. Eyes closed. Gape thick and white to pale yellow. Bill yellow with a horn-coloured tip. Neosoptiles of primaries, secondaries and rectrices visible.
1	The same as Day 0.
2	Subcutaneous pins visible below the skin. Eyes closed.
3	First primaries may emerge in pin. Eyes still closed.
4	All primary and some secondary pins have just emerged. Eyes begin to open but only as slits.
5	All primaries and secondaries in pin, but no other tracts yet. Eyes still open as slits.
6	All the feather tracts now in pin but no feathers in brush yet. Eyes fully open.
7	Pin feathers continue growing, some feathers in brush..
8	All feather tracts have at least some feathers in brush and most of the primaries and secondaries in brush.
9	All feathers about 20% in brush.
10	All primaries about 33% in brush.
11	All primaries about 50% in brush..

eggs (range: 3–5 eggs), similar to the value of 4.1 eggs/clutch reported by Maclean (1993). Eggs were weighed ( $\pm 0.01$  g) in the field using a portable digital scale. Eggs weighed within three days of laying were considered fresh, and their mass (FEM) and dimensions were used to calculate an egg weight coefficient (Kw) for the species as described by Hoyt (1979). The Kw values of fresh eggs were used to calculate the estimated egg mass (EEM) of eggs found

four or more days after laying. The Kw value estimated from four fresh Scaly-feathered Weaver eggs was Kw = 0.000594755. Of 14 eggs measured in five nests, the mean mass of fresh eggs was 1.05 g ( $n = 4$ ). The EEM of 10 eggs that were four days or older when data were collected was 1.17 g. The egg dimensions (min - mean  $\pm$  SD - max, in mm) of 14 eggs were as follows: length = 14.4 - 15.63  $\pm$  0.67 - 16.5; width = 10.7 - 11.06  $\pm$  0.20 - 11.5 mm. Egg dimen-



sions were similar to those reported by Maclean (1993).

#### Development and care of nestlings

Nestling development is summarised in Table 1. At two nests where four nestlings hatched, three hatched on the same day and the fourth on the following day. This suggests incubation commenced after the third egg was laid, or when the penultimate egg was laid. Only one nest was followed from hatching to fledging, and at this nest, fledging occurred on day 15 (day 14 for the youngest).

#### Breeding success

Twenty-seven eggs were laid in nine

ABOVE The nestlings on the left hatched on the day the photo was taken, and the others the day before.

© Derek Engelbrecht.

nests under observation, and four nestlings fledged, giving a crude breeding success estimate of 14% in the Polokwane Game Reserve. Most nests ( $n = 12$ ) were lost during the incubation stage. At one nest, a Short-snouted Grass Snake *Psammophis brevirostris* was found in the nest when I collected data. There were no nestlings in the nest, and I assume the snake consumed all four 3 to 4-day-old nestlings. At another nest,



a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill was seen extracting 8-day-old nestlings from a nest by simply breaking through the roof of the nest with its bill (see Engelbrecht 2011).

The Scaly-feathered Weaver is another example of the 'Tragedy of the Commons' - some of our most common birds are also some of the least known as most resources are usually directed to threatened or charismatic species. The Scaly-feathered Weaver is so poorly known, that spending any amount of time near a nest is bound to reveal some interesting aspects of its life history.

#### References

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ABOVE A Short-snouted Grass Snake,, presumably the predator responsible for the loss of this broods, still in the nest of a Scaly-feathered Weaver  
© Derek Engelbrecht.

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# VULTURE RESCUE SEASON

PLEASE BE EXTRA AWARE OF  
GROUNDED VULTURES



Vulture chicks are starting to take flight & leave their nests for the first time...

... this means that there is an increased chance that they get injured or become grounded



IF YOU SEE AN **INJURED OR GROUNDED VULTURE, PLEASE **CONTACT US IMMEDIATELY****



## Interesting sightings

16 October 2022 - 15 December 2022 share your interesting sightings seen within the Limpopo Province. Please submit your sightings to [thelarknews@gmail.com](mailto:thelarknews@gmail.com) and include the date, locality and a brief write-up of your sighting. Photos are welcome but will be used at the discretion of the editors.

**SABAP2 Out of Range; Regional Rarity; National Rarity, †Unvetted**

COMPILED BY Derek Engelbrecht

### NON-PASSERINES

**African Black Duck** - 3 December 2022. Two seen at the Aloe Ridge Dam in the Polokwane Game Reserve (Richter van Tonder); 3 December 2022. A pair seen at the Madea Wetlands (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**African Grass Owl** - 3 December 2022. Near Haenertsburg (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**Black Heron** - 3 December 2022. One seen at the Makotopong Wetlands (Selwyn Rautenbach).

**Booted Eagle** - 20 November 2022. One seen near Duiwekop



Black Heron © Derek Engelbrecht

on the Rita road (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Broad-billed Roller** - 20 October 2022. Returning migrant: several seen in the Tzaneen region (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Bronze-winged Courser** - 3 December 2022. One on the Tweefontein road (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Common Ringed Plover** - 26 November 2022. Several individuals seen at a ZZ2 dam near Dikgale (John Davies).

**Diederik Cuckoo** - 27 October 2022. Returning migrant: one heard in Dorp, Polokwane (Julia Friskin).

**Dwarf Bittern** - 3 December 2022. One seen at the Aloe Ridge Dam in the Polokwane Game Reserve (Jody de Bruyn).

**Eurasian Hobby** - 26 October 2022. Returning migrant: one seen on the edge of Haenertsburg (Derek Engelbrecht).

**European Honey Buzzard** - 7 November 2022. One seen in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Fulvous Whistling Duck** - 2 December 2022. Fifteen individuals at Madea wetlands (Jody de Bruyn); 3 December 2022. Two birds at Makotopong wetlands (Richter van Tonder).

**Greater Flamingo** - 3 December 2022. A flock of 30 flying past Duiwekop on the Rita road (Derek Engelbrecht).



Broad-billed Roller © Derek Engelbrecht



Dwarf Bittern © Jody De Bruyn



Fulvous Whistling Duck © Jody De Bruyn



Greater Flamingo © Daniel Engelbrecht

**Greater Painted-snipe** - 3 December 2022. One at the Akademia Reformia Dam, Polokwane (Richter Van Tonder); 3 December 2022. Three birds at the Palmietfontein (Vencor) dams (Jody de Bruyn); 3 December 2022. One at the Polokwane Bird Sanctuary (Richter Van Tonder).

**Maccoa Duck** - 3 December 2022. A single individual seen on the dams at the Vencor Abbatoir (Jody de Bruyn).

**Pallid Harrier** - 20 November 2022. One seen on the Rita road (Jody de Bruyn).

**Red-chested Flufftail** - 15 November 2022. An individual heard near Haenertsburg (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Red-throated Wryneck** - 26 November 2022. One near Boyne towards the Wolkberg (Derek Engelbrecht); 3 December 2022. One at the University of Limpopo (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**Saddle-billed Stork** - 3 December 2022. Two adults at a ZZ2 dam near Dikgale (John Davies).

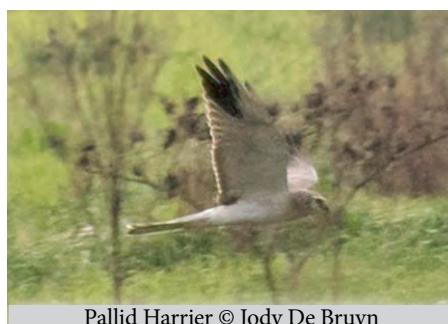
**Secretarybird** - 20 November 2022. One seen in the Polokwane Game Reserve (Mark Friskin).

**Southern Bald Ibis** - 6 November 2022. Two birds seen on the UL Golf Course, Mankweng (Susan Dippenaar).

**Temminck's Courser** - 20 November 2022. Three birds seen on the Rita road (Derek Engelbrecht).



Maccoa Duck © Jody De Bruyn



Pallid Harrier © Jody De Bruyn



Southern Bald Ibis © Derek Engelbrecht



Temminck's Courser © Derek Engelbrecht

**White-fronted Plover** - 26 November 2022. One seen at a ZZ2 dam near Dikgale (John Davies).

**Woolly-necked Stork** - 5 November 2022. Four seen in a field near Sebayeng (Jody de Bruyn); 3 December 2022. One seen at Turfloop Dam Nature Reserve (Doug Newman).



Lesser Grey Shrike © Derek Engelbrecht



Short-toed Rock Thrush © Derek Engelbrecht



Southern Pied Babbler © Daniel Engelbrecht



Spotted Flycatcher © Derek Engelbrecht

## PASSERINES

**Cape Bunting** - 15 November 2022. A small flock seen towards Rhee-bokvlei (Derek Engelbrecht); 3 December 2022. A small flock seen in the Wolkberg (John Davies).

**Icterine Warbler** - 3 December 2022. Returning migrant: one seen at Platkoppies (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**Lesser Grey Shrike** - 14 November 2022. Returning migrant seen near Boyne (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Quailfinch** - 9 December 2022. A small flock flying over Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Short-toed Rock Thrush** - 18 November 2022. A female seen along Randfontein road (Annette van Schalkwyk); 3 December 2022. A male seen near the Tufa Waterfall in the Wolkberg (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**Southern Pied Babbler** - 1 December 2022. A group seen at Platkoppies (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Spotted Flycatcher** - 8 November 2022. Returning migrant: University of Limpopo (Derek Engelbrecht).

**Swee Waxbill** - 6 November 2022. A small flock of at least three birds at the Mokopane Biodiversity Conservation Centre (Nicholas Mulder).

### BEST OF THE REST LIMPOPO PROVINCE

#### NON-PASSERINES

**African Emerald Cuckoo** - 30 November 2022. One seen in the Greater Makalali Private Nature Reserve (Jan Pienaar).



African Emerald Cuckoo © Jan Pienaar

**African Skimmer** - 22 October 2022. A breeding pair seen at the Balulele weir (John Adamson); 27 October 2022. A single bird seen at Pioneer Dam, Kruger National Park (Stuart Dunlop).



African Skimmer © Derek Engelbrecht

**Cape Gannet** - 4 November 2022. A first for the Limpopo Province and a most unusual record, one was seen flying in the Makuleke Concession, Kruger National Park (JP Van der Merwe). See note on p. 87.



Cape Gannet © JP Van der Merwe

**Common Ringed Plover** - 20 October 2022. One seen at Marataba (Matt Lailvaux).



Common Ringed Plover © Matt Lailvaux

**Curlew Sandpiper** - 28 November 2022. A bird was seen at Marataba Conservation Camp (Matt Lailvaux).

**European Roller** - 3 December 2022. Returning migrant: one seen at Letsitele (Daniel Engelbrecht).

**Green Sandpiper** - 27 November 2022. One seen near the Giri-

yondo Border Post in the Kruger National Park (Leigh-Ann Hoets).

**Lesser Flamingo** - 8 November 2022. Seen at Marataba Conservation Camp (Matt Lailvaux).



Green Sandpiper © Leigh-Ann Hoets

**Pennant-winged Nightjar** - 4 November 2022. A male displaying at Mineral Wildlife near Loskop Dam (Pieter Verster).

**Sanderling** - 23 October 2022. One seen at Marataba (Matt Lailvaux).



Sanderling © Leigh-Ann Hoets

**Terek Sandpiper** - 27 November 2022. One seen at Sable Dam in the Kruger National Park. Only the second record for the Limpopo Province, and the first with photographic evidence (Leigh-Ann Hoets).



Terek Sandpiper © Leigh-Ann Hoets

#### PASSERINES

**Boulder Chat** - 27 October 2022. 23 August 2022. One seen on the Limpopo River near Usutu (Dirk Human).



Boulder Chat © Dirk Human

**Eastern Clapper Lark** - 5 November 2022. Several males displaying at Kwaggavoetpad Nature Reserve (Pieter Verster).



Eastern Clapper Lark © Pieter Verster

**Monotonous Lark** - 3 December 2022. A male calling on Pidwa Wilderness in northern Makalali (John Davies).

**Pink-throated Twinspot** - 8 November 2022. Near Lanner Gorge, Kruger National Park (Duncan McKenzie).



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## UPCOMING EVENTS



### Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting and AGM

Date: 7 February 2023

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

### Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting

Date: 7 March 2023

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

### Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting

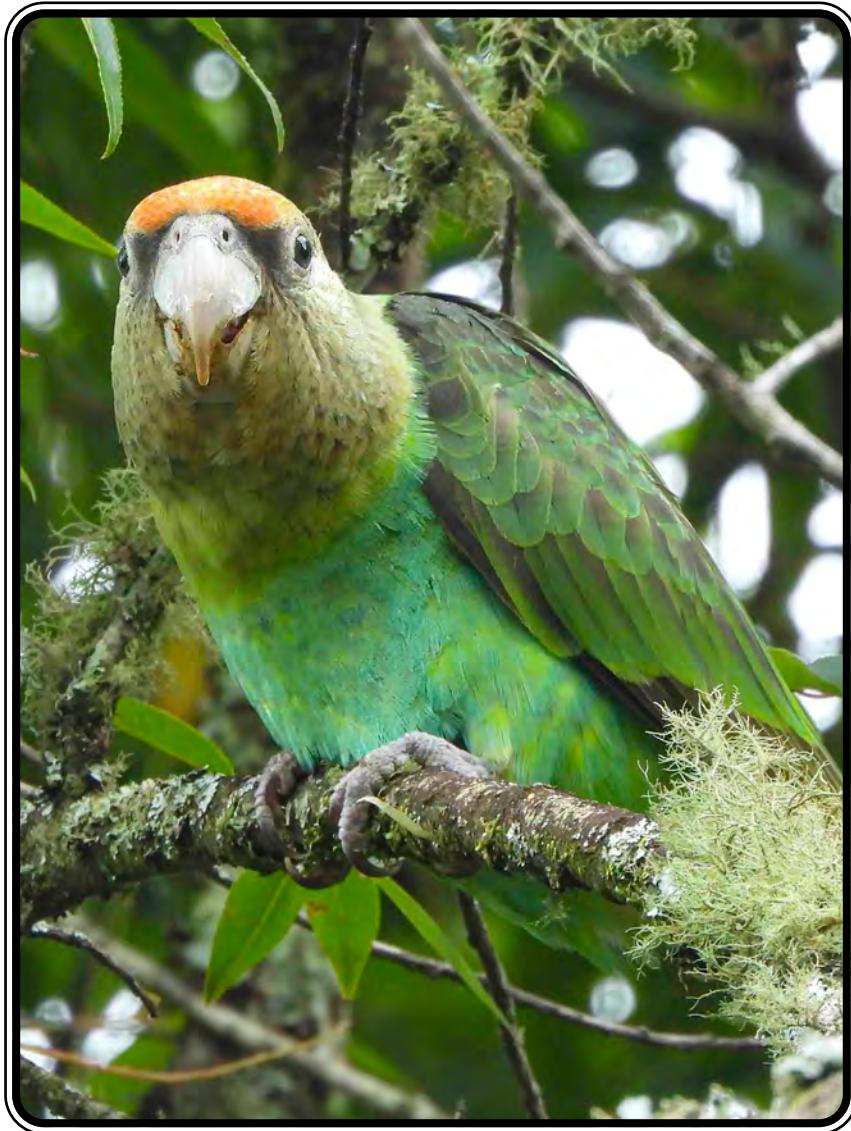
Date: 4 April 2023

Time: 18:30

Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

# All birds are equal

In 2023, the front covers of **The Lark** will be dedicated to species that may never feature on any front cover. This year, our back cover is reserved for the non-LBJs.



Cape Parrot, Birdlife SA Bird of the Year 2023 © Derek Engelbrecht