



# Wakkerstroom Bird Club



*Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa  
Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs*

## NEWSLETTER NUMBER 67 – MAY 2019

Hello fellow Birders,

Apologies for the missing April newsletter – technology completely flummoxed me by destroying my laptop's hard drive, and it spent umpteen weeks in PC ICU. Now at least I know why they say "back up your data". We live and learn ..... painfully sometimes.

Anyway, we're back for May!! The Committee has been working hard to get the wheels rolling for our first Birding Bonanza this coming October; we're very excited about it and hope you will be too. More details below.

We are also running a "**Name our Mascot**" competition at the moment – as you know, this year's Bird of the Year is our beloved Secretary Bird, and BirdLife South Africa have again made an adorable soft toy to collect. We thought it an appropriate bird to use at the WBC Mascot ... but he needs a name urgently!! You have until 31 May to come up with something appropriate, and to forward your suggestion to [kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za](mailto:kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za) with the subject line of "WBC Name the Secretary Bird", or Whatsapp Kristi on 081 726 5282. Only one suggestion per person will be permitted, and the committee will choose their favourite Top Ten which will then be put forward for voting via social media. The result will be announced during the Arts and Crafts Ramble in mid-June, with the winner receiving their very own newly-named fluffy Secretary bird worth R150. Just a bit of fun that costs you nothing.



On the subject of Bird of the Year 2019, for lots of facts about Secretary Birds, as well as things to do for the kids, are on this page <https://www.birdlife.org.za/events/bird-of-the-year> .

Also revealed during the Ramble will be the winners of the **2018/19 Sandy Twomey Photographic Competition**. The last round is taking place right now, and you have until 15 May to submit your entries. We have seen some superb entries, and Warwick Tarboton will have his hands full to decide on the best ones. The prizes are well worth competing for, so remember to send your best photos to [photocomp@wakkerstroombirdclub.org.za](mailto:photocomp@wakkerstroombirdclub.org.za) before the 15<sup>th</sup>.

### **Birding Bonanza**

Hopefully you have already blocked out the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> October in your diaries for this event because you won't want to miss this! We will have 12 speakers from all realms of South African birding as well as environmental experts, with all talks concentrating specifically on our grasslands and wetlands. There will be three parallel programmes run at different venues around town, AND an independent full programme dedicated to the younger generation which will

Postal Address: PO Box 93, Wakkerstroom, 2480 Cell Phone Number: 082 255 6778

facebook page: Wakkerstroom Bird Club e-mail: [wackersbirdclub@gmail.com](mailto:wackersbirdclub@gmail.com)

prove to be both great fun and educational – it also means that Mum and Dad can attend talks and know their offspring is not only safe but having the time of their lives.

Another highlight will be the photographic workshop which will open a whole new world of birding for us. Then there will be guided walks with the bird guides and speakers, and a bird ringing demonstration too. On both evenings we are planning to host dinners for attendees, with surprises along the way showcasing some of the musical talents in town. The full programme and cost will be announced soon, and WBC members will be the first to know. Seats will be limited due to the size of the different venues.

### **Easter Market and a Look Back At the Music Festival**

We had a successful day at the Easter Market/ Vleifees recently – for the first time these two events were combined, and to great success, with over 2300 paid visitors through the gates. We chatted to folks both local and from further away about the Bird Club, spread the news about the Birding Bonanza and other events, advised on where to go to see the area’s “specials”, and also had a raffle where for just R10 a ticket you could win a gorgeous hamper containing a large Easter bunny and his friend Owl made by Geldhof Belgian Chocolates in Johannesburg, as well as a bottle of Limoncello and various other chocolates to enjoy. The lucky winner was a delighted Miles Dell, congratulations Miles! All funds collected will go to hosting the Birding Bonanza so we can bring you a really top event.

We also had great success with our stand at the Wakkerstroom Music Festival (WMF) at the end of March. For the first time we not only had our book sale to bring in funds (hugely successful thanks to some very generous donations of books and LPs), but also had some light food and snacks for sale, which patrons enjoyed as they went from performance to performance. Judy-Lynn Wheeler was even interviewed by KykNet’s “Fiesta” which showcased the Music Festival.



### **“One Night, One Million Stars” Event – Another Date To Save!**

Something else to put in your diaries RIGHT NOW is this stargazing event, set for the **6<sup>th</sup> of July** at the BirdLife South Africa Centre. We will be privileged to have UNISA’s Head of Astronomy, Professor Derck Smits and his team here to first present a “Quick Tour of the Universe” talk in the afternoon, and once it’s dark telescopes will have been set up to get a really close look at the twinkly things up in the sky. There will also be stalls and food vendors, fires burning, as well as coffee and hot chocolate to keep the rather chilly Wakkerstroom night at bay. If you’ve ever had the privilege to see our skies on a clear night, you will know just what a huge treat this will be. For bookings, once again please email [kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za](mailto:kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za) with the subject line of “One Million Stars”, or Whatsapp Kristi on 081 726 5282. Tickets R100 per person, under 12s R80.

**ONE NIGHT, ONE MILLION STARS**

**6TH JULY 2019**

PRESENTATION @ 3PM  
STARGAZING @ 6PM

**R100pp**  
KIDS UNDER 12  
R80

**!!!STARGAZING WAKKERSTROOM!!!**

COME ALONG AND HAVE A  
**'QUICK TOUR THROUGH THE UNIVERSE'**

A PRESENTATION BY PROF DERCK SMITS  
HEAD OF ASTRONOMY AT UNISA

STAR GAZING  
BY  
PROFESSOR D. SMITS

STALLS AND FOOD VENDORS  
WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR DINNER AFTER  
THE PRESENTATION  
AND THEN LATER  
WE WILL BE  
VIEWING THROUGH THE TELESCOPES!!!!

COME AND JOIN US!!!

HOT CHOCOLATE & COFFEE  
WILL BE AVAILABLE!

**DRESS WARMLY!**

FOR BOOKINGS, CONTACT:  
KRISTI.GARLAND@BIRDLIFE.ORG.ZA  
+27 81 726 5282

LionHeart  
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## **Global Birding Day**

This Saturday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, sees the annual Global Birding Day, hosted by Cornell University. More details in our Diary section.

### **Caution – Researcher at Work!**

If you've recently seen a young lady stalking the wetland armed with all sorts of gadgets, don't be alarmed – it wasn't a mad meteorologist come besotted butterfly catcher, but Emma Dufback. All the way from Sweden, Emma is a university student who was undertaking the final task before she gets her Masters degree in Environmental and Water Engineering in June. She is working under the mentorship of Bob Scholes. Emma usually carries all that gear (and a big plastic bucket) on a bicycle between test sites on the wetland. Samples taken of vlei vegetation also have to be transported in the same way, all in the heat we have been feeling! Fortunately Graham and Claudine Spencer have taken her under their wings and relieved her of some of that drudgery! Emma says "I am so thrilled to have gotten this incredible opportunity, and I am also very grateful for all the help and support from the locals in Wakkerstroom."



"Due to the lack of management of the sewage disposal system in Wakkerstroom, a large part of the wastewater from the town goes directly, without any treatment, into surrounding waters finally reaching the Wakkerstroom vlei. The vlei purifies the wastewater and provides clean water downstream," says Emma. "Untreated wastewater has high concentrations of organic matter and nutrients, such as nitrogen, and wetlands are known for their ability to remove nutrients from waters. Wetlands have various processes related to water purification, one such process is nitrogen uptake by the wetland vegetation. The main objective of my study is hence to estimate the nitrogen uptake of the vegetation in the Wakkerstroom wetland in order to quantify the detoxification capacity of the vlei. To reach the goal of the project, I will collect samples of wetland vegetation in order to estimate the primary production of the wetland. I will also determine the nitrogen content in the vegetation by submitting some samples to iThemba lab at Wits," she adds. Hope to see you again soon, Emma!

Our thanks to Professor Bob Scholes for giving us the benefits of Emma's time; the Scholes' are invaluable supporters of all things Wakkerstroom!

### **Africa's Beautiful Cranes**

Our own Glenn Ramke gave an interesting talk last week as part of a series of history talks presented during Wakkerstroom's 160th anniversary year. No-one better than Glenn could have talked of the area's cranes, as she spent many years researching and protecting them, and her passion for these special birds came through in every sentence. Below are some interesting facts on Africa's cranes, published in the Zululand Observer last May, and many of the points Glenn addressed were mentioned here too:

"As the world recently celebrated Endangered Species Day (2018), we took a look at the continued efforts to protect endangered species – including South Africa's national bird which is currently listed as 'vulnerable' on the Red List of Threatened Species. According to the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), the overall population of the Blue Crane has halved since the 1970's.



SA's national bird, the Blue Crane



The Southern Grey Crowned Crane



The large Wattled Crane

'With support from the Ford Wildlife Foundation (FWF), however, conservation efforts by the EWT are turning the tide,' they said in their Endangered Species Day statement.

'The EWT's African Crane Conservation Programme, a partnership with the International Crane Foundation (ICF), is working to halt the decline of South Africa's cranes.

'Their efforts have already yielded results, with the population of all three crane species not only stabilising, but showing an increase.

'The Grey Crowned Crane population in KZN has grown by an astounding 44% over the past decade.'

- South Africa is home to three species of crane: the Blue Crane, the Grey Crowned Crane, and the Wattled Crane, all of which are threatened.
- The Blue Crane is South Africa's national bird and almost exclusively endemic to South Africa, with a small number of birds (20 – 25) found in Namibia.
- Uganda's national bird, the Grey Crowned Crane, is the most ancient species of crane, and also the fastest declining crane species in the world. South Africa is the only country with a stable and increasing population.
- At a height of up to 175cm, the Wattled Crane is Africa's largest crane, and the second largest in the world. Due to loss of wetlands, the species is critically endangered in South Africa.
- The oldest known living crane is 83 years old. Crane fossils date back more than 10-million years.
- Cranes depend on grasslands and wetlands for survival, which are two of South Africa's most threatened habitat types. Only two per cent of our grasslands are conserved, and more than 50 per cent of our wetlands have been lost.
- We lose roughly 10 – 12 per cent of our Blue Crane population annually in the Western Cape due to collisions with overhead powerlines."

Some sad statistics. Appreciate every crane sighting you have; we are privileged to have both the Grey Crowned Crane and the Blue Crane on our doorstep.

### **Protecting Africa's Vultures**

Another concern for bird watchers is the vulnerability of vultures around the world. They are a hugely important species in the environment, but are worryingly in decline. A recent symposium aims to increase the conservation of vultures, particularly in Africa:

"Hosted and sponsored by the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center based in Annapolis (USA, ed), the 'Saving Africa's Vultures' pursuit (collaborative, team-based synthesis research) brought together, over the course of four meetings held over two years, a multi-national group of scientists, conservationists, economists and anthropologists. Their aim was to develop innovative approaches to the conservation of Africa's vultures.

This fourth, and final, meeting touched on the expansion of renewable energy in Africa (and the threat this may pose to vulture populations), as well as innovative ways in which youth education may be used to develop respect for these often misunderstood birds.

The group also focused on finalising various outputs developed during the course of the four meetings, including an in-depth review of the link between vultures and the prevention of disease; a socio-synthesis strategy to restore Africa's vultures; a situational crime prevention strategy to prevent the illegal poisoning of vultures in the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area; an investigation into whether African vulture species can be used as indicators of ecosystem health; and a review of lead poisoning in Africa's vultures." (By Linda van den Heever, Species Project Manager, BirdLife South Africa)

### **Windfarm News**

Leading on from the article above, also from BirdLife South Africa comes the following good-news article, published last week. As the world increasingly looks for solutions to provide electricity by using renewable resources rather than coal, we must guard against endangering species that rely on areas we are eyeing as potential solar or wind farms.

#### *"Brakes put on Controversial Eastern Cape Wind Farm*

BirdLife South Africa welcomes the decision of Ms L. Zulu, the Acting Minister of the Department of Environmental Affairs, to uphold our appeal against the environmental authorisation issued for the controversial Inyanda Roodeplaat Wind Farm in the Groot Winterhoekberg in the Eastern Cape. The proposed wind farm would be constructed in an

almost pristine environment, surrounded by protected areas. BirdLife South Africa trusts that the Department will apply its mind when reviewing the available information and ultimately refuse the application in its entirety.

BirdLife South Africa supports renewable energy, but wind energy facilities can have negative environmental impacts. Among other things, birds and bats can be killed if they collide with the rapidly moving turbine blades. Animals may also be disturbed or displaced at wind energy facilities and, although these impacts can be less obvious, they may also be significant. BirdLife South Africa therefore does not support the development of wind turbines in or adjacent to important conservation areas, or in other areas where they may present a risk to raptors and other threatened species.

BirdLife South Africa was surprised when the proposed Inyanda Roodeplaas Wind Farm was granted environmental authorisation in April 2018. The proposed development site has been identified as a focus area for protected area expansion, both at a national and provincial level (e.g. the Addo to Eden Corridor and Baviaanskloof World Heritage Site expansion). It is located between and is almost surrounded by three portions of Groendal Nature Reserve, and it is uncomfortably close to the Baviaanskloof World Heritage Site. A number of experts, including the Eastern Cape Department of Economic Development and Environmental Affairs, rightly questioned the compatibility of the proposed wind energy facility with the surrounding land use.

BirdLife South Africa concerns extended to the negative effects of the proposed wind farm on birds, especially raptors. The following species could be negatively impacted: Martial Eagle (listed as Endangered in the Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland), Black Harrier (also Endangered and found only in southern Africa) and Verreaux's Eagle (previously known as Black Eagle, listed as Vulnerable).

The majority of the turbines would have been located on a narrow ridge top and spur ridges, thus placing them in direct line of flight paths used by birds."

It is encouraging to hear when the voice of the people and protective organisations have success in their protests against injudicious decisions made by municipal, provincial, or national organisations. If it's important to you, talk about it, argue against it, fight to protect it!

### **Calendar of Events, May 2019**

**Saturday May 4 – Two** temptations! Our monthly Wetland Walk as usual on the Amersfoort Bridge from 07h00.

**ALSO:** Cornell University (USA) is again holding their Global Big Day again, a simple operation of recording every bird seen or heard on that day, anywhere with no restrictions such as pentads etc. This is pure fun birding and has been popular with some of our members since we started taking part. Log on to the web at [www.global-big-day-may-2019](http://www.global-big-day-may-2019) and register. Why not get a group together and do a run, or even record in your garden/favourite birding patch?

Last year some 30,000 birders around the world recorded 7,025 species! South Africa finished 20<sup>th</sup> with 400 species from 133 checklists, we can do better this year!

**Tuesday May 14** – our monthly outing will be to a return trip to "The Lavender Farm" outside Volksrust on the Vrede road. We will leave the Library at 07h30 to convoy along the way.

**Wednesday May 15 AND Thursday May 16** – a duo of talks by Peter Greaves, see below, 17h30 for 18h00 both nights at BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre.

- **EPIC ETHIOPIA.** Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, the Blue Nile Falls, and Simien Mountains in northern Ethiopia, the Great Rift Valley and the Bale Mountains east of the Rift are compelling destinations in the ancient country of Ethiopia (Abyssinia). Altitude varies between 800m and 4,500m (15,000ft) which creates a wide range of habitats with birds, animals and flowers available to see, many of them rare and endangered.
- **A Stroll through China.** Beidaihe, on the east coast of China is one of the spring migration hotspots of the Far East. A fourteen day tour to the area is a great start for a tour of China. Before the bird tour we added the normal tourist things in Beijing (Great Wall, Temple of Heaven, Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City, Summer Palace and Ming Tombs) and after the bird tour we added Xian's Terracotta Warriors and, with a special visa, Lhasa in Tibet to see the Potala Palace of the Dalai Lama. This produced a month long adventure of some of the best places and birds China has to offer. Rounding the trip off in Hong Kong we include some birds of the famous Mai Po Bird Sanctuary for an unforgettable experience.

That's it from me for this month, stay warm with winter getting very close now, and KEEP BIRDING!



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