



Wakkerstroom Bird Club



Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa

Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 80 – SEPTEMBER 2020

Hello fellow Birders,

So unofficially it's the start of Spring on the 1st of September, but many parts of the country don't quite feel like that yet – fortunately the OFFICIAL start is only on the 21st with the Spring Equinox, so we do have a few more weeks to get in the mood. But tell that to the birds that are starting to show themselves here in Wakkerstroom after their migration south! As Brian Guerin reports, best be ready for them because they tend not to look at a calendar ...:

The Migrants are Coming! (Some are Here Already)

Bird migration has fascinated humans over the centuries and still does today – and will until we all understand it in detail. Which is probably never!

The club has been running a Migrant Survey for some years although some of our leading birders are not sending sightings in for recording. Your participation will not only give the club useful and interesting information but might lead you to try to find out where these birds come from and go to, why they migrate at all and trace the amazing routes they take. All very fascinating!

Some early birds have arrived already; Common Sandpiper was recorded on the Vlei walk on August 1, Yellow-billed Kite on August 3, Wood Sandpiper on August 10, Ruff on August 16 and White-throated Swallow (Penny Burchmore's photo below) on August 17. Picture of a Ruff (right) courtesy Wikipedia, note the conspicuously scaled upperparts (with buffy edges).



Just reported to me from Friday, August 21, are White-rumped Swift and Black Swift.

Altitudinal migrants reported so far are Amethyst Sunbird on August 4, Western Cattle Egret (1 bird) on August 16. Also recorded were South African Cliff Swallows (in numbers) around their usual haunt of the Amersfoort Road Bridge on August 14.

We would like more members to participate in our Migrant Survey, the rules are simple, any migrant seen in our area is to be ticked on the form which we have available, just contact me soon as possible on chairman@wakerstroombirdclub.org.za for copies. The form and Instructions for completing it are on our website (wakerstroombirdclub.org.za) As mentioned, the Survey is not pentad specific, it covers migrants seen in all part of “our area”, for example on a day drive, a visit to the vle, in your garden or any birding session.

Won't you please join in and help us with this interesting project?

STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS!

Just today {29 August} I received a report of our first Common Buzzard, on a pole on the Oude Stasie tar road.



One of our particularly interesting migrants previously known as Steppe Buzzard, a more descriptive name for us down here because of their very long migration route. They breed in Europe/Siberia and migrate here via the Bosphorus or east of the Black Sea and enter Africa via the Gulf of Suez, a most numerous raptor in South Africa, especially in the Western Cape lowlands, They occasionally form pairs before the return migration. Return migration starts February, peaking in March. (RobertsV!!)

(Picture of an overwintering bird here in South Africa Wikipedia).

Reservations are open for The Vistual African Birdfair

Coming up this weekend, so be sure to register if you haven't done so already:

A promotional banner for 'THE AFRICAN birdfair'. The banner features a string of colorful triangular bunting flags at the top. The text 'THE AFRICAN birdfair' is prominently displayed in blue and green. Below this, it says '5 September 2020 VIRTUAL' and 'Virtually the best bird fair in Africa.' There are three colored buttons on the left: 'Talks & Presentations' (black), 'Exhibitors' (yellow), and 'Auctions' (red). A green 'REGISTER' button is on the right.

(There is a link to the registration page further down in this article)

Virtually the best bird fair in Africa is flying into homes
across the world on

5 September 2020

and we want you to join us!

Click below to register or find out more from our [website](#):

Of particular local interest during the Birdfair is a new project launching on 5 September, as Kristi Garland reports: "There was huge excitement in our office last week when local artist, Carol Preston, arrived with the final artwork for the Common Ringed Plover Kamishibai story. We cannot wait to launch this story at the Virtual African Bird Fair on 5 September in the kiddie's corner." Kristi also met with a printing company which is assisting with the print design of the Chasing Migration Board game, another exciting aspect of this project.

Kristi was also in the news as one of this month's *'BirdLife South Africa Celebrates Women's Month'* series. This is what they had to say: "Kristi Garland is based at BirdLife South Africa's Wakkerstroom Tourism and Education Centre where she manages both the accommodation and guide bookings, along with the maintenance of the buildings and grounds. Kristi is involved in environmental education initiatives in and around Wakkerstroom. She currently supports three junior bird clubs and a number of schools in southern Mpumalanga and northern KwaZulu-Natal. Kristi's heart lies in Wakkerstroom where she represents BirdLife South Africa on a host of local committees and projects relating to tourism and environmental education." This is one busy lady! 😊

Something else to look forward to during the Bird Fair is a special presentation, as BirdLife South Africa's CEO Mark Anderson reports: "BirdLife South Africa is very pleased to announce that Peter Harrison MBE will be the keynote speaker at BirdLife South Africa's 'Virtual African Bird Fair'. Peter has led birding expeditions all over the globe and has written and/or illustrated over a dozen bird books, including the renowned "Seabirds: An Identification Guide". In early 2021, Peter will be launching a completely new identification guide with all new text and plate "Peter has devoted himself to the conservation of birds, and was rewarded with the Conservation Gold Medal Award by the RSPB. His actions were also recognized by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who granted him his title of Member of the British Empire. He has also been awarded the Linnaean Society's Eisenmann Award for Excellence in Ornithology. Peter will be familiar to those who joined us on Flock at Sea in 2013 and 2017, and he will once again be regaling us with tales of albatrosses as our keynote speaker at the Virtual African Bird Fair on 5 September 2020. He is without doubt one of the world's best public speakers."

Register here: <https://eventapp.co.za/birdlife/> (and note that you need to register for the second option in order to watch Peter speak)

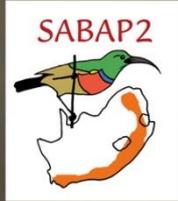


Atlasers – A special message for you by Sanjo Rose

Dear atlasers,

We are appealing for help to ensure the future of SABAP2! As one of Southern Africa's most important biodiversity monitoring programs, The Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2 collects almost 2 million bird distribution records each year, providing the best real-time measure of the impact of ever accelerating global change on regional biodiversity. Citizen scientists have carried the costs of data collection, but backbone funding is needed to maintain the information technology systems, which supports SABAP2 as well as Birdmap atlas projects throughout Africa and other bird monitoring projects like CWAC, CAR and SAFRING. The South African National Biodiversity Institute has funded most of these IT costs, but the COVID-19 pandemic has seen their budget cut, and the funding allocated for 2020, 2021 and 2022 has been lost, putting the future of the project at risk.

Are you able to help? Donations large or small, monthly contributions or once-off would be appreciated. We would also value any suggestions of corporate or other sources of funding we could investigate. Please send your suggestions to Hilary Buchanan at fitz@uct.ac.za. All donations will be eligible for a section 18A tax certificate.



LET'S NOT LOSE IT

One of South Africa's most important biodiversity monitoring programmes needs your help!

The Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP) collects almost 2 million bird distribution records each year, providing the best real-time measure of the impact of global change on regional biodiversity. Citizen scientists carry the costs of data collection, but funding is needed to maintain the information technology backbone, which also supports atlas projects throughout Africa, as well as other bird monitoring projects like CWAC and CAR.

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For more information and banking details, visit <http://sabap2.birdmap.africa/funding>



The Kamfers Dam Flamingo Saga

Hot on the heels of a recent Zoom webinar by Mark Anderson on the Kamfers Dam flamingos, there was an article about them in the Saturday Star. Here is the download for it: at https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/feathers-flying-over-the-fate-of-flamingos-housed-at-gauteng-facilities--d1eed34c-26d1-4493-baeb-ba5ce43e4d32?fbclid=IwAR34z1mLx_CMIKQuPQ9fY5UjVxX_aQUfiTLyLjhvaleAZO7ttfmNn6cClCo



Now something for the Craniacs

COLOUR CODING FOR CONSERVATION: ASSESSING THE RED LIST STATUS AND GREEN STATUS OF THE BLUE CRANE

Christie Craig, PhD Candidate & Western Cape Field Officer, African Crane Conservation Programme (ACCP)

Our National Bird, the Blue Crane, is an interesting species in the context of modern conservation. They occur in the eastern grasslands of South Africa, Karoo, and Western Cape, with a very small isolated population in northern Namibia (less than 50 cranes). Blue Cranes were once abundant in our eastern grasslands, but in the second half of the 20th century, degradation of these habitats led to a crash in the Blue Crane population – an estimated decline of around 90%. At much the same time, areas of Fynbos in the Western Cape were being rapidly transformed for cultivation, namely wheat and pastures. Blue Cranes found these cultivated lands enticing and flocked to the Western Cape. Their numbers increased so dramatically that we now estimate that over half of all Blue Cranes live in the Western Cape.

An intensively farmed agricultural landscape, such as those the Blue Cranes have chosen to occupy, can be a treacherous place for wildlife, and presents the cranes and conservationists working to protect the species with significant challenges. Threats rife in these areas include powerline collisions, fence entanglements, breeding disturbances, and occasionally conflict with farmers. Climate change and socio-economic factors placing further pressure on the agricultural landscape call into question the stability of this 'artificial' population. By contrast for example, the Karoo population experiences much less disturbance and as a result the population numbers have remained quite stable over the years.



Photo: Blue Cranes in Papkuilsfontein Protected. Environment, Northern Cape. CREDIT: JP Le Roux Environment, NC

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List is a tool used to categorise the risk of extinction in species, and provides information on their range, population size, habitat and ecology, use and/or trade, threats, and existing conservation initiatives. The categories into which species are placed range in severity from Extinct, Extinct in the Wild, Critically Endangered, and Endangered to Vulnerable. Species that are not yet considered threatened but have suffered some declines are categorised as Near-Threatened, while species that have healthy, stable populations are classified as Least Concern. The Red-Listing process is rigorous, and to inform the process biologists need reliable quantitative data to demonstrate actual or future declines in the species. The Blue Crane is listed on the global IUCN Red List as Vulnerable because of the declines in their grassland habitats and the rate of their population decline (30–50%) over three generations (39 years for Blue Crane).

The Red List is an incredibly useful tool for prioritising species for conservation action based on sound scientific evidence. However, it does have its limitations. As we see more positive impacts from conservation interventions, it is becoming clear that many species are in some way dependent on continued conservation efforts, and if these were to stop, the species population could once again begin to decline. These nuances are not accounted for in the red-listing process, which is what led the IUCN and other partners to establish the IUCN Green Status of Species. The Green Status is a way to categorise a species according to its recovery potential, its state of recovery, and its dependence on conservation. In December 2019, The Endangered Wildlife Trust's African Crane Conservation Programme (EWT-ACCP) took part in a global project run by the IUCN to test the Green Status of real-world species. We ran through the process of assessing the Green Status of the Blue Crane, the results of which, as well as those for hundreds of other species across the globe, are being analysed by the IUCN and will soon be published for comment.

from the scientific community. We are very excited to have contributed to this exciting project, which will allow us to view threatened species not just in terms of their risk of extinction, but also of their recovery potential.

However, assessing the extinction risk of a species through the Red-List is, and will remain, an important part of understanding the conservation status of a species. In the case of the Blue Crane, with available data showing the population increasing in parts (Western Cape), and stable or slowly declining in others (Karoo and grasslands), it was proposed that the Blue Crane's Red List status be down-listed from Vulnerable to Near-Threatened. This is every conservationist's ultimate goal – to see species move down to less threatened categories. However, due to the population crash in the grasslands, and the uncertainty about the long-term viability of the Western Cape population, we considered the down-listing very carefully. In 2012 Sally Hofmeyr, a PhD student in the University of Cape Town's Animal Demography Unit (ADU) undertook a detailed analysis of Blue Crane monitoring data collected by citizen scientists, which showed an increase overall for the Blue Crane population. As this data are now almost 10 years old, I worked with Sally to update this analysis up until 2019. What we found was rather concerning, as in the last 10–14 years, the Western Cape population stabilised and then began to decline. In the Overberg, where we find the highest density of Blue Cranes, the population has been declining on average by 4% per annum since 2011. More than half of all Blue Cranes are found in the Western Cape, and if we continue to see even a lower rate of decline (2% per annum), we can still expect the global population to decline in the region of 32% over the next 39 years. Given this worrying trend in the Western Cape, the EWT, the International Crane Foundation (ICF), the IUCN Crane Specialist Group, CapeNature and the Fitz Patrick Institute motivated that the Blue Crane remain listed as Vulnerable. The reasons for the decline are unclear, but my PhD project is focused on better understanding the threats and opportunities this species faces in the Western Cape. Armed with this knowledge, we are in a better position to inform and prioritise conservation action to conserve our national bird. This research is funded by the Leiden Conservation Foundation, Eskom and Dave Myers.

Wattled Crane success at Ingula



The proud Wattled Crane parents guard the nest site where the chick was hidden as shown in this pic by Carina Pienaar.

Located near De Beers Pass on the escarpment between Harrismith and Ladysmith, the 8000ha Ingula Nature Reserve protects high-altitude grassland and marshy wetland. It's also home to more than 13 threatened species monitored for breeding activity each year. For most of these species, breeding takes place in summer; however some, like the regionally Critically Endangered Wattled Crane, more often than not breed in winter.

The Wattled Crane is one of four Critically Endangered species recorded in the reserve, the others being the White-winged Flufftail and the Bearded and White-backed vultures. High-altitude wetland covers about 1200ha of the reserve and is of critical importance for water production and filtration – and not only for the surrounding area, but also for Gauteng. Managing this wetland and the surrounding grassland to optimise and maintain their biodiversity is a priority and the relevant authority takes great care to ensure that good grazing patterns are implemented and to limit traditional annual fires to areas that require the removal of old, moribund vegetation.

To show just how important Wattled Cranes are at Ingula, BirdLife South Africa's Robin Colyn developed a Wattle Crane Species Action Plan in 2015, which has recently been revised. The plan aims to inform optimal management of the wetland for the cranes and other biodiversity, using the Wattled Crane as an indicator species.



Ingula Nature Reserve's wetland in summer. Credit Fifi Meyer.

Although there are still challenges, recent developments have proven that management seems to be effective for the resident pair of Wattled Cranes. Since we started to actively monitor their breeding in 2014, five chicks have fledged – most recently at the beginning of this month. This current fledgling, named Lockdown Lucy, is now the third in three consecutive years and the second chick to have hatched in this particular nest. Visitors to Ingula are frequently treated to sightings of the proud family, as the previous chick remained in the reserve until March 2020, just before incubation commenced for Lockdown Lucy.

Another pair can be seen on a neighbouring farm and it too has had some breeding success, raising a chick in 2018. Unfortunately we haven't been able to confirm more recent chicks, although breeding behaviour has been recorded.

The Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2 considers the Wattled Crane to be a regional rarity for the Free State, as it is confined mostly to these eastern wetlands. It may not be so rare at Ingula, but it is still a sight to be valued, respected and celebrated!

CARINA PIENAAR, INGULA PROJECT MANAGER

Volume Up!

BirdLife South Africa had a major coup during August: pro bono advertising on DSTV. BLSA is very grateful to those who were involved in the production of this video: Mel Tripp (director and script writer), Flume Digital (production, editing and sound mix), Mario Fazekas (images) and Guy Gibbon (bird calls). The video was flighted 330 times on eight DSTV channels during August, including on M-Net Premiere, M-Net Action, Kyk Net, Super Sport Blitz and Nat Geo. All of the above was provided to BirdLife South Africa for free!

The link to the video is still available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMpJ4QtE3DM> (turn your volume up as there's sound).

Diaries at the ready for November please 😊

With the move to Level 2 BirdLife South Africa decided that **Birding Big Day 2020** can go ahead on Saturday 28 November. All the event information is available at <https://www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2020/> and teams can register at <https://www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2020/entry-form/>

WBC September Diary

At last, after such a long, tedious period of lockdown, we can now plan some activities again, observing social distancing and the other regulations, of course.

Saturday, September 5 – our vlei walk at the beginning of spring, let's make it a bumper one, birding on the vlei has been improving lately, trees are flushing and the migrants are there for the ticking! N.B. Meet +/- 07h30 *at the PICNIC SPOT in future* as a road safety precaution and also not to attract too much attention. Coffee, tea and rusks will be available. Further details of our migrant survey and instructions are mentioned elsewhere in this issue and also on our website, www.wakkerstroombirdclub.org.za

Tuesday, September 8 – a return outing to Robin and Karen Waite's property La Belle Esperance, near Volksrust. Remember the Martial Eagle that flew low over our heads as we drank coffee? The farm is accessed from the Majuba gravel road just past Charlestown. Turn right there and travel for 6,5km. You'll see a red gate and a signboard saying La Belle Esperance Adventure Farm, turn in there and up the hill toward the farm house. If you want to join our convoy instead, we will meet at the Library at 7h30.

Wednesday September 16 – an evening meeting at BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre, Kristi will give a talk on this year's Spring Alive activities. The club has been supporting this initiative for a few years now, remember Ringo, the White Stork whose leg ring was found here and sparked an international search for its origins? Kristi and Carol Preston will show a story in Kamishibai (Japanese storytelling) format and a new board game called Chasing Migration which they have developed. Just might be a glass of sherry in the offing?

We might also mention here that the Conservation Conversations webinar on at 19h00 on Tuesday September 15 will be presented by Kristi Garland entitled "Junior Bird Clubs – are they for us and where do we start?" This series of webinars every Tuesday at that time is highly recommended.

Mid-October will see a return visit by Peter Greaves who will give us the couple of talks which we had to postpone due to the lockdown. We would appreciate your input on the outing for Tuesday October 13 – or any future outing for that matter. Any new venues would be welcome!



Just checking you're wearing your face mask no?? Well get quacking then!

Stay safe, stay healthy, and keep birding