



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 32– MARCH 2015

Our new Trailer up and running!



Details of the plaque

The WBC has recently taken delivery of the new trailer needed to hold the sprayer purchased by the WNHA that we use in our Invasive Vegetation Project. Everything has been fitted, the trailer registered and licensed and we're all ready for the next spraying season in a few weeks time.

We would like to thank all those who contributed so generously to our Trailer Project, all those who bought tickets in our Competition and those who provided the prizes. It was a great success and we are extremely grateful to you all.

The trailer has been dedicated to Sandy McKenna Twomey, the Camera Lady, and a suitable plaque has been affixed to the trailer.

Norman Dennett

Wakkerstroom Walks and Trails

There is an exciting venture that has started in Wakkerstroom – the development of walks in and around the village. The aim is to provide visitors trails that show off the natural beauty as well as the fauna and flora, definitely the best of what Wakkerstroom has to offer. This venture has been brought about by a working committee of enthusiastic walkers, naturalists and birders.

Currently on offer is one historical walk, namely the War Memorial, and one nature focussed trail in the Wetland Reserve which looks at the indigenous fauna and flora which whets your appetite to explore a little more. These trails can be done either on foot, bicycle or car. They are self guided and average no more than two hours each. Detailed leaflets are available at the Information Office in The Crow's Nest in Badenhorst Street.



Do birds perspire?

No. Birds don't have any sweat glands on their skin, so they lose excess heat by panting and seeking shade.

From the book "Everything you wanted to know about birds..." by Stephen Moss

**A Farewell:
Wakkerstroom's Secretarybird Lady says Goodbye.**



After almost 17 months, the Wakkerstroom Secretarybird Project comes to an end. At the end of November 2013, I started this project alongside Tshwane University of Technology and BirdLife South Africa. The Project aims to determine the productivity, nesting success and diet of the Secretarybirds in the greater Wakkerstroom area.

By August 2014, I found 22 nests in this area of which 13 pairs produced 6 fledglings in the 2013/14 breeding season and 8 pairs produced 12 fledglings in the 2014/15 breeding season. As Secretarybirds are annual as well as biannual breeders, it is difficult to determine their productivity. This study however, has shown that the birds in this area are doing better than expected.

I will be going back to Pretoria end of March to do the final data analysis and final write up. For the 2014/15

Secretarybird diet, I will do manual prey remain analysis at Ditsong Museum as well a species identification using DNA barcoding. These results will then be compared, which I am very excited about.

During my time spent in Wakkerstroom, I have met many people and some became dear friends, whom I will remember and cherish for the rest of my life. I climbed many trees (and fell out of some), drove many kilometres in my trusty TUT bakkie (which I have grown to love and respect in many a dire situation!) and made lots of friends. I also learned a great deal and had a lot of fun. I have fallen in love with this area and its people, have no doubt, you will be missed!

This Project would not have been possible without the help of the area's community, especially the farmers. I thank everyone from



the bottom of my heart for their friendship, love and support given to me and the Project.

I will keep you updated with the results of the Project and will hopefully see everyone again soon.

Eleen Strydom.

Note from the Editor: -

Eleen was the guest of honour at a recent function at De Oude Stasie to say farewell to her. She's seen here with Len van Eyck from the Stasie.



Tot siens, Eleen – you have indeed made many friends here and we all wish you the very best for your studies. Don't be a stranger!

Flufftail Hide.

Do you remember that day, some two and a half years ago in August 2013 when the catastrophic fire destroyed the Flufftail Hide, arguably the best Hide in Wakkerstroom?

Your committee is actively considering whether we should try to raise the necessary funds to re-build the Hide. This is a major undertaking with many factors to be taken into account. We need you, the members, to share your views on the matter.

What type of construction should the Hide be?

Is the previous site the best site for a new Hide?

Do you have any suggestions as to how we could raise the funds required?

Are you prepared to become actively involved?

There are many other questions to be considered. If we are to go ahead with this it must be with the commitment of the vast majority of our members. Please think about this and let us know your thoughts.



Let's begin with GOOD NEWS –

The pair of Grey Crowned Cranes, called the Mbata pair – those that lost four chicks last season, has fledged two juveniles! YAY! And they have not been wandering around in the open field near the main road this year and mostly are to be seen in the field between the houses or close to the wetland.

I wonder how many of you have seen the sign up about “Cranes Crossing”. I know a number have as people have remarked on what a lovely sign it is. Perhaps the cranes saw it and that is why they did not go near the road this year! It is time to take the sign down again until next breeding season so that hopefully it will have an impact then. Thank you to those who slowed down and kept your eyes open in case the family were in or near the main road.



And more ...

Gys Roos told me some time ago of a pair with a chick on his property near the guest house. Although on a number of visits, I did not see them except once when two adults flew away and I wondered if the chick was no longer around. Then this week – I saw the family and saw the juvenile flying with the adults! I do believe this is the pair that has always bred on the other side of the road called the Eskom pair and may breed down there then go across the road for the days or even stay there once the chick is a bit bigger. Whatever, it is another pair with a fledged juvenile.

Then a third pair on the Jantjieshoek road have two nice big juveniles that I have not seen flying yet but could be – would be nice to see 5 go off from this wetland this season. There is still hope that there could be more as the Weavers Nest pair – a pair that has always bred in the wetland opposite Weavers Nest have chicks – but they are still SO tiny and the grass is SO tall that I have not actually seen them – my gut feeling is there are two from the adult behaviour but whatever – let's hope they make it to fledging!

Groenvlei wetland: for many years I monitored 3 pairs on the Jakkalsdraai farm – if you turn right at the Groenvlei tennis club towards Zaaiohoek, the wetland is on the left – but then for a long time I have only seen two pairs – until this season! So thrilled to see three pairs again AND two have two chicks each and the other has one. Last time I saw them, they were looking good and about half grown so hopefully they will continue fledging – that would equal the BIG Wakkerstroom output – I wonder why, why are we losing so many chicks from this wetland?

Blue Crane numbers of fledged chicks was considerably down this past season and I only know of 7 compared to usually 20 plus. One can spend many hours wondering why this is and never know the answer. My feelings are that with the very, very late rain perhaps the supply of insects was insufficient for feeding tiny chicks, in many places – just a thought!

The Bald Ibis, on the other hand, seem to have enjoyed the lack of early rains, often accompanied by high winds, hail and copious amounts of water beating against the cliff faces where they breed. It was a BUMPER year for "Baldie" chicks in this area at least. There again one can “wonder why” forever – the Bald Ibis colonies are starting breeding SO much later than they used to do. 12 years ago I would check on them around mid-August and now it is mid- to late September. Is this something to do with the change in climatic conditions - later and less rain and again, (my thoughts), the supply of insects is also much later and as both these and crane chicks are fed insects at the start of their lives, the non-availability of these could be a problem for raising chicks!?



Any thoughts/comments from the experts???

I don't mind being told that is rubbish – as long as you can come up with better suggestions!

Sexual Dimorphism in Birds.

Sexual Dimorphism is just the ornithologist's fancy term for the differences that show between male and female birds of the same species. These differences can appear in size (weight and length); colour etc. and some are very obvious indeed. With some raptors (African Fish Eagle, Verreaux's Eagle, Common and Jackal Buzzard) females can be 20-30% larger than their mates. Otherwise, "the sexes are alike" as said ornithologists like to say.

We will confine ourselves here to some colour differences in a couple of common species in our area to better illustrate the point.

Giant Kingfisher:

This, the largest of our kingfishers, is a species with marked colour sexual dimorphism. Note the female, on the left, has a rufous belly. The male, on the right, has this colouration on the chest. To aid you in the field, she has a rufous "apron" and he wears a rufous waistcoat!

Starting to get the hang of it?

Another ornithological term that crept in here, giant, should be explained. The term giant *should* only be used to denote the largest bird of a genus; the word pygmy should only be used for the smallest. This distinction is has become a little blurred over time with the growth of birding knowledge.

For example Roberts VII shows the Giant Kingfisher as 42-46cm and the Kookaburra (which is also a kingfisher) is said to be 41-47cm long. Nothing wrong with a little inconsistency!

Pied Kingfisher:

These wholly black and white birds are another species that is easy to "sex" and one to dazzle your non-birding friends with! The female has a single broken breast band while the male has two complete breast bands.

Interestingly, this bird is thought to be the longest bird (bill-tip to tail-tip) in the world that is capable of sustained hovering.

NOTE: We have decided to give the Bird of the Month articles a rest for a while in favour of a series attempting to "de-mystify" birding expressions that are really not that complicated. Hope you enjoy them!

Diary

Saturday, 4 April 2015 – Our usual Vlei Walk is on track for 07h00 just past the bridge on the Amersfoort Road. After which, you could amuse yourselves by wandering around the Easter Market in and around Badenhorst Street from around 09h00 onward. The Club will have its usual book stall; so come and support us.

Tuesday, 14 April 2015 – Details of our monthly outing still to be advised.

Thursday, 16 April 2015 – There's to be an EXTRA SPECIAL MEETING at Birdlife SA, Wakkerstroom Tourism and Education Centre. ALL members are urged to attend. The meeting will start at 18h00 sharp. Further details will be made available soon. **N.B The meeting has been changed from Wednesday to Thursday.**



Invasive Plants:

Sweet Briar, *Rosa rubiginosa*, is a Category 1 Declared weed in South Africa. The plant may no longer be planted or propagated and all trade in the seeds, cuttings or other propagation material is prohibited.



Originally from Europe it is unfortunate and sad that such an attractive and beautiful flower that many people associate sentimentally with England, should be such an Invasive species here in South Africa. The seeds are easily distributed by birds and the plant spreads widely and rapidly forming dense, long lived, impenetrable stands that prevent the growth of native species. This tends to slew the population of species, particularly birds, by providing an unnatural food source. This is another example of an attractive plant becoming a weed when the natural checks and

balances that would occur in its original home environment are not available and it can multiply unchecked.

Yellow Firethorn. *Pyracantha augustifolia*, another member of the Rose Family, has white flowers with clusters of small yellow, orange or red pomes, often referred to incorrectly as berries. Bitter and inedible they contain Hydrogen cyanide but become a food source for birds in the late autumn or winter when the bitter effect subsides. It is there to discourage the seeds being eaten until they are fully ripe, plants are clever! Stems and branches have long sharp thorns and again with no checks and balances the plant rapidly forms dense impenetrable stands up to 6m in height. *Pyracantha* has been extensively



grown as an ornamental shrub because of its attractive colourful clusters of “berries” in the autumn and early winter and also as a totally impenetrable security hedge. Nevertheless it is an Invasive plant and legally must be removed although some of the hybridised varieties that bear infertile seeds may be planted. Control. It is comparatively easy, if somewhat hard work, to control both of these species. The Club has removed considerable numbers from various parts of the Wakkerstroom Vlei. It is, however, very labour intensive and therefore expensive. The preferred method is to cut the plant down with a Brush-cutter and then to paint the stumps with a herbicide. This

must be followed up with regular checks to ensure that there has been no regrowth. The Wakkerstroom Working on Fire group has been of great assistance with this.

Interestingly both of these plants produce an edible product. The Rose Hips make a delicious Rose Hip Syrup, a very good source of Vitamin C whilst the *Pyracantha* pomes, (better make sure they are fully ripe), produce a jelly which is very high in pectin that jam makers can use to facilitate “Setting” of some jam. ***Text and Photos by Norman Dennett.***

Do birds migrate by night as well as by day? Yes, very much so. More species – and many more individuals – are night fliers, and for several reasons. First, the air is cooler at night, which is especially important as the bird moves south. Cool air allows the bird to fly faster, with less dehydration and loss of energy. Second, there are fewer predators around, most of which are daytime migrants. Finally, migrating by night and stopping by day allows birds to feed and rest during daylight hours. Nocturnal birds include most songbirds, wildfowl and waders.

From the book “Everything you wanted to know about birds...” by Stephen Moss

We thought it might be of interest to include some birds that occur in the greater Wakkerstroom area, but rarely, if ever, in the Pentad and so decided to publish the next two articles: We intend to include others in future editions, please let us know if you find them of interest. Read on!

Cape Batis –Kaapse Bosbontrokkie

The Cape Batis (*Batis capensis*) is a small passerine bird in the wattle-eye family and is endemic to Southern Africa. It is resident in the highlands of southern and eastern South Africa and Zimbabwe. It is, however, rarely found in our immediate area.

It is a small stout insect-eating bird, usually found in moist evergreen mountain forests and wooded gorges. The nest is a small neat cup low in a tree or bush.

The Cape Batis is strikingly patterned. The adult male has a grey crown, black eye mask and white throat. Its back is brown, with a black rump and tail and rufous wings. The underparts are white with a broad black breast band and rufous flanks. The female and juvenile plumages differ in that the breast band is narrower and rufous, not black, and there is a small rufous patch on the throat. The rufous wings and flanks are a distinction from other *Batis* species in the region.

Both the male and the female will aggressively defend their territory. When larger birds of prey, animals or humans approach, the bird will often perch conspicuously near the intruder and angrily protest audibly.

The Cape Batis hunts by fly-catching, or by taking prey from the ground like a shrike. The song is typically a triple whistle *cherra-warra-warra* or *foo-foo-foo*.



Picture taken in the Bontebok National Park in 2007.
(Wikipedia)

Lemon Dove (*Columba larvata*) (from Wikipedia)

The Lemon Dove or Cinnamon Dove is a bird species in the pigeon family (Columbidae). It differs from the other African pigeons of the genus *Columba* by its terrestrial habits and the white face and forehead of adult males; it is therefore sometimes separated in the genus *Aplopelia*.



Picture by Dick Daniels taken in the Birds of Eden Aviary, South Africa - Wikipedia

The Lemon Dove is fairly small, measuring 24–30cm (9.4–11.8in) in length and weighing 81.7–150g (2.88–5.29 oz). Adult males have a plumage that is dark brown above, glossed green on sides of neck, and cinnamon brown below. As noted, they have conspicuous white face markings. The feet, iris and orbital skin are red, the bill is black. Females and young males are generally similar, with a lighter brown plumage and dull grey facial markings. The males of western African subspecies have a dark grey plumage.

The Lemon Dove is distributed in montane forests of Africa, ranging for example from some 100 metres to 3,000 metres above sea level in eastern Africa. The diet consists mainly of various small fruits, seeds, molluscs and insects. The female usually lays two creamy white eggs.

Widespread throughout its range, the Lemon Dove is evaluated as a Species of Least Concern on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Nonetheless, it seems to be declining in some parts of its range; in Tanzania for example it is not rare above 1,300 metres above sea level in the Nguu North Forest Reserve, but not at all common in some lower-lying habitat. It is nearly absent from the southeast of that country.

Interesting Articles: by Brian Guerin

Recently I have been sent two excellent articles that are too long for inclusion here and also too long to précis effectively. The first is a copy of an article entitled “For the Birds.....Or Not? - Debunking some Myths about Which Plants are Popular with the Birds” from the March 2015 edition of *Fauna and Flora*. Some surprising conclusions.

The second one is from *The New York Times* of January 24, 2015. The article is entitled “Mosquito Nets for Malaria Spawn New Epidemic: Overfishing” It seems that throughout Africa people are not using these nets for their intended purpose, rather sewing the family’s nets together into larger nets which are used instead for fishing. Mosquito nets, manufactured and handed out in millions, are now causing problems through overfishing and decimating stocks of under-sized fish. Includes conflicting views of people on each side of the fence. .If anybody would like to receive copies of these thought-provoking articles please contact me on bguerin@nelweb.co.za

World Sparrow Day on 20 March 2015. (Belated, but Relevant)

World Sparrow Day was celebrated on March 20, the objectives of which were *to raise awareness of sparrows and the need to conserve general urban biodiversity.*

Sparrows are some of the most ubiquitous birds on the planet and as such are often taken for granted. Five species of sparrow occur in South Africa. The Cape Sparrow is a well-known near-endemic to southern Africa, and is found in a wide range of habitats, from urban parks and gardens to the arid savanna of the Kalahari, where they can occur in large flocks. The Southern Grey-headed Sparrow is equally common but, due to its fairly non-descript plumage, is often misidentified or even overlooked. The common House Sparrow, another abundant resident of our urban settlements, was introduced into Durban from the northern hemisphere in the 1800s. Less well-known are the Great Sparrow, which superficially resembles the House Sparrow, and the Yellow-throated Petronia which, due to its solitary and unobtrusive nature, is easily overlooked.



Cape Sparrow - Picture taken by Derek Keats at Walter Sisulu

The spirit of World Sparrow Day is in keeping with BirdLife South Africa's recently launched Keeping Common Birds Common Project, an initiative of the BirdLife International Preventing Extinctions Programme.

The theme for this year's World Sparrow Day (and for the rest of the year) is "I LOVE Sparrows", and individuals and organisations are encouraged to visit the World Sparrow Day website at www.worldsparrowday.org to offer their support. Together we can collectively inspire as many people as possible to conserve sparrows, other birds and their habitat across the planet.

Interesting Local Sightings.



25 March – Wattle Starling – 2 birds photographed by Norman Dennett in his garden. They were feeding on a fruit tray which the barbets always considered their own and would defend vigorously. However in this instance the barbets left the scene immediately. Could it be the sight of the long, dagger-like bill of the starling?

In breeding plumage the males grow bare, black wattles and the yellow patch behind the eye is much larger and extends across the back of the neck.

These birds are highly nomadic and uncommon visitors to Wakkerstroom although they can occur in very large numbers. Kruger Park is said to have a population of more than 130,000.

22 February – Common Moorhen – near the mile

post on the bridge 2 adults feeding their chicks *and being assisted by the older siblings.* These juveniles still have a while to go before attaining adult plumage but were assiduous in collecting food items and passing them on to the newer arrivals! Ann Cleal.

This behaviour was also observed during the Vlei Walk on March 7. Editor.

Gys Roos reports seeing a large Leguaan sunning itself on the Kruger Bridge on two occasions recently.

Who beats the Beatles? (Remember them?) The Brown Thrasher of North America, that's who! This member of the mockingbird family has as many as 2,000 different songs, about ten times the number written by the Beatles! This is far and away the largest 'songbook' of any bird: challengers include the Nightingale (between 100 and 300 different songs), the Song Thrush (between 140 and 220), and the Northern Mockingbird (up to 150)

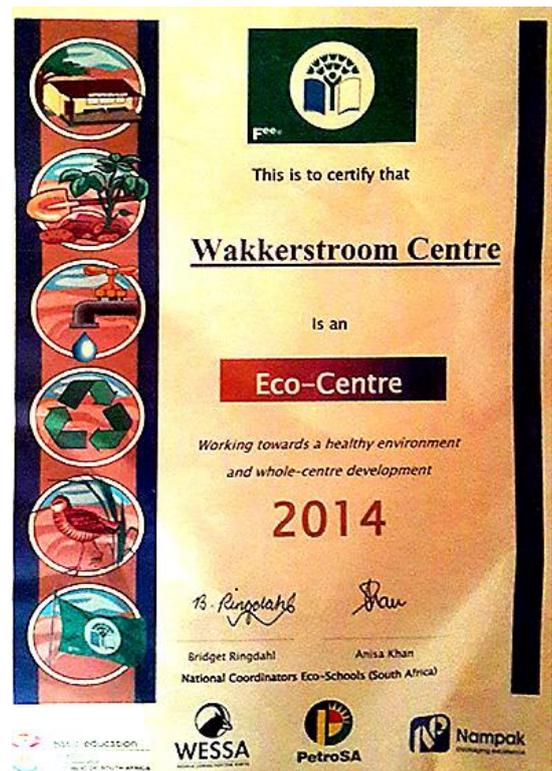
From the book "Everything you wanted to know about birds..." by Stephen Moss

Mpumalanga's first Eco-Centre by Kristi Garland

2014 was an exciting year which concluded with the BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Tourism and Education Centre submitting their portfolio for the Eco-Centre Programme. The Eco-Centre Programme shares the same model as the Eco-Schools Programme where each Centre focuses on better environmental management of the Centre itself along with better environmental learning with the staff, visitors and schools near to the Centre. Managed and implemented at a national level by WESSA (Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa, the Eco-Centre programme is part of FEE (Foundation for Environmental Education).

The portfolio included a background to the Centre, how it functions and the programmes we are involved in from both a school and community perspective. We selected three themes to work within namely Resource use with a focus on a recycling programme, Nature and Biodiversity with a focus on the newly designed Alienator Project and finally Community and Heritage with a focus on recording and monitoring bird species in the broader environment. To report back on the recycling Programme, over the year 2014 between the Centre and the community of Wakkerstroom, we prevented just over 3 metric tonnes of waste from entering our local landfill site. Definitely a great achievement from all sides. Let's try and beat this in 2015. As of the 23rd March, the community of Wakkerstroom has collected 1.5 metric tonnes of recyclables through this programme. From the

Aviator's perspective, over the 2013/2014 year I worked with 371 teachers and 10752 learners in the Goldfields region of the Free State. We are very proud to say that this pilot phase has led to some huge achievements regarding learner involvement and skills development. We recently received news that our proposal for a second year has been approved and I will be starting in the Free State again in the new school term, around mid April 2015. There will be a few more schools added to the project which will bring the total number of beneficiaries up to 622 teachers and 18 254 learners across 15 schools. Thanks to Harmony Gold Limited for all their support and for giving conservation education wings in the Free State. We are in the process of applying for funding and hope to bring this programme to Mpumalanga soon!



Recycling – the issue we all need to address. Kristi at the BLSA centre is doing great work on recycling. Please try to help her.

Dear all

Could I ask if you will share this appeal with your members. The village is definitely on a roll this year!!! Over the 2014 year, the village of Wakkerstroom prevented a total of 3,1 tonnes of recyclables from entering our landfill. In the first 3 months of 2015, we are currently sitting on approximately 1,5 tonnes of recyclables J That's almost half of what we collected in 12 months

If you could encourage all shops / store owners / B&B's / guest houses / association members to join this initiative it would be super! All recyclables can be dropped off at the Wakkerstroom Tourism and Education Centre, Monday to Friday between 9am and 3pm. Please ensure all recyclables are cleaned - no bits of food etc and ideally separated into different bags. We accept glass, paper and cardboard, plastic and metal or tin cans.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any additional information.

Kind regards

Kristi Garland, Grasslands Environmental Education Project and Centre Manger



**JOHN BARROW –
EDITOR**