



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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OUR NEW E-MAIL ADDRESS

In order for our club to have more of its own identity, we have opened our own e-mail account with Google Mail. The address is wackersbirdclub@gmail.com. It is now in operation and we'd appreciate it if you would use it instead of dajohn.barrow@gmail.com

Annual General Meeting.

Full details will be given in the notice of the meeting but please note in your Diary that our (fairly informal) Annual General Meeting will be held on July 20, 2013 at De Oude Stasie. We have a well-known speaker, namely Geoff Lockwood, coming down for the occasion. A light lunch will be available at R35.00 pp, please book direct with Hannelie (0784163713).

THE EIKOS WEEKEND

A Johannesburg company, Eikos Risk Applications (Pty) Ltd, held a company workshop weekend here in Wakkerstroom.

Birding played an active part in the proceedings and the Wakkerstroom Bird Club is very pleased to have assisted in the team building exercise.

One young lady commented, "I've never walked so far in my life! But it's beautiful this time of the morning". Many commented on how quiet it had been during the night, an experience they had never had before. They were delighted with the birds they saw and



were able to identify, thanks to the "Birding Introduction" provided by Andre Steenkamp at the Wakkerstroom BirdLife Centre.

We would like to congratulate Sean Pyott for bringing his company to Wakkerstroom and hope that other companies will follow his example. We thoroughly enjoyed being with them and we're confident that a couple of converts have joined the ranks of birders. Many of them said, "We'll be back!"

Our Chairperson, Brian Guerin, is second from the right and Sean Pyott stands between Lucky and Judy-Lynn Wheeler

Rudd's Lark - By John McAllister

I'm going to start off my discussion on our grassland larks with Rudd's Lark. Not only is it our letterhead bird, but it is THE bird that resulted in Wakkerstroom's awakening from its long slumber in the late 1980s with the opening of Weaver's Nest Guest House by the intrepid Elna Kotze.



Rudd's Lark from a painting by our own Bronwen Davidson

Larks are cryptically marked birds that are well camouflaged in their natural habitat and are admittedly quite difficult to identify. It helps a lot though if you have some pointers and know what to look for. Firstly they are far easier to find in the breeding season – from October to April in the case of Rudd's Lark. In my experience the males display most actively, in the Wakkerstroom area at least, after the first good summer rains – usually from around mid-October, but I have had them displaying in mid-September when the rains have been early). The display activity builds up to a crescendo by late November and then starts tapering off until late March/early April.

A “proper” display consists of a single bird flying up out of the grass at a steep angle of at least 60 degrees to a height of around 100 m. The bird then engages in a slow, fluttering flight with fast-moving wings in a large circle over its territory. The flight is at times so slow that the bird almost seems to hover and even go into reverse. All the time it gives a guttural “song” that I like to describe as “look-at-meeee” (he is after all displaying to an admiring lady somewhere on the ground), but has also been described

as “purple jeep”, “pee-witt-weer”, “wicha-ey-yo”, “is-it-wee-prr” and many other really useful renditions of the “song”.

We apparently have a super race of Rudd's Lark here in Wakkerstroom. Elize's admittedly ancient edition of “Newmans” describes the display as the bird cruising about between 15 and 35 m above the ground. My old “Roberts V” says the bird “rises to about 15-30 m, [and] flies about 10 times in a circle of roughly 20 m” before landing again. My trusty “Sasol III” says “The display flight is high and can last up to 30 minutes.” My “Roberts VI” at least says that the male “rises in flight at ca 60° angle to 15-100 m then circles (20-50 m diam) for up to 40 min”. All the birds I have ever seen here were up at at least 100 m (they were almost invisible) for way longer than this. The longest time that I recorded was well over 90 minutes and I was rarely there when the bird started his display, but picked it up only after it had already started with its show. This wasn't an isolated incident, but happened far too frequently for the comfort of my neck! I spent many summers watching Rudd's Larks and autumns with my physiotherapist.

Another good feature that can easily be seen in the display flight is the bird's fairly long bill and very thin, longish tail. In flight this makes it look something like a 1948 Studebaker. (You do know what a '48 Stud looks like don't you?) – From a distance it's difficult to see whether it's going backwards or forwards!

If you want to see the bird on the ground then the trick is to find a displaying bird. They are quite easy to hear if you know the call, but can be quite difficult to see in the air where they are a mere speck to the naked eye. The next thing to do is to pray that you have not got an iron man competitor up there. Having found a displaying bird you'll have to watch it until it suddenly decides to dive almost vertically to the ground. If you don't see where it landed then I'm afraid you will have to start the process all over again.

Let's assume that you saw where it landed and disappeared into the grass. Now you should approach the landing site as casually as you can. If you're too fast the bird will take fright and run away – and they can run very fast – never to be seen again. If you are too slow the bird may decide to start displaying all over again. Many a foreign birder has told me that they never expected to get “rain forest neck” in the grasslands of South Africa.

If you've done all the above and think you know more or less where the bird is then you'll need to look for a lark with a very upright stance – more pipit-like than most larks (if you know what a pipit looks like of course). Look for a long-legged (for a lark anyway), upright bird with **bold** blotches on its back, a white belly, streaky chest and a bold white eyebrow. It also has a longish, thin tail, but this is probably not such a noticeable feature when the bird is on the ground. No other South African lark has this combination of features. If it looks straight at you you'll see the median streak down the centre of the head and this is the clincher. It is the only South African lark with this feature.

Rudd's Lark used to be lumped with two other larks of the Horn of Africa – Archer's Lark of North-western Somalia and Sidamo Lark of southern Ethiopia. Mackworth-Praed and Grant, in Volume 2 of their African Handbook of Birds called it a Long-clawed

Lark and give its east African range as “Western British Somaliland”. They note that the nominate race was “described from the Transvaal.” The reason for treating the birds as a single species seems to have been that all three birds have the median head stripe.

With the splitting of *Heteromirafr* *ruddi* into three species Rudd’s Lark is now a South African endemic with a very restricted range and is dependent on prime grasslands above 1 500 m. Within this range it has a very fragmented distribution and has disappeared from areas where it was known to have occurred in the past.

The bird’s habitat consists of prime grassland which has not been altered by mining, agriculture or heavy grazing. The current wisdom claims that Rudd’s Lark “favours stone-free areas of natural grassland on flat or gently-sloping hilltop plateaux”. Within these areas the birds supposedly prefer moderately to heavily grazed grasslands.

When I used to do birding tours back in the early years of this century my favourite area for these birds was a gently sloping field just above a wetland in the valley bottom. The field was surrounded by hills on three sides and while it was not on the valley floor it was not exactly what I would call a “hilltop plateau” either. During the breeding season there were as many as five pairs displaying over this field. While the birds were certainly easier to see when the grass had been mown or grazed short by cattle and sheep the birds were still there in at least one year that I can remember when the farmer rested the field and kept his animals out of it. At that stage the grass was around knee to waist height here and it was very difficult to get views of the birds on the ground. Even when the grass was short there was always a high basal grass cover with very few if any areas of bare earth as the farm was generally well-managed and over grazing was not allowed to take place.

Rudd’s Lark used to be classified as **Critically Endangered** which made it the world’s most threatened lark. Its degree of threat has since been downgraded to **Vulnerable** as the species has apparently been found in areas in the eastern Free State and possibly northern KZN where it was not previously known to exist.

While this reclassification may sound like good news for the species it does not mean that it is no longer threatened by future extinction. At present the total world population of Rudd’s Lark is thought to be between 2 500 and 5 000 individuals. David Maphiso, whose Masters thesis was on “Habitat selection and breeding biology of Rudd’s Lark”, suggests that the bird’s disappearance from areas where it was known to occur previously (such as around Dullstroom) might indicate that the actual population is much lower than these estimates.

It is perhaps worth noting that the birds are no longer seen so easily in the field where I and many other birders used to find them. One of the best places to find them now is around Fickland’s Pan, but that grassland is also degenerating fast as a result of a combination of factors like overgrazing, injudicious burning and the planting of crops by subsistence farmers.

Up to now Rudd’s has survived in grasslands where the winters are too long, cold and frosty to be able to grow crops with much success. With the advent of genetically modified crops it will not be too long before we have, say, mealies that only require a short growing season and much of its already threatened habitat will become even more threatened. The birds would not be able to tolerate ploughing and crops in their living area.

As we all know from recent developments in the Wakkerstroom area there is coal in “them thar grasslands”. Extensive mining in the area would potentially result in acid mine drainage, increased infrastructure such as buildings, roads, mine dumps, etc. and heavy vehicular traffic with unknown consequences for the birds. The spectre of afforestation seems to have receded somewhat in the Wakkerstroom area at least, but if it raises its ugly head once more this would be disastrous for these little birds and other grassland specialists who would simply have nowhere else to go.

Outings for July 2013

We’ll be having our usual outing to the Vlei on Saturday, 6 July starting at the slightly advanced time of 07h30 due to the colder days at this time of the year. Bring warm clothing and your “extra eyes”.

On the 9th, we’ll be visiting Piet’s Dam, about 20kms from Volksrust on the Vrede Road. Fuller directions will be given at a later date. We’ll be leaving from the Wakkerstroom Library at 07h30. Bring refreshments, binoculars and a seat if you so wish. If our Volksrust members would like to participate, please phone John Barrow on 082 255 6778 if they’d like to travel in convoy and could meet us outside Mica Hardware at, give or take, 08h00.

Our winter Car Count will be conducted on Saturday, 20th July. Judy-Lynn Wheeler who co-ordinates this activity will give further details later on.

Bird of the Month



Western Osprey.

Scientific Name: Pandion haliaetus , Pandion=a king of Athens.
haliaetus=a fishing eagle.

General: Only one species worldwide with 4 barely separable sub-species. Unusually for raptors males tend to be larger than females. They are able to dive up to a metre below the surface of the water and catch fish. On emerging with prey it is turned and carried in line with the body, thus reducing air drag. The Western Osprey is often kleptoparasitized (robbed of food) by the African Fish Eagle. Normally silent in Africa.

Description: A distinctive species, despite its similar angling style to the African Fish Eagle. Most commonly confused with juvenile African Fish Eagle but with care this can be avoided. The Fish Eagle juvenile has a dark eye, have generally darker colouration with white streaking on the head and throat, with prominent white patches in the flight feathers. The juvenile Fish Eagle has a diagnostic shorter white tail with one dark terminal band. The Western Osprey has a barred tail. Sexes are alike.

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Status: Mostly a non-breeding migrant to Southern Africa arriving October-December and departing March-May. There are records of overwintering birds and scattered breeding records. All sightings of this species should be advised to the club, preferably at The Crow's Nest.

Food: Almost entirely fish but will occasionally attack waterbirds.

Habitat: Mainly coastal, estuaries and lagoons. Inland also, lakes, large rivers and man-made impoundments.

Breeding: Breeds outside s Africa normally, builds a large stick nest, usually in remote places, on top of large pine. Nests on cliffs in the Mediterranean area. If undisturbed the nest site-may be used repeatedly. Monogamous, possibly with long-term pair-bonds.

Conservation: Threatened by environmental pollution because of its fish diet. Populations declined in the 1950's and 60's, believed to be caused by DDT in insecticides affecting eggshells. It is now classified by the IUCN as a species of Least Concern.



American sub-species

South African Otters by John McAllister

I know this is not about birds, but with the recent sightings of otters on the Club's "Vlei Walks" I thought it might be of interest to look at these charismatic mammals.

Two species of otters – Cape (or African if you are less parochial than most South Africans) Clawless and Spotted-necked Otters (or Speckle-throated Otters) - occur in South Africa and both have been seen in the Wakkerstroom Wetland from time to time. On our 1st June outing there was some discussion on which species we saw frolicking around in front of



A Cape clawless otter sleeping in the sun showing the clear white markings on the throat and chin

us with a many comments about the colour of their necks and their size.

According to Wikipedia, Cape Clawless Otters are 113 to 163 cm long including their tails and weigh between 10 and 36 kg while Spotted-necked Otters are between 95 and 105 cm long and weigh between 3 and 6.5 kg. It would seem to me that there is very little visual difference between the dimensions of a small Cape Clawless and a large Spotted-necked, so I submit that this is not a reliable identification feature of these animals in the field.

Once again Wikipedia mentions that Cape Clawless Otters are “characterized (sic) by white facial markings that extend downward towards their throat and chest areas.” The same source also asserts that they are “chestnut in colour”, although this is not always obvious in the photographs available on the web.

Spotted-necked Otters on the other hand are “deep brown and marked with light spots around their throats.” In experience the



Spotted-necked Otter showing white spots on an otherwise dark neck

spots are quite variable in size varying from virtually invisible to quite large blotches, but the neck and chin is never completely white as in the Cape Clawless Otter – in the South African sub-species at least. Other features mentioned by Wikipedia include the fact that Spotted-necked Otters are very vocal with a sharp whistle being the most common vocalisation and that while both species take their catches to the shore/bank and eat them the Spotted-necked also eat theirs in the water on occasion.

A further sighting of otters

Ann witnessed the demise of a Yellow-billed Duck as it was being pulled underwater by an otter which was promptly joined by other otters. The duck momentarily surfaced a couple of times as it struggled to escape but the time elapsed between first and last sighting of the bird was probably less than a minute.

In another incident one otter had caught and was consuming an eel – as rapidly as though it were a stick of sugar cane being fed into a mincer!

It has been interesting to see the reaction of birds when the otters have large prey on the bank. The birds arrive quickly to scavenge, at times, actually moving amongst the animals and apart from a hasty side-step or two, not at all intimidated. On other occasions, however, I have seen them fly off at first sighting of an otter. The birds involved in scavenging were African Purple Swamphen, Common Moorhen and African Sacred Ibis.

That's all folks, (as one of the Disney cartoon used to say),

We hope you enjoyed it as much, if not more, as the previous editions.

Remember, we are always on the look out for interesting articles on birding around Wakkerstroom and we ask you to send your contribution to me for possible inclusion in the next issues.

Yours in Birding

JOHN BARROW - EDITOR