



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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Rising to the flame



Our village has been abuzz recently with the talk about the Working on Fire Programme, a project some members of our community have worked on for the past six years. The good news is that our local team has been recruited and is currently on their mandatory basic training at the Working on Fire National Academy in Nelspruit. We look forward to welcoming the team home towards the end of July. Being a fire fighter, and especially one in this programme leads to many training opportunities. Since its inception in September 2003, the Working on Fire Programme has been in partnership with the national government under the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP). The initial aim of the programme was to alleviate poverty and for the recipients to gather additional and employable skills. Currently, the programme employs approximately 5000 young men and women in 200 teams across the country. After passing a rigorous fitness test, the trainees are sent on a 21 day training course.

There are three main categories of training: mandatory (fire fighting skills), functional (dependent on the role each member plays in the team) and finally, life skills (HIV awareness, entrepreneurial programmes etc.) With the employed youth component sitting at approximately 85%, this programme definitely assists in developing skills in our country's youngsters. This team of 25 will not only be of service to the broad community during the fire season. During the summer months they will be able to assist in alien plant removal, erosion control and the like thereby addressing the need to prevent and control wild fires to enhance the sustainability and protection of life, property and the environment through Integrated Fire Management (IFM) practices.

These IFM practices support the National Veld and Forest Fire Act No. 101 of 1998 which aims at preventing and controlling veld, forest and mountain fires throughout the country. Please note that this Act applies to you if you own, lease or control land and if a fire can start, burn on or spread from your land. You have the responsibility to prepare and maintain firebreaks between your land and any adjoining properties. Locally, the Fire Protection Association (FPA), based in Volksrust, assists its members with carrying out this act. They are responsible for developing a fire management strategy, appointing a Fire Protection Officer, the training of its members as well as drawing up binding rules for all its members. Together with Working on Fire and the FPA, our community has a great resource for fighting those all consuming fires.

Preparing and fighting potential fires in our area has never been made easier. As the community, you can make use of the team throughout the year and as a member of the local FPA, the cost of using the team is greatly reduced. As the saying goes – by the people, for the people.

For more information, please contact Johan Deacon on 017 799 3192 or Johan Kennard on 017 735 3296.

Written by: Paul van der Vyver (Working on Fire: Regional Manager, Mpumalanga Highveld South Region) and Kristi Garland (BirdLife South Africa: Grasslands Environmental Education Project and Centre Manager)



Members of a fire fighting team in training

“Fences – friend or foe of birds?”

“You can help us answer this question”, says Ernst Retief, BirdLife South Africa researcher who recently introduced this new research project. “Birds are killed each year when they collide with fences. Often these species are also of conservation concern, for example the Secretarybird and Blue Crane. We suspect many bird species, and even bats, come to a cruel demise when they are caught in fences, dying from broken legs and wings, or from dehydration”.

Although there is some information available about this problem, most of it is based on anecdotal evidence or studies outside of South Africa.

Some of the questions that need answering are:

Which species are killed through collisions with fences?

Why do these species collide with fences? Might be linked to behavior: nocturnal species more affected than diurnal birds.

What type of fence poses the biggest risk to birds? Anecdotal evidence suggests that barbed wire fences are the biggest problem, this needs to be confirmed.

What environmental factors contribute to collisions? A fence over a wetland might be more of a risk than one near a homestead.



BirdLife SA now requests members of the public and birders to please submit information about birds caught

in fences. Please include historical sightings. The data can be submitted in two ways; email to Ernst Retief (ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za) or by completing a form on the BirdLife South Africa website:

<http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/important-bird-areas/fence-mitigation-project>. A photo of the incident would be especially valuable.

The data collected will help to obtain a better understanding of the problem and will enable appropriate proposals to be put forward with the aim of lessening the impact of fences on wildlife and birds in particular.

Melodious Lark by John McAllister

While Melodious Larks, also known as Melodious Bushlarks (Howard and Moore – Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World) and Latakoo Larks (The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World) are not strictly Wakkerstroom Larks; they are found around Ladysmith, not TOO far away for a day's birding. They are such charismatic birds that they really cannot be left out of any serious discussion of Wakkerstroom larks.



Melodious Larks are not much to look at

These small larks are not much to look at and can easily be overlooked as just another LBJ, BUT they have an amazing secret. Their song during the breeding season is just that – a SONG, not the rather squeaky, wispy and sometimes guttural sounds that most other larks call songs. Melodious larks launch into a wonderful song mimicking as many as 60 other species of birds ranging in pitch from the sweet songs of canaries to the harsh sound uttered by Swainson's Francolins proclaiming their territory.

This beautiful song is given either when the bird is perched on a prominent feature such as a post or fence or in a display flight with rapidly beating wings about 30 m above the ground. So if you hear this canary-like song around Ladysmith (in our region) have a look for a



Photo taken some years ago on the Wetland Fence at the South Western end of the Reserve just below Norman's house.

perched bird initially as this will give you the best view. Failing this scan the sky and search for the bird in flight display. While this does not give you such a great view it is certainly diagnostic. If you follow the displaying bird in your bins it may well land on a prominent perch and you can get a good look at it. Taxonomically Melodious Larks are classified in the *Mirafra* genus which includes the large majority of birds in the Lark Family. While they are essentially grassland birds they have a look-alike species in the Bushveld – the Monotonous Lark. Both are small, compact birds with stoutish, conical bills, both having clear white throats and both have streaked breasts and off-white to fawn bellies. The good news is that they VERY seldom occur in the same area in South Africa at least. In South Africa Melodious Larks are tied to open grassland, even though these might be quite small patches at times. Monotonous Larks are, on the other hand, generally tied to Acacia woodland in the Bushveld and Lowveld in my experience. They also seem to be absent in dry periods, but explode after good rains and seem to perch on every available Acacia in the area. Their songs are also vastly different with the Monotonous Lark being limited to an explosive ‘bang-la-desh’.



Melodious lark displaying

The choice habitat for Melodious Larks in South Africa is grassland dominated by Red Grass *Themeda triandra*, but they will utilise less prime grassland such as vacant lots in southern Pretoria and some planted pastures. The species is classified as Near Threatened as it has suffered much loss of habitat to agriculture. Melodious Lark is a South African near endemic with a patchy distribution extending from the Eastern Cape interior through the Free State to Gauteng and North-west Provinces. There is a very isolated population in Central Zimbabwe. According to Roberts VII the species is known from only two farms in Zimbabwe and in 2005, both of these were scheduled for resettlement.

Ladysmith is well worth a visit for birders. Not only are there Melodious Larks here but there are other delights such as White-bellied Korhaans or whatever they are called today and if you can arrange a visit to the sewage works I have seen such rarities as Baillon’s Crakes and Painted Snipe here in the past.

Old Photographs etc. – Brian Guerin

In order to gain an overview of the changes to the Wakkerstroom Vlei area as it was we would appreciate seeing any old photographs that you may have in your possession. Aerial photographs would be of particular interest and terrestrial photographs will also tell a story. Printed articles giving historical details will also be of much use.

We need photographic material to plot the spread of alien species like *Phragmites* and also to try and establish the effects of this growth on flow channels through the vlei system. This sort of information seems to be in short supply and any assistance will be appreciated. All material will be returned to the owner. Please contact Brian Guerin, 017 730 0570 or 083 415 6701 for collection, returns will be done as soon as possible.

An Interesting Website:



I have been in e-mail contact with Mr Bill Handke of the Canberra Indian Action Myna Group in Australia. Their organisation is doing sterling work on the eradication of this pest and also the Common Starling. Go to www.indianmynaactiongroup.org.za and see the methods they are employing and the successes they are achieving. I have received their Myna Matters Bulletin # 29 by e-mail and will be happy to forward it on to anyone who would like to read it. One article records the destruction of nearly 50,000 Indian Mynas just

from the Canberra district since they started operations in 2006. These are the *reported* figures as some trappers don’t report their captures. - We can only dream.....

“If the bird and the book disagree, always believe the bird.”- An old birdwatcher’s proverb

Interesting Local Sightings:



Black-headed Oriole
(Wikipedia)

1. Amazing sighting of a small bat feeding on the remains of an apple at the birdtable in our garden. Unfortunately plentiful supplies of apple placed there on subsequent nights have not been touched
2. African Marsh Harrier displaying over the vlei in a most unhurried manner, long, slow climbs alternated with descents during which the underwings “flashed” when caught in the early morning sunrise, and
3. A lone, vividly coloured Golden-breasted Bunting, obviously a male, but no sighting of a partner.
4. After what seems a long gap, a Black-headed Oriole spotted drinking water from a sugar-water bottle in the garden. All by Ann Cleal.
5. A single Lesser Flamingo on Zaaihoek Dam. Visible for a few minutes only in the ‘scope before flying off. The wholly

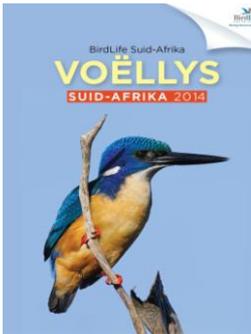
dark bill and extensive pink colouration on head and neck clearly visible. Seen between the shore and the small, rocky island annually exposed by the falling water. To be submitted to the ADU.

6. One of our early birders saw a Black-backed Jackal walking along a street in Wakkerstroom.
7. Graham Spencer saw 2 Blue Korhaans on the airfield last Sunday



A Golden-Breasted bunting in the
Hluhluwe Game Reserve (Wikipedia)

Voëllys in Afrikaans / Bird List in Afrikaans



Let asseblief op dat die opgedateerde Afrikaanse Voëllys vir 2014 is nou beskikbaar op die BirdLife Suid Afrika webbladsye. Sien www.birdlife.org.za/publications/checklists

Please note the updated Afrikaans check list for birds is now available on the Birdlife South Africa website. See www.birdlife.org.za/publications/checklists

Monthly Pentad Report – to June 30

The total species count to the end date of the first year remains at 205. The information gathered will be carefully checked and a printout will be on display at one of our meetings.

This now means that the information gathering for the second year of the proposed three year term has commenced. Members who are not yet participating are asked to come forward and join us. Even the one-off sighting of an interesting bird can be reported to a Committee member for inclusion in the results. All that is needed is appositve identification! I am often in the situation that someone says “Oh, by the way, I had a Spotted Eagle Owl (for e.g.) in my garden a couple of weeks back” That record is lost because the date is not usually remembered, and I have a number of examples of this happening. Even the smallest contributions make a difference.

New Members

We regret to announce that we did not attract any new member since the last newsletter .

August evening meeting – Final date / details to be advised.

We are planning a round-table meeting of all interested parties, the public included, on future development plans of the vlei area. Speaker – Dr Bob Scholes, one of the foremost experts in this field.

“We have been God-like in our planning of our domesticated plants and animals but rabbit-like in our unplanned breeding of ourselves.” – Arnold Toynbee.

Bird of the Month: Yellow-breasted Pipit (Geelborskoester)

Scientific Name/Meaning: *Anthus chloris*, Greek *anthos* is probably a wagtail. *Anthos* is a flower in Greek and the yellow wagtails appeared flower-like in green grassy fields. *Chloris*, Latin, means green but should actually be yellow.

General: This is an endemic species, uncommon even in its restricted range and one of the keenly sought-after birds for visitors to our area. It is similar in size to African Pipit, the most common Wakkerstroom pipit. Resident or partially altitudinal migrant, during April-September depending on the severity of the winter.

Description : In breeding plumage, as we are most likely to see it, the Yellow-breasted Pipit is distinctive if the clear lemon-yellow underparts are seen. Confusion with other large pipits is possible if only a partial view is gained. Other ID features are; the breast is indistinctly streaked or plain, the clearly scalloped upperparts and white outer tail feathers. It has a fluttering display flight and familiarity with their characteristic song is recommended when searching for them. It is a high altitude (>2000m) grassland species. Non-breeding adults are duller with saturated, dark brown upperparts, white, buff or rich brown below and with a bright yellow spot on the lower belly.

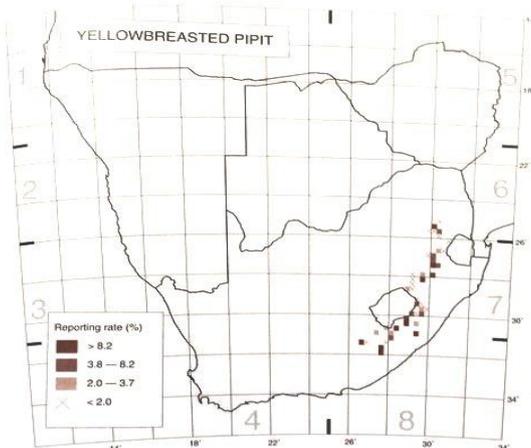
Status/Conservation: Yellow-breasted Pipits are currently classed as Vulnerable and afforestation of montane grasslands, overgrazing and the disruption of increased burning have all resulted in reductions in their range. Good populations still occur in the protected areas of the Drakensberg, e.g. Natal Drakensberg Park.

Food and Feeding Methods: Forages on the ground for insects, beetles, grasshoppers etc.

Habitat: High mountain grasslands (usually 2000-2300m) in Mpumalanga, on flat or gently sloping ground. Unlike most pipits they are not attracted to burnt areas.



Picture courtesy of Wikipedia



Breeding: In the Wakkerstroom area most clutches seem to be laid during November to March, 1-4 eggs, (usually 3) are laid and the incubation period is approximately 14 days. In a study, of 353 eggs laid, 213 hatched and 183 hatchlings fledged, giving a success rate of only 53%! The nest is an open cup of grass, neatly lined some 4-5cm deep built in a hollow, surrounded by tussocks. If the incubating bird is disturbed or threatened it sometimes flies off with an injury-feigning display. Breeding success is greater in lightly grazed grasslands.

We have been approached by Dr Ian Little, Threatened Grasslands Species Programme, Endangered Wildlife Trust, to

assist in recording/advising all sightings of Yellow-breasted Pipit to him. It is hoped that the above will assist in identifying this elusive species. This could be “birding with a purpose” for members, in the summer months particularly, and we urge all keen birders to participate. The Club would like to collate all sightings and forward a monthly report to Dr Little, or alternately your sightings could be sent direct to him on his e-mail address: ilittle@ewt.org.za. Accurate position points are important, GPS if possible.

Outing in August

We fear that the low temperatures experienced in Wakkerstroom and surrounds during July have persuaded some of our usual attendees to stay away. Hopefully by 12 August, the temperatures will have risen somewhat, making the day more conducive to outdoor events. A group of us are hoping to organise a “recce” to The Wakkerstroom Farm Lodge with a view to a future outing to the farm. We’ll meet at the Library at 08h45 to leave at 09h00. This is virtually an untouched part of our pentad and, with the commencement of the 2nd year of the pentad survey, we’d like to incorporate the farm into the search area. Members and their friends are cordially invited to join us. Bring your equipment and refreshments if you wish.

How many toes do birds have?

Most birds have 4 toes on each foot. Some have only 3, and the Ostrich has just 2. Birds' toes are arranged in one of various configurations: all four pointing forward for gripping onto vertical surfaces (e.g. Swifts); 3 toes pointing forward and one back for perching (passerines); or two toes forward and two back for climbing or grasping objects (woodpeckers, cuckoos and parrots). One species, the Osprey, can even adjust the arrangement: normally it points three toes forward and one back, but when catching fish it points two forward and two back, to get a better grip on its slippery prey.

Vanishing Bees (follow-on)

In the last issue, we had an article on "Vanishing Bees" by Norman Dennett. Note below some things you can do to protect our hives from a similar fate.

You can bee the change every day. Here's how.

VOTE WITH YOUR FORK

Buying organic produce helps nurture the food systems that take better care of the bees and everything else on this planet.

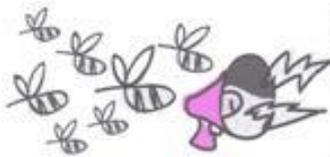


STOP HOME PESTICIDE USE

Natural cleaners and pest remedies are safer, more effective and less expensive than toxic chemicals. Get rid of the poisons in your cabinets, garages and lawns.

PLANT A GARDEN

Grow yummy food, delicious herbs, beautiful flowers – it improves your health and helps the bees. Even people in apartments can use planters or raise a window garden!



RAISE AWARENESS

The first step to activate change is education. Let people know about the bee crisis, the very real dangers of widespread pesticide use and our perilous agricultural landscape.

There are many other ways to help the bees – shop at farmer's markets, explore community supported agriculture, become a beekeeper, write to your senator or congressman or host a screening of this film. Visit our website for information on how to make a difference.

www.vanishingbees.com

Bee the Change. Join the Hive. Spread the Buzz.

Why do you rarely see a dead bird?:

Considering that millions of birds die every year, it is amazing how few dead ones we come across. Many die out of sight of human beings, while others are killed and eaten, leaving little or no evidence. Decay and decomposition can also be very rapid, especially in warm climates.

Club AGM held on 19 July 2014 - Abridged Chairman's Report for the Year ending June 2014.

1. Welcome to everybody present and the apologies received are noted.
2. Thanks for joining us for our annual report back on the year's activities and what we have done with YOUR subscriptions and generous donations. As with last year we will try to keep it as informal as we can –without proxies, nomination forms because being an independent club we have no one to answer to OR pay any of our hard-earned monies to.
3. I believe we have had another successful year, increasing membership numbers, raising funds of R4244 from trading (a new activity) and increasing expenditure on projects from R9916 to R14732, i.e. by R4816. This work included substantial improvements to the interior of Drummond Hide making it more user-friendly and later installing a gate to better control key entry and thus avoiding the continuing problem of Eskom cutting our locks at the old gate. Thanks to Gys Roos for his continuing support on this item.
4. I would like to thank some of our "supporters" for their willingness to help "off Committee". They include Keith Davidson for all of his work on the Drummond Hide, Glenn Ramke for introducing us to Claudia Holgate who brought us in a good sum of money from her talk, and also Tanya Smith who also gave us a fascinating evening talk. Kristi Garland for providing a venue for our monthly meetings and general support for the Club. Thanks, too, to Len and Hannelie for their continuous support in our endeavours – and lunch today! If I have forgotten anybody please forgive me.
5. It goes without saying that we couldn't have achieved so much without a supportive and dedicated Committee and we should all thank them for their efforts! Thanks to each of them!
6. Future Plans:
 1. The Drummond Hide will be given a coat of preservative within a week or two,
 2. Work will re-commence on alien removals in the very near future, around the margins and in the vlei, The Working on Fire group will finish their training in the next couple of weeks and we are hoping to get some assistance from them with alien removal, probably beginning with the basket willows.
 3. The clearing of an open ("loafing") area opposite the WOW Hide depends on the water level and will be looked into shortly.
 4. The first spraying we will do (mid-spring) will be at Crane Hide to open up the reeds and restore the attractive outlook of this hide.
 5. We have been offered generous financial assistance by WNHA which will enable us to extend and accelerate efforts to clear greater areas of open water and provide better viewing possibilities. We are extremely grateful for their assistance.
 6. The objectives of all these activities are to greatly improve birdwatching opportunities on the vlei for members and residents and to provide an attraction for visiting birdwatchers and eco tourists to come and spend their eco-rands in our town!

JOHN BARROW then presented the Treasurers Report revealing a closing cash balance at June 30 of **R**

7. Election of Committee – the existing Committee was re-elected and the meeting then closed.



Brian Guerin, Hannelie vd Walt, Johann Knobel, Judy Wheeler, Kristi Garland and Len van Eyck outside De Oude Stasie after the talk.

The meeting was followed by a beautifully illustrated talk by guest speaker Johann Knobel on his experiences photographing eagles for his book "Eagles of Africa". One stunning picture followed another and his passion for these birds shone through. We have to thank him also for most generously waiving his fee to come and talk to us.

**THE EDITOR,
JOHN BARROW**