



# Wakkerstroom Bird Club

P O Box 93, Wakkerstroom 2480 Cell Number 0822556778 E-Mail: wakkersbirclub@gmail.com

## NEWSLETTER NUMBER 15 – SEPTEMBER 2013

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### Pyracantha

If anyone still has doubts about the need to clear this terrible weed from our Vlei, read on!

**Pyracantha crenulata** the Himalayan firethorn (red) fruits and **Pyracantha angustifolia** yellow firethorn (yellow/orange fruits) occur in our area. They are evergreen shrubs which can grow up to up to 5metres high with stiff spiny branches. They have sharp pointed hard woody spines and bear dark glossy grey/green leaves. The white flowers produce berries 5 -8mm in diameter. The plants are cultivated for ornament, hedging and screens on highways. The fruits are poisonous, when eaten in quantity. In our high altitude grassland areas it has become an **Invader**. The plants are found in disturbed areas, rocky ridges and along water courses. Pyracantha is one of the most aggressive invaders and is capable of penetrating and replacing indigenous vegetation, and threatens both agricultural productivity and natural ecosystems.

**The Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act, (Act 43 of Republic of South Africa 1983, amended in 2001);** states that the plant is a **potential transformer** and therefore declared a **Category 3** invader.

According to **The Act**; Declared invader (**Category 3**):

No further plantings are allowed

No trade of propagative material is allowed

Existing plants in gardens may remain but must be prevented from spreading.



**The Act** states that;

- 15A (3 a) **Category 3** plants may not occur within 30 metres of the 1:50 flood line of a river, stream, and spring, natural channel in which water flows regularly, lake, dam or wetland.
- 15A (3 c) a land-user must take all reasonable steps to curtail the spreading of propagating material of **Category 3** plants.
- 15C (4) no person shall, except in or for purposes of a biological control reserve-
  - (a) plant, establish, maintain, multiply or propagate **Category 3** plants
  - (b) import or sell propagating material of **Category 3** plants

Plant nurseries are not permitted to trade with **Category 3** plants.

There are however, Pyracantha hybrids such as Pyracantha Orange Charmer that can be purchased from nurseries. It cannot produce viable seed, or be propagated from cuttings.

Ref: **Henderson, L.** 2001. Alien Weeds and Invasive Plants. Plant Protection Research Institute handbook number 12. Agricultural Research Council Pretoria 0001

## TO FEED OR NOT TO FEED?

### A thought provoking letter exchange submitted by Norman Dennett

A recent exchange of letters on SABirdnet once again brought up the subject:

Should we, or should we not, feed the wild birds in our gardens throughout the winter?

The opening letter was from Shaun, he wrote....

*Hi All,*

*I have a small seed feeder in my garden. I have resisted this addition to the garden for many years and am still not sure if it is the right thing to do. My concerns are many:*



*1. That the seeds I use are from alien crops and they do spill and germinate so I am directly contributing to the alien vegetation problem.*

*2. Being only a seed feeder I am giving the birds that feed on these a step up and possibly disadvantaging the other types of birds i.e. fruit, insect and other feeders in the area.*

*3. Birds use this to feed the young that in turn become used to the idea that food comes from feeders and don't learn how to source food properly. (Much like children think that water comes from taps and food from the supermarket)*

*4. The birds become dependent the food source so I have an obligation to provide the food and since my work takes me away from home I just cannot meet that obligation on.*

*So they are a few of the concerns that I have but in the really cold weather I top up the feeder but not on an ongoing basis. I would like to know what other birders feel about the idea of feeders.*

*Regards,*

**Shaun**

Amongst the replies was this one from Michael Wright

*Hi Shaun,*

*Interesting topic and valid concern.*

*I believe most of your assertions are relatively true, and will briefly address them with the following personal thoughts (no research to back it up, so I may well be incorrect):*

- 1. I do not believe the seed you use to feed will substantially lead to alien infestation, as firstly I doubt it is exotic. Although you may see it dispersed by the birds, leading to abnormal species density / richness in and around your area. I wonder if any research can verify this?*
- 2. The seed-eaters will mildly out-compete the insectivores/frugivores in your area, but they are largely competing for different resources. So, again, I don't believe this is fundamental.*
- 3. Young birds will probably grow a level of abnormal dependency, but you will likely assist with natality rates and help increase bird populations, which is a positive mitigation against the negative effects of human impact and mismanagement of their habitat.*
- 4. Dependency will probably be true, but only if you constantly provide abundant feed.*

*A good balance would probably be to use bird seed 2 or max 3 times a week in moderate quantities. Thus they occasionally come looking, but are forced to seek alternative food sources and move around in their respective ranges.*

*If you can add fruit to feeding stands, as well as water troughs/baths, even mealworm and nesting logs, fruiting and flowering trees and plants to your garden (that attract butterflies, moths, invertebrates, frogs, other insects, etc.), and indigenous seed-producing grasses, you will provide a better balance and become a faunal and floral biodiversity haven :). Place these feeding and drinking sources near bushes and branches so that the seed-eaters (generally small) can flee to safety easily. Just deter the neighbourhood cats, and add a bat flat to control mosquitoes. Simple! :)*

*All in all, I believe there will be some mild positives and negatives, but nothing too significant. The other positives are that you get to see inter- and intra-species behaviour and learn about, enjoy and appreciate birds (good for the soul). You will likely, after one or two seasons, discover more birds nesting in or around your property, which is probably welcome. They present great photo and video opportunities and you can teach family members / friends about them.*

That's my unscientific, off the cuff thoughts, and I'd be interested to hear the more expert views and advice of others.

Best Regards

Michael Wright

**What do you think? Please drop a line to [wackersbirdclub@gmail.com](mailto:wackersbirdclub@gmail.com) and let us know *your* thoughts on this vexed question!**

### **Do you know of a Secretarybird nest? By Ernst Retief, Birdlife SA and submitted by Kristi Garland**

The Secretarybird is one of South Africa's most attractive and well known birds. Their characteristic crest feathers, black leg pipes and behaviour of striding through the veld, as they search for insects, small mammals and snakes, makes them very easy to identify. During the last few years, these charismatic birds have unfortunately become less easy to find. It has been suggested that their numbers have declined considerably, not only in South Africa but also across their range elsewhere in Africa. This situation is of great concern to BirdLife South Africa, and a research project has therefore been initiated to determine why their numbers are declining.

#### Possible Reasons for decline

- Habitat fragmentation and degradation through the spread of agricultural development and commercial forestry;
- Collisions with power lines;
- Collision with farm fences;
- Killed by cars;
- Excessive burning of grasslands may suppress populations of their prey;
- Intensive grazing by livestock can lead to veld degradation;
- Disturbance by humans is likely to negatively affect breeding;
- Secondary poisoning;
- Capture and trade of small numbers of birds.

The aims of the BirdLife South Africa research project are to determine:

- The size of the area used by Secretarybirds for feeding
- The type of habitat used by the birds; for example, pristine or degraded grasslands, agricultural lands or a combination of these habitat types.
- How long immature Secretarybirds stay at the nest and where they move to when they leave the nest area.

BirdLife South Africa has already fitted three Secretarybird chicks with GPS satellite tracking devices and subsequently obtained very useful information about these birds' movements. The first bird in the Free State moved about 100km in an easterly direction after leaving the nest. The second bird moved from Bela Bela to Botswana, a distance of about 270km. The third bird moved from

Warden in the Free State to the KwaZulu-Natal south coast before moving inland to Ixopo. For more information about these birds' movements and other aspects of the project, see the BirdLife South Africa Facebook Page and website (<http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/threatened-species/secretarybird>).

BirdLife South Africa would like to fit tracking devices to more Secretarybirds. For this, BirdLife South Africa needs the assistance of all birders and land owners. Please be on the lookout for Secretarybird nests. Secretarybirds usually nest on Black Thorn, Umbrella Thorn, Sweet Thorn, Common Hook Thorn trees, but also sometimes use alien trees. Trees up to a height of 5m are used for nesting. The best way to find a nest is to look out for adult birds standing on the nest tree and then to investigate closer. If you find a nest, please contact Ernst Retief at [ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za](mailto:ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za) or 072 223 2160.

BirdLife South Africa would also like to learn about Secretarybird mortalities, especially so that the human-caused mortalities can be addressed.

This project will make a considerable contribution to our knowledge of Secretarybirds and thus assist with their conservation, and you can contribute to the conservation of this charismatic bird species.

Ernst Retief  
Conservation Manager: Gauteng and Limpopo  
BirdLife South Africa  
0722232160  
[ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za](mailto:ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za)



By authority Ernst Retief

Photo taken by a camera trap donated to a land owner by BirdLife South Africa

## More on Karoo Thrushes in Wakkerstroom by John McAllister

The Karoo Thrush saga continues at 108 Kana Flats. The bird that has been in our garden on and off for the past two weeks now shows all the features of a Karoo Thrush and has a totally orange bill. There's not a smidgeon of black on it and it is a "classic" Karoo Thrush.

This begs the question – is it the same individual that has been in our garden periodically for the last seven weeks or so or is it a different bird?

This is actually quite an important question. If it is the same individual then the implication is that the black smudge I reported on last week could be a feature of some sort of juvenile/sub-adult plumage which is lost when the bird reaches its full adult plumage. If you look at the photographs of the study skins on Etienne Marais' website (<http://www.birding.co.za/feature6.htm>) then there does indeed seem to be some black on the bills of some of the Karoo Thrush skins.

If it is a different individual then it may support the theory that Karoo and Olive Thrushes hybridise with each other. According to Roberts VII they have been reported as hybridising "but recent molecular study failed to detect hybridisation."

In the words of an old banker "It makes you think, doesn't it?"

## Bird of the Month

Due to space constraints, this feature has been held over until the next month.

## Pentad Survey by Brian Guerin

The species list now totals 136 as at the end of week 27. Please keep your lists rolling in – birding is good now that the migrants are returning.



## Botha's Lark By John McAllister

Botha's Lark is another of our "special" birds that birders from all around the world come to Wakkerstroom to see. Like all larks it is superficially hard to identify because it is cryptically marked and well-camouflaged. With a little thought and effort though they are not too difficult to sort out and the rewards are well worth the effort.

Botha's belongs to the genus *Spizocorys* which comprises six species all of which are found only in Africa. They are all smallish larks with more or less conical bills. The largest is Masked Lark of Ethiopia and northern Kenya and this species also has the least conical bill. Obbia Lark is endemic to the Indian Ocean coast of eastern Somalia and the rest – Stark's Lark, Pink-billed Lark, Botha's Lark and Sclater's Lark are endemic or nearly endemic to South Africa and Namibia. Here in the Wakkerstroom area we are graced with the presence of both Botha's and Pink-billed Larks in this genus. Botha's is the only one of the six species that is not found in desert or semi-desert areas.

Both Botha's and Pink-billed Larks are similar looking small larks (with a total length of 12-13 cm) with pink conical bills and both have similar behaviour patterns. Both also have short tails and can almost look tailless like a sort of large Crombec, which is only useful if you know what a Crombec looks like I guess.

So how would you know which species you are looking at in the field? The good news is that it is not as difficult as it looks. Botha's Lark always has a heavily streaked breast with a rufous background. The **rufous does NOT extend onto the belly which is always plain white**. Pink-billed Larks, which we'll look at in more detail in a future newsletter, usually have a less heavily streaked chest, sometimes with no streaks at all, but, at least in our region, the **entire underparts except the throat are rufous**. In flight Botha's has **white outer tail feathers** while Pink-billed has **buffy outer tail feathers**. Because the tails on both species are so short the tails look like they are tipped white or buff respectively.



Photograph by kind permission of Niall Perrin. You can see more lovely photos on Niall's website on [www.niall.co.za](http://www.niall.co.za)

### Botha's Lark in the grasslands near Wakkerstroom

Sasol III describes the call of Botha's Lark as being "a cheerful, repeated 'chiree'". This should probably be described as their "song" rather than their "call". The song is an advertisement to attract members of the opposite sex and is usually uttered only during the breeding season. Their call is actually a rather nondescript "chuk" which is probably a contact call meant to keep them in touch with other birds no matter what their gender. Be that as it may the two-note "chiree" is really quite distinctive and is a great way of finding the birds during the summer months (October to March). Pink-billed Larks give an oft repeated two- or three-syllabled note often rendered as "see-see-see" which REALLY does sound different to "chiree" – really – I promise you! Unlike Rudd's neither of these birds have a long, protracted display and hearing them sing is often the only reliable way of finding them.

It is also possible, though not as satisfying, to identify and separate Botha's and Pink-billed Larks in flight. The short tails and the white or buff outer tail feathers are quite distinctive and, when combined with the song which is often given on take-off and in flight, are definitive.

They occur in the same sort of places as Rudd's Lark and like that species their habitat consists of prime grassland which has not been altered too much by mining, agriculture or heavy grazing. Contrary to what the learned folk tell us I have often found them in knee- or even waist-high grass where no grazing at all has been allowed for at least that season. In fact there were quite a few times when birders that I took out and who had only a limited time available had to be happy with flight views of the birds when they disappeared into the long grass. They are of course much easier to see in shortly grazed areas, but even here the basal grass cover is usually good for the most part.

In the Wakkerstroom and possibly Memel areas Botha's and Rudd's Larks can in fact be found in the same field at least for part of the year, again in contrast to some of the literature that I have read which state categorically that the birds are never found together. This may account for some of the apparent differences between my observations and that of some of our boffins. Early in the "lark season" around September and October I have found these two species co-existing in the same field, often in waist-high grass. Rudd's Larks then seem to get really serious about defending their territory. This may be because they have found their mates for the season and may even have started to breed – I never saw this for sure though. Suddenly the Botha's Larks disappeared from the well grassed "Rudd's Lark field" and appeared across the road in a field where there were two small settlements or "kraals", a greater concentration of cattle and a soccer field. The grass was much more heavily grazed here (but still had a good basal cover) and was even bare in places such as on the soccer field. The next field contained a monoculture of planted pasture and I never saw the birds so much as fly across the fence into this.

My theory about what caused this very localised movement is that the primary habitat of Botha's Larks was essentially the same as Rudd's Larks. As the breeding season progressed Rudd's became more fiercely competitive about their territories and out-competed the smaller Botha's Larks. These were then forced to move to the more heavily grazed areas which were in fact their secondary habitat and not their first choice of where they would actually like to be.

The fact that they occur in the same areas should not present any major ID problems as the two species are VERY different to each other. The first major difference is well illustrated by the Afrikaans names of the two species. Rudd's Lark is known as *Drakensberglewrik* or "Drakensberg Lark" and Botha's is known as *Vaalrivierlewrik* or "Vaal River Lark". While Rudd's prefers mid-altitude grasslands in foothills of the Drakensberg range in the eastern part of South Africa Botha's Lark has a preference for the upper to mid reaches of the Vaal River catchment and can be found in suitable grasslands from Wakkerstroom and Memel north to around Secunda and west to Kroonstad in the north-central Free State. This range unfortunately coincides quite closely with the eastern half of the "maize triangle" and with the Mpumalanga/northern Free State coalfields.

Other major differences, apart from their physical appearance, can easily be seen in their behaviour. Firstly Rudd's Larks are seen either in pairs or are solitary whereas Botha's are often seen in small flocks of ten or so birds. Secondly Rudd's adopt a much more upright stance, even when feeding, than other larks. Botha's, on the other hand, generally have a much more horizontal posture, especially when feeding.

According to the Eskom Red Data Book of the Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland published in 2000 Botha's Lark is classified as Endangered, i.e. one step further away from extinction than Rudd's Lark which was classified as Critically Endangered. Its habitat seems to be equally threatened as that of Rudd's and its distribution within its range seems to be equally fragmented. Like Rudd's Lark the species has disappeared from areas where it once occurred and it no longer occurs near the Type Locality (i.e. the place where it was first described) at Vredefort in the Free State. Its saving grace, bearing in mind that it is considered to be only two steps away from extinction, may be that it occurs in small flocks of up to 10 birds rather than solitary birds maintaining quite a large territory like Rudd's.

Both Rudd's and Botha's Larks have very restricted, but diverging ranges. The Wakkerstroom-Memel area is the only place where these two threatened species overlap and this alone makes Wakkerstroom a highly desirable place for overseas birders to visit. The presence of many other rare and endemic birds here makes the area even more desirable for the estimate 40-50000 "hardcore twitchers" from all over the world and THIS means money in our pockets!

**Yours in Birding - JOHN BARROW - EDITOR**