



# Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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## NEWSLETTER NUMBER 11 MAY 2013

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### VLEI WALK 4 MAY 2013

On a nigh perfect morning 18 birders gathered for our 9<sup>th</sup> Vlei Walk, a bird walk that was virtually hijacked by the appearance of more otters than most might have seen in their lives! Early bird Anne alerted us to the presence of a group of 8 adults and approximately 5 juveniles moving around below the roadway but close to the near shore. A few other adults were seen swimming across the vlei a little later. Best estimates of the total number seen rose to 16-18. Birding and the proffered Tea/Coffee/Cookies, took second place for quite a time, and understandably so.

When we knuckled down to serious birding a total of 42 species was recorded, a rewarding autumn tally. The vlei yielded a number of Black Crakes, Squacco Heron, a lone Black-crowned Night Heron, Rock Kestrel (I think for the first time), a group of 6 Hottentot Teals and excellent views of a Little Bittern.

All in all a most successful outing with something for everybody! Don't forget our next Vlei Walk will be on Saturday June 1<sup>st</sup>, **starting a little later, at 07h30**. Tea/Coffee etc. will be available

### OUTINGS IN JUNE

1 June – Our usual visit to the Vlei. Meet us by the bridge on the Amersfoort Road from 07h30 onward with your Binoculars and warm clothing.

11 June – A trip to the Wessels Farm. We're hoping to see the Gurney's Sugar Bird. We'll leave from the Library at 07h30. Bring something to eat and drink as well as your binoculars and the afore-mentioned warm clothing.

### **The cold wind doth blow and we shall have snow.....'**

The cold winter months are rapidly approaching and your committee is in a quandary as to just how and when to arrange our Wednesday Speaker/Film Shows etc.

The options are...

1. Continue as we are i.e. 5.30pm for 6pm.on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wed of the month.
2. Wednesday afternoon 2 pm for 2.30pm.
3. Hold no meetings until September, we would continue with the Saturday Vlei Walk and the Monthly Outing as usual.

We are asking the members to decide by popular vote.

Would you please contact John by SMS on 08225567678 or Norman 017 730 0523 / 0835379092 or [dennett@mtloaded.co.za](mailto:dennett@mtloaded.co.za)

**This is urgent, please let us know your preference as soon as possible.**

## THE COMMON SANDPIPER

Courtesy of Neels Jackson, *Die Beeld*



Bird Atlassing always surprises us with what it reveals; the latest being the current uncommonness of the Common Sandpiper.

Maps of previous and recent Bird Atlas projects show that this species is disappearing from 48% of the observation areas where it was previously noted and its numbers are down in 32% of its areas of

distribution.

According to Prof. Les Underhill of the University of Cape Town's Animal Demography Unit, this is the most disturbing comparable distribution map he has ever seen.

Inspiring little concern for its survival, the Common Sandpiper is still considered an all too common species in the wider world.

Its breeding grounds are spread all over most of Europe as well as across the width of Asia. During the Northern Hemisphere's winter, South Africa is its destination farthest south. "This is a species that adapts with ease to any kind of dam or river therefore, the decline in numbers in South Africa can hardly be blamed on a lack of these" says Underhill.

It may be that these birds track south in smaller numbers because they find water sources closer than Southern Africa. Their decline in numbers may also be attributed to loss of habitat and suitable breeding grounds in Europe and Asia and this, he surmises, only becomes apparent here at the extreme southern tip of their migration route.

## THE UNMENTIONABLES

By John McAllister

Today and possibly over the next few months I want to talk to you about the unmentionables of the Wakkerstroom birding scene – no, not Victorian ladies underwear! - LARKS.

I know – there are many more charismatic birds to be seen in our area – Cranes, Secretary birds, Jackal Buzzards, Amur Falcons, even some ducks, etc., but my favourites are the larks. Unlike the more colourful and better known species many larks have nowhere else to go and will simply go extinct if we do not pay attention to protecting their habitats. I suppose I have always loved the underdogs of this world and that may be why I feel such an affinity with these engaging little birds.

Firstly let's think about where they are to be found. They are, for the most part, birds of the world's more open areas with few, if any, trees and this is the start of their problems in the popularity stakes. Many people seem to love the more wooded parts of South Africa and think that our grasslands are boring and uninteresting places that are only good for growing mielies or some other boring crop. They have even stolen the name "Savanna" to describe their beloved Bushveld or Lowveld. Savanna was originally a Spanish word that was used to describe the open, treeless grasslands of Argentina (now soya bean veld I guess) and other places in the Spanish New World.

Another feature common to many larks is that they are one of the real habitat specialists of the world and if their habitat is damaged or modified they are often in grave danger of going extinct. Southern African species in this category include:

- **Rudd's Lark** which is restricted to virtually unspoilt grasslands over 1500 m in altitude along the Drakensberg range from Dullstroom to the Eastern Cape around Ncora Dam south-west of Elliot. Its habitat is now severely fragmented and as much as 80% of the



Rudd's Lark



world population can be found within a 100 km radius of Wakkerstroom. Many years ago it was considered to be a subspecies of larks found only in north-western Somalia and southern Ethiopia. These have now been split into two species Archer's Lark in Somalia and Sidamo Lark in Ethiopia;

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- **Botha's Lark** which is restricted to similar grasslands, but in the Vaal River catchment in southern Mpumalanga from Wakkerstroom east to around Kroonstad in the northern Free State. Its habitat has also become very fragmented;
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- **Barlow's Lark** which occurs in a narrow band in the Namib Desert from Port Nolloth in the Northern Cape north to around Lüderitz in Namibia;
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- **Dune Lark** which allegedly occurs in the Namib sand-sea from near Walvis Bay to north of Lüderitz. I say allegedly as I have dipped on this bird every time I have looked for it;
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- **Red Lark** which is almost entirely restricted to the red sand dunes of northern Bushmanland in the Northern Cape from Steinkopf in the west to near Van Wyksvlei in the east following the fossil course of the Koa River. A greyish morph occurs on the shale soils around Brandvlei.
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- **Agulhas Long-billed Lark** is restricted to the fynbos of the extreme south of the Western Cape from around Bredasdorp east to near Mossel Bay.

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Of the 28 larks (31 if you believe that Bradfield's Lark and Damara Clapper Lark of the arid west and Agulhas Clapper Lark of the southern Cape are a separate species in their own right) there are 6 that don't measure up to my habitat standards:

- **Monotonous Lark** (who is actually a very engaging little chap and not Monotonous at all) follows the Bushveld rains around and can be absent from an area for years and then is suddenly abundant and shouting "Bang-la-desh" either in a display flight or from the topmost point of seemingly every tree or bush;
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- the widespread **Rufous-naped Lark** who loves to sing from some sort of perch like a fencepost in the more open areas such as along the Newcastle road near Wakkerstroom;
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- **Flappet Lark** who can often be heard giving his wing-whirring display flight on a spring or summer's day high above his patch of Bushveld;
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- **Short-clawed Lark** which seems to like more open areas in arid Bushveld from around Polokwane in the north in a crescent-shaped swathe through Botswana to around Kimberley in the south – one of my favourite places to show people this species on my birding tours used to be in the now deproclaimed Vaalbos National Park;
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- **Fawn-coloured Lark** who prefers the arid Bushveld and is really a Kalahari specialist in southern Africa; and
- The rather uninteresting **Sabota Lark**, who is probably the archetype of most people's idea of larks who is widespread and common in the Kruger National Park for example.

○  
Here in the grasslands around Wakkerstroom we are blessed with 9 species of larks - Rudd's Lark, Botha's Lark, Pink-billed Lark, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Melodious Lark, Rufous-naped Lark, Eastern Clapper Lark, Spike-heeled Lark and Red-capped Lark. I have included Melodious Lark here as although it has not actually been recorded, as far as I'm aware, in the Wakkerstroom area, it can be found, with reasonable reliability, in the grasslands around Ladysmith. It is these 9 species that I intend discussing over the next few months. Hopefully I'll be able to convince you that these little birds have real character and are not really that hard to identify. All it takes is a little patience and the rewards are exceptionally satisfying.



Melodious Lark

## **ATLASSING INFORMATION** by JOHN BURCHMORE

The SABAP Bird Atlas is making steady progress, but there is still work to be done. There are some pentads in Mpumalanga that have not been covered. The goal for us is to turn all the pentads in our area green on the Avian Demographic Unit atlas website map. The green colour indicates that the specific pentad has been atlased a minimum of four times or more.

The reason for having a minimum of four cards per pentad is that the Species Diversity Index can be calculated for that pentad. The diversity of species within an ecosystem (in this case a pentad) can be used by Biologists as a gauge to the health of that specific pentad (ecosystem). The greater the number of species, the healthier the pentad. Ecosystems that are under stress through poor management, changing agricultural practices, industrial development, urbanization and mining, can possibly lose species.

The data from the cards is used to calculate the SDI. The numbers of records of each species in a pentad and the total number of records of all the species in the pentad are used. A minimum of four lists per pentad are required, seven lists are better and eleven lists are better still.

The Species Diversity map should not be confused with the Species Richness map. This map records the number of species in each pentad irrespective of the number of lists submitted. The Species Richness map is not as useful for analytical purposes as the SD map.

*REF (Thanks to Peter Lawson ex Roger Fieldwick), the Hornbill No.106 Spring 2012*

### **INTRODUCTION**

To do this, a 5-minute grid is being used. This produces grid cells about eight kms north to south and five kilometres east to west, called a pentad. It is necessary to list all the birds in the order that you see them in the pentad. Try and work at least two hours in the pentad. If there are different habitats it will possibly be necessary to spend more than two hours in the pentad to enable the areas to be covered properly. As "citizen scientists" we can make a difference by collecting basic information and sending this to the ADU where the info is processed into a large yet accessible database

*REF Animal Demography Unit, African Birdlife November/December 2012,*

### **The Atlas of Southern African Birds.**

The publication of The Atlas of Southern African Birds was the culmination of many years of atlasing carried out by thousands of participants. Data was collected in the period 1987 to 1991. Due to the success of this project it was decided to initiate a second atlas project SABAP 2.

SABAP2 was launched in 2007 and is perhaps the most important bird-conservation project of all. This project will enable scientists to establish the ranges of our birds, as well as how these have changed when compared to SABAP1. It would also be possible for the ADU to develop an understanding of the processes governing these alterations by utilizing information about land use change and variations in vegetation and weather patterns. The aim was to atlas the entire country to establish baseline data on all indigenous species. Due to the enthusiasm shown by "citizen scientists" and the ADU's data processing skills, it was decided to consider mapping bird distributions on an annual basis.

The concept of SABAP2012 was started last year. A blank coverage map from the first of January 2012 to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2012 was used. It was decided that a similar project would be done in 2013. The ADU plan is to build up the "movie" of bird distribution and be able to see, for many species, how their distributions alter year by year. The ADU hopes to have more than 30% of pentads visited in a single year.

It is up to us, the members of Wakkerstroom Bird Club, to assist with this project. It can be fun; covering areas we have not been to before. The roads around Wakkerstroom are sign-posted so it is easy to make your way around.

**Attend our next talk on atlasing by Andre and I. Become part of the atlas vision.**

*Please note the correct spelling of the word **Atlassing**. This is the spelling used by the ADU. Ed.*

## INTERESTING BIRD SIGHTINGS

29/04/13 – 06H10 – Peregrine Falcon struck a Speckled Pigeon lifting off Hoog Street adjacent to the old tennis court. Victim carried to one of the dead conifers, enabling clear sighting of the falcon as it rapidly plucked and consumed the prey.

1/05/15 07h30 – Black Crake pair observed on fallen reeds at the Vlei. Calling softly whilst allopreening in the early sunlight, they then copulated. Apparently monogamous and can breed at any time of the year. With winter on our doorstep, it does seem a tad late/early! Query, pair bonding or simply cozy conditions coupled with the last of the summer wine.

Submitted by Anne

## AMUR FALCON UPDATE

According to a text message received from Birdlife Northern Natal on 15 May 2013.the Amur Falcon with a transmitter attached has nearly reached her breeding ground. The text message received reads “Female Amur Falcon fitted with transmitter nearly at breeding site. Done on migration 105000 km” What an amazing feat!

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### Ground Woodpecker.

**Scientific Name:** *Geocolaptes olivaceus*, Greek *geos*=earth. *Colaptes*=to buffet or peck. *Colaptes* is also Greek for a woodpecker: *olivaceus* Latin = olive green.

**General:** There are some 210 species of woodpeckers worldwide, 9 of which occur in southern Africa. Woodpeckers are generally characterized by colourful plumage, strong chisel-like bills and dipping flight. Most, but not all, species have a “give-away” red cap in either or both sexes. Their presence is often given away by their tapping on a tree trunk. Their nearest relative is the Red-throated Wryneck which has similar habit and has a soft, not stiffened, tail.

**Description:** The Ground Woodpecker is the largest of our woodpeckers, with grey head shading to olive on the back, bill blackish, and the iris white to yellow. Best identifying feature is the pinkish red belly, darker red in the centre. Their feet have two toes pointing forward and two facing backwards, a tool which allows them to cling to trees, rocks etc. Their central tail feathers are strengthened to assist in this. This species usually occurs in pairs or small family groups and is usually sedentary. Immatures are paler than adults, not as intensely pink below.



**Status:** A locally common Endemic i.e. it only occurs only in the Southern African Sub-region. The Knysna Woodpecker is also an Endemic species.

**Food:** Almost exclusively ants, their larvae, pupae and eggs which it gathers with its long, sticky tongue.



Ground Woodpecker by [Claude Gibney Finch-Davies](#) (1875-1920)

**Habitat:** Usually rocky slopes, sometimes moving around rocks to a partly concealed position from which to watch intruders. Sometimes seen in dongas where they may nest.

**Breeding:** The breeding season runs from July-December with a peak in August-September, 2-4 eggs are laid and incubated by both parents. The nest is a self-excavated burrow in a vertical wall of a donga or river bank or sometimes in a crevice in a rock face, and is usually unlined. Two-four glossy white eggs are laid but the incubation period is not known and the nestling is also not described.

**Conservation:** Considered not threatened, lives in areas of low human populations and also occurs in protected areas.

## The Committee