



# Wakkerstroom Bird Club



*Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa*

*Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs*

## NEWSLETTER NUMBER 71 – SEPTEMBER 2019

Hello fellow Birders,

Spring is springing here in Wakkerstroom, with temperatures in the mid-20s for the past couple of weeks. We've even had about 3 drops of rain which settles the dust for 5 seconds ... here's hoping for a much better rainy season than the last one. It has certainly been a very mild winter bar a few bouts of low night temperatures. As every year, we are starting to look for the first migrant visitors to arrive. Kristi Garland from the BirdLife South Africa Centre had a brief glimpse of what she thinks was a Corncrake the other day ... which would certainly be unusual! Just shows you never know what turns up! It would be good to confirm the sighting, so keep your eyes peeled for this fella:



### Birding Bonanza October 2019

I'll start off with the sad news that, due to low bookings, we have had to cancel our Birding Bonanza. A lot of work has gone into planning the event, and we are grateful to all the speakers, venues, and sponsors who were supporting it. Apologies to those of you who had booked. Hopefully we will be able to have a better response at another time; the economic woes of the country (and the world) certainly had a major impact, as we firmly believe that we had put together an attractive package at a competitive price.

## BirdLife South Africa, Ingula & Eskom

*Kishaylin Chetty, Eskom's Senior Adviser: Environment plays the habitat game. Credit: Carina Coetzer*

Dr Melissa Howes-Whitecross, the acting manager of BirdLife South Africa's Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme, and I recently attended the Eskom Environmental Management Conference at Megawatt Park as exhibitors representing our respective organizations. The idea was to showcase the work that BirdLife South Africa is doing in collaboration with Eskom and to highlight the successes achieved by the longstanding Ingula Partnership. Particular conservation projects we discussed were those relating to the Southern Banded Snake Eagle and the Secretarybird, which the Ingula Partnership generously funded. Eskom's environmental and technical staff members were among those who attended the conference, so Melissa and I took the opportunity to point out to them the importance of bird conservation and managing bird habitats on Eskom properties.



*Melissa Whitecross, Carina Coetzer and Kishaylin Chetty at the Eskom Environmental Conference. Credit: Melissa Whitecross*

The people we spoke to often started the conversation by asking, with a frown, how we were relevant to Eskom, but once we'd chatted for a while their overall attitude was very positive. Several employees even tried their luck at the Ingula habitat game, which helps to showcase the bird monitoring that has been conducted at Ingula Nature Reserve over the past decade. The game shows the different habitat types in the reserve (grassland, wetland, dams and escarpment forest) and the object is to link threatened species to their correct habitat. This proved to be great fun and most players soon realized how easy it is to infer the correct habitat even though they don't know the birds. Their efforts were rewarded with chocolate coins.

Melissa and I made several valuable connections and we are looking forward to seeing Eskom staff members as new recruits to the birding community soon!

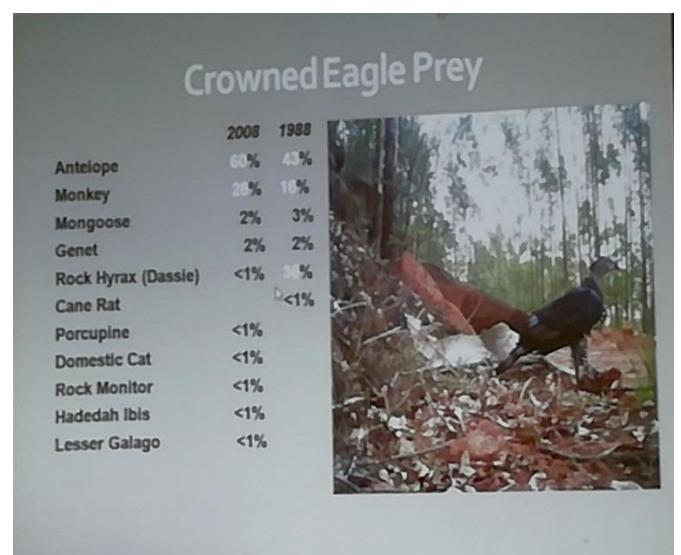
CARINA COETZER, INGULA PROJECT MANAGER

## Garth Batchelor Talk on Crowned Eagles

Another well-attended talk took place at the BirdLife South Africa Centre in August, when Garth Batchelor (accompanied by his wife Laura) came down from Nelspruit to give a fascinating insight on the Crowned Eagle project with which he has been involved for a number of years. These specialised birds of prey are a forest species, preying on small antelope, vervet monkeys and the like. Although they, like everything else it seems, are under pressure from various man-made problems, they are holding their own in the pockets of natural forest as well as pine and eucalyptus plantations.



Nests are being monitored to on an annual basis to keep track of each eagle pair's breeding success. With the aid of camera traps the researchers have discovered that nests, usually built on the highest tree in the territory, are almost always above or close to game paths, so the eagles get a good view of their potential dinners and therefore don't need vast areas to roam like other species. This means that different pairs' nests can be fairly close together without interfering with each other's availability of food, forming an uninterrupted chain for many kilometres.



What magnificent birds they are. Let us know if you've been fortunate enough to see one.

## Zaaihoek Dam Levels

We have decided to include a new item in each newsletter, namely the water levels of Zaaihoek Dam in comparison to other dams in KwaZulu Natal. This will give a good idea of rainfall in the Wakkerstroom area, as after rainstorms the water flows first into Martin's Dam, into the Uthaka River and through the wetland, before emptying into Zaaihoek. Considering last year's low rainfall and the present time of year, levels aren't as low as might be expected. The first table below is from 11 August, the second from 27 August:

	THIS	LAST	LAST		FULL	
	WEEKS	WEEKS	YEAR'S		STORAGE	
	%	%	%		CAPACITY*	
ZAAIHOEK DAM, KZN	70.2	70.8	94.0		184.3	
TOTAL ALL KZN DAMS	60.7	61.2	63.2		4801.8	
* FULL STORAGE CAPACITY IN MILLIONS OF CUBIC METRES						

	THIS	LAST	LAST		FULL	
	WEEKS	WEEKS	YEAR'S		STORAGE	
	%	%	%		CAPACITY*	
ZAAIHOEK DAM, KZN	69.4	69.4	92.3		184.3	
TOTAL ALL KZN DAMS	59	59.8	62.3		4801.8	

## SABAP 2 News

Sanjo Rose of the South African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP) has kindly sent a link to the recent webinar recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zq11P1H8Ssg>. He has also written the following to atlasers:

"A core function of SABAP2 is the mapping of species distribution. Over time, with enough data, distribution and abundance changes can be analysed. To ensure that estimates are reliable we need repeated coverage over large areas. To this end there are several **coverage challenges** registered with SABAP. All these challenges have a set of pentads that are monitored with specific goals in mind. For example, the Free State - KZN Escarpment challenge targets 89 pentads, with the particular aim to better understand the distribution of several threatened and endemic species such as Yellow-breasted Pipit, Rudd's and Botha's larks, all three cranes, Denham's Bustard, Southern Bald Ibis and White-bellied and Blue Korhaans. See the July 2019 BirdLife SA newsletter for more details: <https://www.birdlife.org.za/media-and-resources/e-newsletter/e-newsletter-2019/#24705>

Currently, the registered challenges are:

1. Free State - KZN Escarpment Challenge
2. BirdLife Free State 2019 Challenge
3. Wakkerstroom 4 Challenge
4. GEM Mpumalanga Challenge
5. Greater Kruger National Park Challenge
6. SEA Fracking study area challenge
7. Turn GP 4Degrees Green Challenge

We'd like to encourage everyone to participate in these challenges whenever possible. By doing so you can contribute to both the aims of the particular challenge and to the 2019 challenge of the whole project; which is to atlas 5 300 pentads in South Africa. To find the coverage for a challenge please visit our website (<http://sabap2.adu.org.za/>), log in, and navigate to the drop down menu called 'Challenges'. Here you will find a list of the challenges (screenshot attached). Once you have selected one, the area on the map and a data summary will appear. You can select to view the coverage for 2019 and find a pentad that still needs a full protocol card for this year. Challenges also have champions, atlases on the ground who help coordinate efforts. If you would like to get in touch with any of them please let us know." *Sanjo Rose*

Ernst Retief, the Manager of Data and Spatial Planning at BirdLife South Africa sent this to atlases recently:

"During the early years of the atlas project stories from atlases were published on the SABAP2 website. We want to relaunch this initiative. So this is an invitation to submit articles to us which will then be published in PDF format under the Resources tab on the SABAP2 website. We hope to receive many reports which highlights the fact that atlasing is an adventure, as most atlases can testify to!"

Please note the following:

- Use the attached template and note the guidelines in the document.
- We shall give preference to articles or reports of specific projects where something special happened during the atlasing trip rather than general atlasing trip reports. You can submit your idea to us for comment before you write the article (send an email to [sabap2@birdlife.org.za](mailto:sabap2@birdlife.org.za)).
- You can include photos and maps.
- Stories should be based on events that happened since 1 January 2018. "

### **Wakkerstroom Vlei Research**

We told you about Swedish MSc student Emma Dufback several months ago – here is the a summary of the latest update by Prof Bob Scholes on the progress of her research, which he presented to the WNHA on 30 May:

"Emma Dufbäck, my MSc student from Uppsala in Sweden, will submit her thesis next week. Here are some summary points:

The main purpose of her work was to measure the 'net primary productivity' (NPP) of the vlei (its ability to generate plant growth). This is a step towards estimating its nitrogen absorption capacity. It works out at around 500 to 1000 gDM/m<sup>2</sup>/y, which translates to 10 tonnes per hectare per year, or 2500 to 5000 tonnes for the whole vlei.

A striking feature is that the NPP seems to have increased in the past 7 years, which may be a response to increased nutrient input due to the leaky sewage system. This is just a plausible inference at this stage, which we can test in a variety of ways in the future.

The mean nitrogen content of the plant material is 1-2%. Therefore the nitrogen uptake capacity of the vegetation is 24-81 tonnes N per year. This is not yet an estimate of the long-term nitrogen absorption capacity of the vlei, but is an important step on the way. A very rough estimate of the N content in sewage-derived water from Wakkerstroom and eSizamaleni is about 21 tonnes N/year.



Emma Dufback

One of the main ways that the nitrogen leaves the vlei is when it burns. In producing the dataset allowing Emma to calculate the NPP, we also generated an 18-year record of the ‘brightness’ of the vlei surface, as viewed from space every 3 to 9 days. When there is a fire in the vlei, the brightness of the surface drops suddenly. We found that, on average, every part of the vlei has a 69% probability of burning in any given year; or to put it another way, it burns about 2 years in 3. Thanks to the members who helped with these projects.”

### September Diary

Saturday, 7 Sept: This month sees our 80<sup>th</sup> Wetland Walk! To celebrate, we’re doing something a bit different. We will meet at the picnic spot just past Paul Kruger Bridge at 7h30, do a bit of birding/ socialising, then have some bacon & egg rolls (R20 each) and hot drinks (R15-20) around 8h30. The highlight will be BirdLife South Africa’s launch of their second children’s book for the Spring Alive Project, this year focussing on the European Bee-eater. Ten of Junior Bird Club will be joining us for some of the activities.

Please come and join us? Contact Claudine on 083 347 2770 for catering purposes.

Tuesday 10 September: In the hope that spring has sprung by then we have decided to start up our outings again. We have been invited to Graham Sutherland’s farm on the R543 as we haven’t been there for some time and it’s close to home. We’ll leave the library at 07h30, bring the usual accoutrements, refreshments, a chair and hats. Please come along and make it a big success!

Wednesday, 18 Sept: As winter has passed, we will go back to doing our mid-month meetings on a Wednesday night at the BirdLife South Africa Centre, with either a speaker or a DVD. Join us at 17h30 for 18h.00. Details to be advised.

**And, pencil in the following exciting talks for October:**

October 5, bring ‘n braai and a talk by Gus Mills on his mammal work in the Kgalagadi, and October 8, an evening talk by visiting Warwick Tarboton, subject to be confirmed.

That’s it from me for this edition. Have a great month and keep birding!

Chris.

### Note:

The Committee would like to thank Chris Voets for producing this newsletter on time under the most stressful of personal conditions. She went the extra mile!