



Wakkerstroom Bird Club



Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa

Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 78 – July 2020

Hello fellow Birders,

Halfway through this rather unusual, unpredictable, and unprecedented 2020 – how have you been doing? We've had some exceptionally cold nights in Wakkerstroom the past weeks – residents who have been here for years say they haven't known it to be so cold for so long Night after night of below-freezing temperatures with the extremes going down as low as -14C! This wasn't appreciated by our water pipes of course, and there have apparently been over 200 bursts in the past weeks. A good time to be a plumber, not so good for everyone else! But if you have a bird feeder up in your garden, you will have been very popular with the local feathered population ... food is getting scarce out there. Remember to put out some water for them too. And the bees always appreciate half an orange too.

Close Encounters of the Chance Kind

A chance meeting of a handful of members (and a gentleman from Cape Town) enjoyed some gloriously sunny weather at the vlei on a recent Saturday morning as well as some good birding. John Burchmore's excellent photographs below tell the story. Other good birds seen were Marsh Harrier, Black-crowned Night Heron, Malachite, Pied and Giant Kingfisher. A lone otter was also noted. Those present also commented on the clear up/cutting along the safety barrier and along the Oude Stasie road and how visibility had been improved there. The club spends a lot of time and money on alien plant removal and are constantly harping on the incidence of *Pyracantha* in/around town but with little effect it seems. See also the article on invasive plants elsewhere in this issue.

Photographs © John Burchmore





Meanwhile, Brian Guerin and friends have been keeping busy doing some maintenance:

WOW (Wings over Wetlands) Hide

Wakkerstroom Bird Club, with funding provided by WNHA, recently undertook to redo the Waksol coating of the entire WOW Hide. It was done by our regular worker Eric and was quite a task, given the fact that the hide is quite elevated. Inside, (all walls and floor), outside (all four sides, the steps, support poles and under the floor were done.) Quite a job with the soggy ground and the long ladder needed a pallet underneath for safe support. We will in time do the northeast facing wall again to counter the effect of the sun. We have to make an early decision regarding replacing the posters that were inside. This means that all three hides, excluding Crane hide, have been treated with preservative in recent years. Thanks to all concerned, including Norman Dennett for his long ladder and trailer and Graham Spencer for overseeing the project!



Have you been “attending” BirdLife South Africa’s Conservation Conversations webinars? There have been some fabulous talks – this one will be of particular interest to us here in Wakkerstroom which is one of the very few locations where the White-Winged Flufftail has been located. If you miss the live webinar, you can always catch up on the BirdLife South Africa You Tube channel. And if you go to www.birdlife.org.za/blsa-conversations/ you’ll be able to see what other talks are happening this month.

White-winged Flufftail conservation: three decades of saving one of Africa’s rarest species

The White-winged Flufftail project is supported by:



The White-winged Flufftail is listed as Critically Endangered with an estimated 250 mature individuals remaining worldwide. This elusive bird, endemic to Africa, is threatened by the destruction and degradation of its high-altitude wetland habitat. White-winged Flufftail conservation in South Africa began in 1994 with the establishment of the Middelpunt Wetland Trust. Since then, leaps and bounds have been made in understanding the mysteries of White-winged Flufftail ecology and raising public awareness both locally and abroad. The implementation of a conservation plan (International Single Species Action Plan) is undertaken under the auspices of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). In 2016 the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF) established a National White-winged Flufftail Task team. BirdLife South Africa and partners have recently celebrated the achievement of several milestones including the discovery of the first-ever breeding record of the bird in South Africa in February 2018, as well as confirmation of the species’ call which, until now, had remained a mystery to science. Join BirdLife South Africa’s Hanneline Smit-Robinson, Robin Colyn and Kyle Lloyd as they share about the project’s exciting history, major findings and what lies ahead for the project.

Join the team at
19:00 (CAT) on
7 July 2020.

For more info please
visit:
www.birdlife.org.za/blsa-conversations/



Conservation Conversations with BirdLife South Africa presented by:
Robin Colyn, Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson & Dr Kyle Lloyd, BirdLife South Africa

Also on You Tube is a recording of the recent BirdLife South Africa AGM, so have a look at that as well when you get chance at <https://youtu.be/zhXgl7HeWXo>

Birdlife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre

Have you ever wondered what happens at the BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre? Of course it’s been a lot quieter than usual over the past few months as there have been no guests, courses, or bird talks. However that doesn’t mean that it’s not busy for Kristi Garland and her team ... CEO of BirdLife South Africa, Mark Anderson, releases a weekly summary of what each section of the organisation does, so let’s see what Kristi and the others have been up to in June:



1st to 5th June: The Wakkerstroom Centre had a rather busy week. Monday saw the Working on Fire team returning from standby at home to being operational on a daily basis. There have been many protocols put in place regarding the team, social distancing at base and with regards to transporting the team for production. Kristi Garland had a meeting with the General Manager and Regional Manager together with the Wakkerstroom Crew Leaders to discuss the way forward and the impact COVID-19 has and is having on the team. Daily screening protocols were put into place for all team members. Monday also saw the start of our phased Centre refurbishment. Builders, armed with hammers and chisels began to demolish our Centre's entrance walls and by Friday had cleared up and poured the new foundations. Kristi and Fanie du Plessis conducted a catch up meeting where various items of the refurbishment, finances and plans were discussed. Hannes Marias from MTPA arrived for a two-day stay at the Centre to complete a preliminary investigation on the wetland vegetation for a research project. Kristi was able to join him on Wednesday for a few hours in the field. So far, Hanne's investigation has proven to be successful and we wait for spring for the vegetation for start flowering. The Fire team began the fire breaks around the Centre. With winter closing in on us rather rapidly, the next few weeks are going to be choc-a-block with burning. Kristi attended to various administrative tasks this week – from rescheduling of bookings, continued communication with the Centre staff and arranging further collections and deliveries of building materials for the Centre refurbishment. Kristi was on leave on Thursday and Friday, although she checked in with the Fire team as well as the builders during this time. On Saturday, Kristi attended the first ever Wakkerstroom Natural Heritage Association's virtual committee meeting. Sunday saw Kristi attending the Wakkerstroom re-launch task team meeting.

15-19 June: The Wakkerstroom Centre has been a hive of activity again this week. Although we are missing our guests and visitors, we are using this 'down-time' to give the Centre a facelift. After some really cold and wet weather, our new entrance walls have been built and are looking fantastic. We are also working on damp sealing and re-plastering both the dormitory and training centre blocks. This is taking a little more time than we expected, but the end product is going to be great. Our general overnight temperatures are dropping to below zero on a regular basis, with the lowest recorded temperature being -13 deg C. This has played havoc with our water pipes and after quite a few years of no burst pipes, we return to frequent plumber call outs. Kristi Garland was on leave on Monday. However this didn't stop the Working on Fire team from attending to fire break burning out in the community – once the diesel in the truck defrosted! Kristi spent most of this week attending to various

administrative and staffing tasks with the team as well as arranging the return of our previous WoF vehicle that was sent for repairs.



This week also saw Kristi submitting a range of outdoor activities to the Spring Alive project which has been uploaded to the extranet platform and shared amongst the rest of the international team. Kristi also worked on an outline for an exciting new facet of introductory species videos for the spring season which will start in September. This will be presented at the project social media zoom meeting next Friday. Another aspect of the project Kristi is working on is a SWOT analysis comparison of the project over the last three years to present at the Steering Group meeting in July. This week saw further developments with the Wakkerstroom relaunch task team. Some aspects pertaining to social media and general community information sharing are almost ready to be released. On the birding side of things, with the recent change in weather, things have been quieter. This is evident in the list submissions Kristi has received for the Wakkerstroom Bird Club Lockdown Challenge. **However a super sighting this week was three Wattled Cranes just outside Wakkerstroom toward Groenvlei. Reports confirm that breeding has taken place on this farm for the last three years! A feather in the landowner's cap.** Kristi also spent some time this week assisting a local school with developing a 'COVID-19' friendly lesson on wetlands, bearing in mind no experiments and movement around the school can take place at this time. The idea of developing videos for classroom teaching has been brought up and will be investigated going forward – our way of supporting schools with resources under these unchartered times. The Centre staff is all in good health – from Daphne Pyott to Lucky Ngwenya and our cleaning staff. Kristi keeps regular contact with each staff member on a weekly basis.

I highlighted the Wattled Crane news as it's really exciting for our area to have a breeding pair around. Please remember that they are on private land and respect the landowners' privacy, as well as ensuring that the birds are never disturbed.- Well done to Louisa and Anton Botes for spotting them, and John and Penny Burchmore for seeing them the day after as well. – Jenni Maxted-Smith also reported seeing a flock of 46 Grey Crowned Cranes in the Groenvlei area – wow!!How lucky we are to be able to see all three of South Africa's crane species! Ed.



Photo taken from http://www.tanzaniabirds.net/African_birds/crane_wattled/wc.htm

A Day In The Life Of A Craniac

Someone else back to work after lockdown is a good friend to Wakkerstroom, Bradley Gibbons, Highlands Grassland Field Officer, EWT African Crane Conservation Programme:

In the first week of June, I was able to return to the field following the easing of the national lockdown restrictions and it was a priority to drive some of the fixed monitoring routes that are driven every two months. These routes give us an understanding of the crane population in two regions of Mpumalanga and one in the north-eastern Free State. I first drove a fixed route near Wakkerstroom in Mpumalanga, and I was very excited to see a group of cranes for the first time after a period of two months! I really do fit the description of a *Craniac* – that is a name given to a person with a passion for cranes. The first group had eight Blue Cranes in the small flock and thereafter two Grey Crowned Cranes were recorded and were in fact dancing on the edge of a dam towards the end of the route.



While driving the Free State routes, the numbers of Blue Cranes were typical for this time of the year, with some pairs still in their territories and small flocks moving around together. The first Blue Crane pairs were seen on either side of the road, followed by a flock of 10 Blue Cranes and 10 Grey Crowned Cranes during the second Free State route. Towards the end of this route, nine Blue Cranes were seen flying towards a dam and with it being later in the afternoon, this suggests that this dam is probably a roost site for them. Blue Cranes roost in dams at night and it's also a common occurrence to see them in the late afternoon moving closer to dams.

When I saw three Blue Cranes flying over towards the end of the first route in Wakkerstroom, I realised that it was just like a normal day for them. Farming practices in these grasslands didn't come to a halt, therefore there were no notable differences observed compared to when the route is driven under normal circumstances, unlike towns that look completely different during lockdown. Therefore, it's business as usual on the farms and of course for the cranes too, however it was certainly a good experience for me to be back in the field to monitor them!



Two Grey Crowned Cranes that were seen at the end of their dancing on the fixed route survey near Wakkerstroom, Mpumalanga. Photo credit Bradley Gibbons.

Winter Birdwatching in Wakkerstroom

Thank you to Elize McAlister for this insight on coping with a cold and windy day ...

Because it was so windy today I did not fancy going out to look for birds. But the birds are clever and they know that I have an indigenous garden with trees and shrubs, and birdbaths, where they can find shelter from the wind. So they came to me ...

From inside my house I ticked all 22 species on my list today. Even the Cape Crow, a flyover, I recorded through my kitchen window. Luckily the guineafowls didn't all come at the same time, but during the course of the day strolled through in small groups. I watched the Fiscal shrike which actually ignored the two Common Mynahs that were in his way, and tried to intimidate a Pied Starling, fortunately without any success. A Laughing Dove got too cozy with a Red-eyed Dove, and a scuffle soon broke out with two other Laughing Doves not liking what they saw! The Red-eyed Dove just walked off in disgust. It was also lovely to see how the Red Bishops and two Queleas clung desperately to the branches of the Ouhout tree so as not to get blown away by the strong wind. There was also a lovely Southern Masked Weaver with a lovely black mask – is he too late or too early!? The Redwinged Starlings ignored everybody and just concentrated on having a nice bath!

Altogether a lovely birding experience on a cold and windy day. Thumbs up for indigenous gardening!

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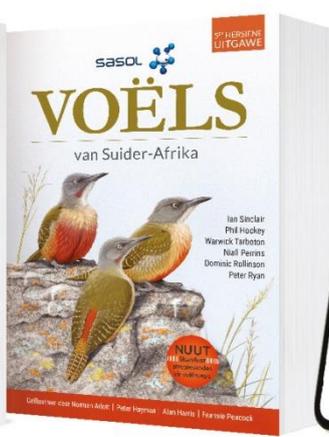
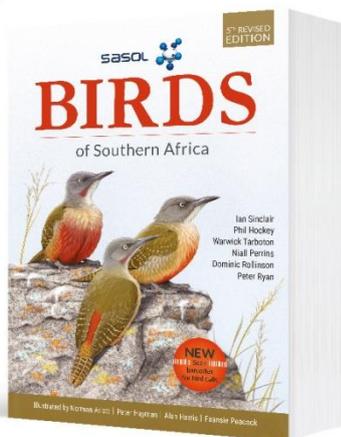
of Southern Africa

Please join Peter Ryan, Warwick Tarboton,
Niall Perrins, Dominic Rollinson & Faansie Peacock
in discussion with Mike Buckham (FitzPatrick Institute, UCT & Better Birding)

Introductions by Mark Anderson (CEO of BirdLife South Africa) &
Pippa Parker (Struik Nature Publisher, Penguin Random House)



DATE: 9 July 2020 at 19h00



In its fifth edition, *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa* has been brought fully up to date by its expert author panel, with additional contributions from two new bird experts. Greatly enhanced, this comprehensive, best-selling guide is sure to maintain its place as one of Africa's most trusted field guides.



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There will be a question and answer session at the end of the launch.
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Invasive Plants in the Wakkerstroom Area

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 angustifolia*, 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 by Norman Dennett.



Pyracantha angustifolia

(Pictures Google Images)



Rosa rubiginosa

That's it from me for the month – stay warm, stay healthy, and keep birding!

Chris