



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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More on those “White” Butterflies.



Queueing up

You will have noticed the swarms of apparently white butterflies flooding through the area for a week or more now. These are, in fact, brown-veined whites *Belenois aurota*, and if you look at one closely you will see the attractive brown markings. This species undergoes a migration beginning from the Cape Town area and along the West Coast as far as Namibia. They then head off in a north-easterly direction, finally crossing Mozambique and heading out to sea in the direction of Madagascar. Clouds of these massed butterflies will eventually extend up to 1km into the air.



Feeding time!

This phenomenon is known as a “burst migration”, a dispersal mechanism that relieves overcrowding in one area and spreads the progeny widely. It is thought to be triggered when the caterpillar food-plants become depleted forcing the butterflies to move in search of new areas to lay eggs. They have to feed every 20 minutes or so whilst on migration or they will dehydrate. In our area they seem to have a preference for Tall Verbena, or Purple Top, *Verbena bonariensis*, an alien from South America. This grows in profusion along the Oude Stasie (dirt) road and these plants are covered in butterflies at the moment.

They then just keep going until they find a mate and lay eggs – or just run out of fuel.

MiniSASS (Stream Assessment Scoring System)

The following information on this system was given to us by Kristi Garland of BLSA for your interest:

MiniSASS can be used to monitor the health of a river and measure the general quality of the water in that river. It uses the composition of macroinvertebrates (small animals) living in rivers and is based on the sensitivity of the various animals to water quality. (Note: miniSASS does NOT measure the contamination of the water by bacteria and viruses and thus does not determine if the river water is fit to drink).

What is the importance of water quality monitoring and management in South Africa? Fresh water is essential for most life on earth. It is also used in all spheres of human life, namely agriculture, industry, biodiversity conservation, sanitation and hydration. However due to the amount of rainfall that South Africa receives, it is classified as water stressed country. This means that if we do not monitor, manage and conserve our current water resources, we will be placing them and the population under tremendous stress in future!

As the general public, we can play a part in making a difference to managing freshwater resources in a community. miniSASS has the potential to be a powerful ‘red flag’ indicator for the identification of aquatic pollution sources. By using miniSASS we can actively take an interest and management in the health of freshwater bodies in our community. Your interest and knowledge can

be enhanced by adopting a local river in your community and monitoring it over time, identifying sources of pollution and taking local action to make a difference. You could also encourage more members of the community to take positive action towards monitoring and conserving water.

Download copies of miniSASS documentation from www.minisass.org www.groundtruth.co.za

River safety: take special care in polluted waters. Beware of dangerous animals (crocs/hippos!) and fast flowing waters. Wear protective gear when necessary and wash your hands regularly with soap and clean water wherever possible!!

Dates for monitoring: Friday 7th Feb , Friday 7th March, Friday 11th April, Friday 9th May, Friday 6th June, Friday 11th July, Friday 8th Aug, Friday 12th September, Friday 10th October, Friday 7th November and Friday 12th December

Kristi Garland and John Burchmore recently monitored one of the three sites here in Wakkerstroom and further information can be obtained from them.

Report on the First 26 weeks of the Pentad Survey

26 w/e 29 December, 2013.

Over the second half of 2013 you may know that we conducted a survey of the birds of the Wakkerstroom pentad, a fairly small area to concentrate on. Obviously sighting records from the vlei and town areas predominate and a concerted effort will need to be made in order to include more sightings from other area of the pentad. I hope the following summary of the results are of interest. The full Excel spreadsheet is available for anyone to see, please contact me if you would like do so.

<u>Group</u>	<u>No of Weeks Seen.</u>	<u>No of Species</u>	
1	0	134	
2	1	31	i.e. 31 species were seen in 1 Week only.
3	2	13	i.e. 13 species were seen in 2 weeks only.
4	3	9	
5	4	8	
6	5	8	
7	10-Jun	15	
8	20-Nov	39	
9	21-25	24	
10	26	34	i.e. 34 species were recorded every week.
		<u>315</u>	= Total Number of species on Warwick Tarboton's list, as amended.

Group 1. i.e. 134 species out of 315 species on the original WT covering 4 Quarter Degree Squares were not recorded in the pentad due to the much reduced area and variety of habitats in the pentad.

Group 2. 31 species were recorded in only 1 week of the survey but may have been seen by more than one Observer in that week, e.g. Yellow-billed Stork (week49) spotted by several observers, Bush Blackcap (week 47) seen by one observer and Wattled Starling, a true vagrant, (week 43) seen by one Observer.

Group 3. 13 species were recorded in only 2 weeks of the survey including Great Crested Grebe (weeks 37&49), European Roller (weeks 50&51) White Stork(weeks 41&52) and Willow Warbler Weeks 47&49).

Group 4. Birds seen in only 3 of the 26 week period included African Darter (42.44&45),

- Group 5. Great Egret (28.29&37) and European Bee-eater (44.46&47), no doubt on migration. 8 species were sighted in only 4 weeks of the 26 incl Blue Crane (35,40,43 &44), Buff-streaked Chat (32,34,41 &48) and Half-collared Kingfisher (36,37,49 & 50)
- Group 6. Also only 8 species including Amur Falcon (47,49,50,51 & 52), Three-banded Plover (31,34,36,40 & 42), and Black Cuckoo Shrike (33,34,38,40 & 45), a single bird that may have now moved on.
- Group 7. 15 species seen in 6-10 weeks, incl Lanner (6 weeks), Red-billed Teal (7), Secretary Bird (8), Southern Boubou (9) and African Reed-warbler (10).
- Groups 8, 9 & 10. The more common birds, not all can be listed here, comprising 97 (54%) of the total species recorded (181). Unfortunate inclusions were Common Starling and Common Myna, both were recorded every week.

Summary. Because the survey is only 6 months old, it is too early to form firm conclusions but some trends are emerging, most notably migration patterns. A more complete picture will be apparent when we have a full year's figures at the end of June 2014.

One definite conclusion, however, is that to make the final product as meaningful as possible we need more volunteers to submit lists. My thanks to those who unfailingly submit lists on a weekly basis, we only have a handful of Observers at the moment. It's important "birding with a purpose", so join us now!

Brian Guerin.
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A Question of Timing

An article in "The Lowvelder" newspaper of November 29, 2013 headed "Grasslands week set for February" quotes a John McAllister of Mpumalanga Parks Board with certain remarks on that subject. John was under the impression that he retired from the MPB 14 years earlier than this! He now thinks he may actually have been "Suspended on Full Pay" (which has become very fashionable) and is presently formulating a claim for 14 years back-pay from MTPA.

We can only wish him well, which leads us on to his article:-

Pink-billed Lark

Pink-billed Lark, while far more widely distributed than the similar-looking Botha's Lark, is nevertheless one 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.

Like Botha's, Pink-billed Lark belongs to the genus *Spizocorys* which, as I've said before (Newsletter No. 15), comprises six species all of which are found only in Africa. All of these with the exception of Botha's are found in desert or semi-desert areas. Pink-billed has the widest distribution of all and is comprised of four subspecies or races in southern Africa and two subspecies (*Spizocorys conirostris harti* and *S.c. makawai*) in south-western Zambia. More than 90% of the breeding population can be found in southern Africa which makes the species a 'near endemic' to the region.



Pink-billed Larks with quite heavy breast-streaking (left) and no breast-streaking at all (right), but note that both have rufous bellies

Subspecies are important to Birders because they form the basis for possible new "splits" in the future. Of the southern African subspecies (*Spizocorys conirostris*

conirostris, *S.c. damarensis*, *S.c. barlowi* and *S.c. crypta*) the nominate race is found in the central grasslands of South Africa. If you look at the distribution map of the species in Roberts VII – assuming of course that you have a portable crane to get it off your bookshelf – you will see just how well the distribution of the subspecies coincides with the central areas of the Grassland Biome of South Africa. Wakkerstroom is right on the eastern edge of the range of *S.c. conirostris* and this is the subspecies that we are concerned with in this article. The other subspecies do look somewhat different to “ours” (and maybe split one day – who knows).

As I mentioned in Newsletter 15 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.

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. To refresh your memory I’ll repeat some of my tips again. 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 usually have a less heavily streaked chest, sometimes have quite heavy breast streaking and sometimes have no streaks on the breast at all. So the bad news is that the streaks are not always a good distinguishing feature, but nevertheless are a useful guide. But there is good news as well. In our region (remember the importance of subspecies?) the **entire underparts except the throat are rufous**. These features are shown quite well on the photographs below – again thanks to Niall Perrins for the wonderful photographs. If you enjoy looking at bird photos I’d suggest you visit his website at www.niall.co.za



A Botha’s Lark showing the heavy breast streaking, the rufous breast-band and the white belly

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. This makes it possible, though not as satisfying, to identify and separate Botha’s and Pink-billed Larks in flight. If you remember Botha’s “song” consists of a two-note “chiree” whereas Pink-billed Larks give an oft repeated two- or three-syllabled note often rendered as “see-see-see”. 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.

Another good clue to the bird’s identity is the habitat that you see them in. As mentioned earlier Botha’s is the only *Spizocorys* lark that is not found in desert or semi-desert areas. It is in fact a species of near-pristine primary grassland whereas Pink-billed, being essentially a bird of the more arid areas of the country, it can withstand more disturbed grassland, particularly more heavily grazed areas, that are essentially man-made deserts or semi-deserts. The area where I used to find them fairly regularly was a patch of abandoned fields near the turn-off to Daggakraal on the Wakkerstroom-Amersfoort road.

If one looks at the distribution map for the species in THE ATLAS OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN BIRDS VOL. 2 (Sabap 1) there seems to be a distinct drop in the reporting rate for the Wakkerstroom quarter degree squares compared to those further west. This seems to bear out my subjective impression that Pink-billed Larks have become decidedly more common in the Wakkerstroom area over recent years and while this is nice for birders it may not be good news for the environment and particularly the closely related Botha’s Lark which may not be able to compete too well with the seemingly hardier Pink-billed Lark. Any way be that as it may for the moment Pink-billed larks are decidedly an asset in our array of grassland larks that attract birders from all over the world to Wakkerstroom.

John McAllister

(Photographs by kind permission of Niall Perrins)

Membership Matters

During December 2013, Ronette Engela from Pretoria and Adriaan Botma from Wakkerstroom joined us. We welcome them to our club and look forward to many years of co-operation between us. We currently have 59 paid members and 3 honorary life members

Bird of the Month

Spotted Eagle-owl

Scientific Name/Meaning: *Bubo africanus* Bubo =Latin eagle-owl, probably onomatopoeic, africanus – of Africa.

General: Owls have the curious ability to arouse different emotions in different people, ranging from affection and awe to outright condemnation, usually based on superstition. Ornithophobia is the name given to an irrational fear of birds, and the negative re-action to owls sometimes springs from this, too. There are 12 local species, and can be loosely divided into ‘screeching owls’ i.e. Barn Owl and African Grass-owl, and the rest as “hooting” owls. Females are usually bigger than males in the larger species and there is little other distinction between sexes.

Description: Large, 43-47cm, approximately 700g. Colour usually shades of grey and black on white background. The back is mostly grey-brown and the eyes are yellow. A circular, dark-edged facial disc and prominent ear-tufts are conspicuous. Confusion should only be possible in our area with the Cape Eagle-owl which is much scarcer, if not absent entirely.

Status/Conservation: Considered to be Not Threatened, indeed its willingness to occupy human habitats stands it in good stead. Recorded only in 14 weeks (54%) of the 26 week Pentad survey is no doubt misleading due to its secretive habitats except when calling or hunting. Occurs throughout southern Africa.



At night in the Kalahari (Wikipedia)



Food: Mostly caught from a slow glide from a lookout, sometimes from above a street light in urban areas, sometimes chases small items on foot. Spotted Eagle-owls frequently use aerial pursuit catching bats, birds etc. They have an extremely varied diet including mole-rats, dead fish, snails, arachnids, millipedes and poisonous snakes. They are believed to not be above a bit of cannibalism at road kills!

Habitat: These birds utilize a wide range of habitats, but are more common in open scrub and grassland habitats with low rocky ridges and trees in which to nest and roost. Resident in many towns and cities.

Breeding: Virtually monogamous, a solitary nester and quite territorial. The same female was recorded in one territory for 21 years, with one male for 13 years and another male for 8 years! In another study of 269 nests, 61% were on the ground, 26% were in trees and 11% on buildings. Usually 2-3 eggs are laid, more or less according to food availability. Chicks leave ground nests about 4 days before those from elevated nests. They stay with adults for 2 months before learning to hunt and leave them at 4 months.

Some Interesting Local Sightings

2 Blue Cranes seen feeding on the grass opposite De Oude Stasie, not seen around feeding there for some years.

Yellow-billed Kite feeding on carrion on the Volksrust road near BLSA.

Little Bittern being chased on 2 occasions by a Southern Red Bishop. On the second occasion the Little Bittern was well and truly “flustered”.

Adult Spotted Eagle Owl standing over the carcass of a juvenile, on the Volksrust road near BLSA. This appears to support remarks in our Bird of the Month article.

A single European Roller recorded on 3 occasions near De Oude Stasie.

Yellow-crowned Bishops have not been recorded in the vlei during the Pentad survey, usually recorded breeding with the Southern Red bishops near the bridge? The only Pentad records are from along the Zaaihoek Dam road.

White-winged Flufftail – One bird caught in mist nets on Sunday, January 19th Kristi Garland will keep us posted on DNA analysis results. We'll report further again in the next newsletter.

DIARY OF EVENTS:

N.B. We advise carrying a drink, snack, hat and insect repellent to all outings.

Saturday 25 January – Summer CAR Count, there will be the usual briefing @ The Mucky Duck @ 17h00 on the Friday evening before, new participants are always welcome.

Saturday 1 February - A.M. Vlei Walk, meet as usual on the Amersfoort Bridge, 07h00 until approximately 09h00. Remember sightings made on these mornings go into the Pentad Survey results.

Sunday 2 February – World Wetlands Day

Saturday 8 February – A new venue. We will visit Newcastle Ponds (sewage works to most of us). Judy Wheeler together with Roy Cowgill recently visited there and came up with a great list of birds. Detailed directions later but essentially, as you reach the first robot at the end of the highway (Albert Wessels Drive) turn left and 6.5km along there you will see their signage on the left. 4-wheel drive / high clearance vehicles will be needed to visit the large pans on Iscor property.

Wednesday 19 February – an illustrated talk by John McAllister on his recent trip to India, 17h30 for 18h00 at BLSA offices. John's talks are not to be missed!

Reed spraying around the Drummond Hide and the picnic site

Recently John Burchmore and Brian Guerin carried out our first herbicide spraying of a couple of selected areas on the Vlei. This is a project we have been researching and discussing for some time with very good advice from Stan Madden who has had extensive experience in this area. The constant encroachment of the wetland by *Phragmites australis* is drastically reducing the amount of open water that is available.

Areas adjacent to the Drummond hide, along the Amersfoort Rd and next to the Picnic site near the Walkway under the bridge were the chosen areas for today's exercise.



There will be a full ongoing report in our next newsletter with pictures of the effects of the spraying.

Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment

Friends of Chrissiesmeer have announced that the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment has officially been declared! At 60,000 hectares, this is the biggest Protected Environment in the country and a critical area to conserve for biodiversity in Mpumalanga. We congratulate all involved in this project and hope that we will achieve the same in Wakkerstroom shortly.

JOHN BARROW - EDITOR