



# Wakkerstroom Bird Club

## ***NEWSLETTER NUMBER 8- FEBRUARY 2013***

### **AMUR FALCON NEWS**

We recently received news of the solitary remaining Amur Falcon fitted with a Tracking Transmitter.

Bernd Meyberg writes, "An adult female Amur Falcon trapped and fitted with a 5g satellite transmitter (ID 95778) on 10 January 2010 in Newcastle (Natal, South Africa) is still alive and its tag is still sending fixes. **It must be the bird with the longest working bird tag of its size.** It stayed in the northern part of the Kruger National Park from the afternoon of 3rd January until the morning of 9th January. On 9th January it flew 337 km to pass the night of 9th/10th January 2013 in some trees (26°12'57.6" S/ 29°39'22.5"E, 645 m ASL) near a farm 30 km NNE of Bethal from where we received several high quality fixes. This place is only 170 km from Newcastle where it will have arrived the following evening. The bird has now been tracked three times each on spring and autumn migrations across the Indian Ocean and to its breeding site in northern China".

Bernd added. "By the way, all of a sudden five of our satellite-tracked Lesser Spotted Eagles have come into the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park area (Kruger NP and surroundings). Has there been some rain recently? Up to now all these and other tracked LSEs remained much further north".k

### **OUR TRIP TO THE VLEI ON 2 FEBRUARY 2013**

On this walk, in glorious sunshine, we were joined by approximately 18 members of BirdLife Trogons with their Chairman, Andy Ruffle. And what a friendly bunch they were! And having a great (birding) time here! I



spent some time chatting to Andy Ruffle and he offered some interesting tips on their way of communicating with members and we will look into these soon.

Birding was not too good on the morning and a total of only 30 species were recorded. The most noteworthy of these was a Western Marsh Harrier male and, we believe, a female. They were flying high above the ground and not quartering the

vlei at all.

We also saw the two Grey Crowned Cranes with their chick which now has a substantial amount of colour in his wings, though his neck and head are still the same straw colour he was all over when first seen away from the nest. Eternally optimistic, we are sure that the birding will be better next month, don't forget our next trip to the Vlei on Saturday 2nd MARCH!

## OUR FACEBOOK PAGE

For those members who are on facebook and have not yet looked at our page, we encourage you to do so. It is called, fittingly, "Wakkerstroom Bird Club" and is easily accessible once you are in facebook. Call it up and click on the "like" icon. We already have 62 "likes" and we're looking for more! Some "likes" have come from overseas countries. We try to make the page as interesting as possible and would appreciate suggestions on how to make it even more so.

## BIRD FEEDER OPPOSITE THE CROW'S NEST



This Indigenous garden is opposite the "Crow's Nest" in the centre of Wakkerstroom. WBC committee member, John Burchmore, who built and looks after the Bird Feeders would like to thank Janet Rowse and Graham Mellor for their generous donation of the bird seed.

This is an on-going project by John and he would welcome either donations of seed or cash as it is a fairly expensive operation. Donations may be handed to him in The Crow-Nest.

## INTERESTING BIRD SIGHTINGS



During the recent Car Count, Sandy Twomey said "We saw a White-Backed vulture between Piet Retief and Wakkerstroom. We also saw three Denham Bustards and a black bellied Korhaan female.

I. have attached a photo of the vulture and the bustard didn't get a photo of the other birds. We did the Dirkiessdorp plain route".



## Bird Hides

Recently Norman Dennett who had been making mini-posters of birds that can be sighted from the various hides around the Village installed them in the Iain Drummond Hide (seen on the page above) and the Crane Hide seen below. They are very interesting and it's well worth a visit to these hides. Mini-posters will be installed in other hides in due course



## **CAR Count. Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2013.**

No! We do not count cars!

CAR stands for Co-ordinated Avifaunal Road Count and is a long standing South Africa wide research project organized by the Animal Demography Unit of Cape Town University. The Wakkerstroom Bird Club has taken part in this for the last 10 years along with hundreds of people from Bird Clubs throughout South Africa.



Participants drive pre-set routes and count indicator species of large terrestrial birds such as Spur winged Goose, Black headed Heron, Blue Korhaan, Secretary Bird etc. and record the habitat in which they occur.

It is one of the largest co-ordinated research projects in South Africa that happens each summer at the end of January and again each winter at the end of July.

Some of the routes have been counted for the last 40 years and an invaluable data bank of the changes in bird populations has been accumulated over the years. This data is then available for detailed analysis by researchers. The project is a good example of the cooperation between the formal Research Establishments

John Barrow and Brian Guerin stop for a welcome break and a cup of coffee. (Photo by Norman Dennett )

and the Citizen Scientist. It produces worthwhile, valuable results. A full report of the results of this latest CAR Count will be included in our next Newsletter.

From the Wakkerstroom Bird Club's point of view, it gives us an opportunity to make use of our detailed knowledge of the area and its birds and enables newcomers to the Club to see parts of the area they will not have visited before. There are eight routes in our area, with each route averaging about 65kms that takes some 4 to 5 hours to complete.

If you would like to take part, keep an eye open for the announcement of the next count which will be in July. You will be most welcome.

## **OUTING TO KLAAS DEVENISH'S FARM 12 FEBRUARY 2013**

On a slightly misty morning we arrived at Klaas' beautiful farm for a morning of birding/Atlassing only to be stumped a bit by said mist. It didn't hide the birds per se but it certainly didn't encourage them to show themselves either! A fair number



Klaas's farm must have South Africa's largest collection of grinding stones

of species were recorded but little of special note. Some of the intrepid souls reached Klaas' waterfall but us mere mortals restricted ourselves to meandering along the banks of the Wakkerstroom.

We were also entertained by the budding (!) botanists in our group, the Burchmores and McAllisters who, with our host's assistance, provided much of interest to the rest of us. My personal favourite was a diminutive white orchid growing in the shade of Ouhout trees next to the river. It rejoices in the common name of "Moederkappie" or "Granny Bonnet" (*Disperis fanninae*) and looks exactly like one but complete with Deerstalker ear covers.

## THE BIRD OF THE MONTH

### WATTLED CRANE



**Status:** Breeding Resident

**Red Data Book**

**Status:** Critically Endangered

**Scientific Name:** Bugeranus carunculatus

**Threats:** Habitat loss, requires 18-40ha of wetland, with up to 150ha of surrounding undisturbed grassland. Young dependent for 7-12 months, do not necessarily breed annually. Lays 2 eggs and the second egg is abandoned when the first chick leaves nest at 1-2 days old. Small southern African population of less than 2200 birds (est.).

**Habitat :** Midland to highland grasslands, also seasonal floodplains in the tropics e.g. Okavango Delta.

**Opportunity :** The establishment of a Grassland Biosphere should help to protect the small Population known to occur in our area. The best policy for birders (and others) would appear to be to reduce any disturbance to these birds, especially during their breeding period which peaks May-August, to an absolute minimum.

We are pleased to have received the following fascinating account from John McAllister of his experiences with this iconic bird :

"The latest sightings of Wattle Cranes just outside Wakkerstroom is quite interesting. South Africa is blessed with three species of cranes - Wattled, Blue and Grey Crowned Cranes. With the exception of a small population in the Etosha Game Reserve in Namibia (and these may no longer exist) Blue Cranes are endemic to South Africa. Grey Crowned Cranes are quite widespread in eastern (with a small 'e') Africa from South Africa as far north as Kenya and were quite common in western Kenya in the early 2000's when I used to take birding tours around there. Both of these species congregate in large numbers when they are not breeding. If you look at them carefully you will see that they are actually paired off in loose groups of adult birds that mate for life and groups of non-breeding birds or "floaters" that are still "playing the field so to speak- the biggest "flock" of Grey Crowned Cranes that I have seen was of around 300 birds on a wetland east of Ermelo in the late 1980s. The biggest "flocks" of Blue Cranes are now found around Bredasdorp in the southern Cape.

Wattled Cranes have (had?) their stronghold in the huge wetlands of the Okavango in Botswana, western Zambia and the Zambezi Delta of Mozambique. There they are birds of huge tropical wetlands and apparently congregate in large numbers throughout the year, including the breeding season. Nowadays the South African birds are restricted to high altitude (1 500 m or higher) wetlands in the coldest areas of South Africa. For the most part the mated pairs live solitary lives on these cold grasslands, although I have heard of groups of up to 60 or so birds in the KZN wetlands/grasslands around Franklin. To me this different habitat and behaviour patterns seems to indicate that "our" birds are in sub-optimal habitat right on the end of their range, but be that as it may it would seem as if they are racing to local extinction in South Africa. In the late 1980s it was my job to monitor the Mpumalanga (then Eastern Transvaal) populations of these birds. I watched them dwindle from a population of around 50 pairs to around 10 pairs in the early 1990s. Today I would be surprised to find 5 pairs in Mpumalanga although I have not worked with them for over 20 years now.

Anyway to get back to the two birds seen around Wakkerstroom recently. For some years now "flocks" of Grey Crowned and Blue Cranes have wintered in the grasslands north of Wakkerstroom and sometimes east of here towards Memel. Often these birds were found in amongst the stubble of harvested mielie fields or at least close to them. A single pair of Wattled Cranes has joined them in most years and this may well be the same pair that has joined them once again. While this is quite exciting for birders it is not necessarily a good thing for the birds. In the early 1990s I found a Wattled/Blue Crane "pair" on a farm just east of Ermelo that had produced a hybrid chick - an indication of just how much pressure these birds were under in the area. At the time there were three or four hybrids known from different parts of South Africa, but this was the first pair recorded in the old Transvaal to the best of my knowledge. Hopefully these two birds will not be tempted or forced to follow the same route.

## VISIT BY THE SANDTON BIRD CLUB

The Chairman and members of BirdLife Sandton, a Branch of BirdLife South Africa, were very welcome guests when they visited the Iain Drummond Hide at Wakkerstroom recently. Mr Malcolm Drummond, and BirdLife Sandton, very



generously donated funds for the refurbishment and repair of the Hide which was supervised by the Wakkerstroom Bird Club. The bird hide is now open to the public once again and we trust that birders will enjoy the upgraded facilities.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS TO DIARISE

### Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> February '13. SNAKES.

Talk by Andre Steenkamp. Wakkerstroom BirdLife Centre. 17h30 for 18h00. Andre is a good teacher, this will be a very informative and interesting talk. Join us for a cup of coffee and a chat at 5.30pm, talk starts promptly at 6pm.

### **Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> March '13. VLEI WALK.**

Meet on the Amersfoort Road Bridge at 7h00 for about two hours. Our regular once a month walk along the raised road overlooking the Wetland, always worthwhile.

### **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> March '13. KEMPENVELDT VULTURE RESTAURANT.**

This is near Dundee and as the Vultures come in to feed between 6h00 and 7h00 it means a very early start.

Meet at the Wakkerstroom Library at 4h00. Leader: Brian Guerin.

### **Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> March '13. "Vultures".**

Talk by Dr Pat Benson. Wakkerstroom BirdLife Centre. 17h30 for 18h00. Pat is a renowned Researcher with projects in India and here in South Africa. Coffee etc. at 5.30pm, Talk 6pm.

### **Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> April '13. VLEI WALK.**

Meet on the Amersfoort Road Bridge, 7h00 for about two hours.

### **Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> April '13. FICKLAND PAN.**

Leader: Brian Guerin. The first opportunity we've had for a long time to visit the "other" side of the Pan. Meet at the Wakkerstroom Library at 7h00. Bring refreshments etc.

### **Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> April '13. "TRAVELLING BIRDS".**

Wakkerstroom BirdLife Centre. 18h00 for 18h30. An opportunity to see this superb film that has not been seen here before. Start a little later than usual. Tea, coffee and a chat 6pm, Film starts 6.30pm.

Until next time!

## **THE COMMITTEE**