Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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Albatross deaths down by 99% in local trawl fishery Cape Town, 30 April 2014.

Conservation success stories are hard to find. Rarely are they the result of simple, elegant solutions that are truly win-win. Now BirdLife South Africa has demonstrated just such a good news outcome. Accidental seabird deaths during fishing is the single greatest threat many seabird populations. Albatrosses, in particular, are under extreme pressure with 15 of the world's 22 albatross species threatened with extinction. This month BirdLife South Africa staff and collaborators have published a 7-year study, showing that the hake trawl fishery in South Africa has reduced albatross deaths by 99%!

Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross (see Quiz – item no 15)

In recent years, deep-sea trawl fisheries have been identified as a major cause of accidental seabird deaths. Trawlers use large nets, held in the water by thick cables, to capture fish living on the sea floor. Seabirds, especially albatrosses and petrels, are attracted in their thousands to the trawlers when fish offal (unwanted heads and guts) is discarded from the onboard processing factory. While scavenging, seabirds are vulnerable to becoming entangled with the cables and being dragged underwater and drowning.

In 2004 the hake trawl fishery became the first fishery in Africa to obtain Marine Stewardship Certification (MSC). MSC certification ensures that fished stocks remain stable and healthy, that ecosystem-wide impacts are minimised and not significant, and that there is continued monitoring and compliance to prescribed fishing regulations. As a condition of certification, the fishery had to assess the risk of seabird bycatch. They discovered that each year around 10 000 seabirds (70% of which were albatrosses) were being killed accidentally. BirdLife South Africa recommended the use of a single measure – called a bird scaring line, to address this problem, and in collaboration with fishing companies they got onboard and conducted scientific research into the effectiveness of the measure. Now their data, collected over five years, has been published in the international, scientific journal Animal Conservation, and shows a 90% reduction in seabird deaths and 99% reduction in albatross deaths since 2006.

A trawler's bird scaring line consists of about 30 m of strong rope, with 5-10 paired streamer lines of lighter, visible material, attached at 2-m intervals. The main line is tied to the back of the moving trawler, with a road cone at the seaward end providing drag that tensions the line and keeps it aloft behind the vessel, usually parallel with the trawl cables. The paired streamer lines hang downwards from the mainline and distract and confuse birds enough to keep them away from the trawlers' cables

"We've worked closely with this fishery since the early 2000s to demonstrate that avoiding seabird bycatch is good for business and for the environment. Moreover it's relatively easy given the right tools." said Bronwyn Maree, Albatross Task Force Leader for BirdLife South Africa. "Bird scaring lines have now become part of everyday life at sea and fishermen no longer resist their use" she continued. "This fishery has shown that through a collaborative approach with industry, government and NGOs it is possible to effectively eliminate seabird mortalities within trawl fisheries." said Francois Kuttel, Chairperson of the Responsible Fisheries Alliance (RFA). The RFA is a group of like-minded organisations which promote responsible fishing practices, influence policy, develop the skills of fishers and managers and promote high quality research. Kristi Garland.

This is great news indeed – anyone who has seen these iconic birds at sea, soaring effortlessly will agree. Ed.

You know you are a birder when……

1. .You travel to a foreign country and the only words you learn to speak are bird names.
2. Your idea of a great vacation is to travel to Cape Town to spend a day at the sewage works.
3. You have ten large bird pictures on the wall at the office and one small photo of your spouse in the desk drawer.
4. Your vacation of a lifetime is spent at a place called Honde Valley.
5. You spend your entire wedding anniversary scanning the tidal flats at Langebaan.
6. You spend every daylight hour on your Indian Ocean cruise looking at pelagic birds.
7. When shopping for clothes you check that the pockets are large enough to hold your favourite field guide.

8. After finding a second Green Barbet you refer to it as a trash bird.
9. The Rare Bird Hotline is #1 on your Speed Dialler.
10. All of the magazines you subscribe to have the word "bird" in the title.
11. You know the difference between pelagic and passerine.
12. Your New Year's resolution was to start a new millennium list.
13. When you talk about the World Series you're not talking about sport.
14. You own more optical gear than a university astronomy department.
15. You know how to pronounce *Diomedia chlororhynchos* and you know what it means. You also know this is the Roberts VI name – the Roberts VII name is even less pronounceable! Ed.
16. Your idea of an exotic dancer is a Grey Crowned Crane.
17. When someone says there is more to life than birding you question their sanity.
18. These jokes make you smile!

Zebras - White With Black Stripes or……

Africa Geographic on their blog site includes an article on the sighting of a newborn "black" Zebra foal in the north-western area of the Okavango Delta. The photographs show the foal with an amazing dark colour over most of his body, except his upper back legs. This is due to a small abnormality linked to the amount of melanin affecting the pigmentation of the fur

There have been at least three other dark zebras born like this in the area however none of them have reached more than 6 months of age with the last foal born of this kind facing its demise to hyenas within a few months. Unfortunately if you stand out from the crowd you are a target. Due to other abnormalities of this nature some scientist's claim that zebra's stripes are formed from the inhibition of melanin and that the "default" color of a zebra is black. In other words, a zebra is black with white stripes. And I thought these were males and the white with black stripe jobs were females……kidding!

This is an excellent website (http://africageographic.com) and is recommended for a visit. To go directly to their blog site, add "/blog" to their web address. In particular, if you'd like to look at the Zebra, then open up http://africageographic.com/blog/black-babyzebra/

Bird of the Month: South African Shelduck

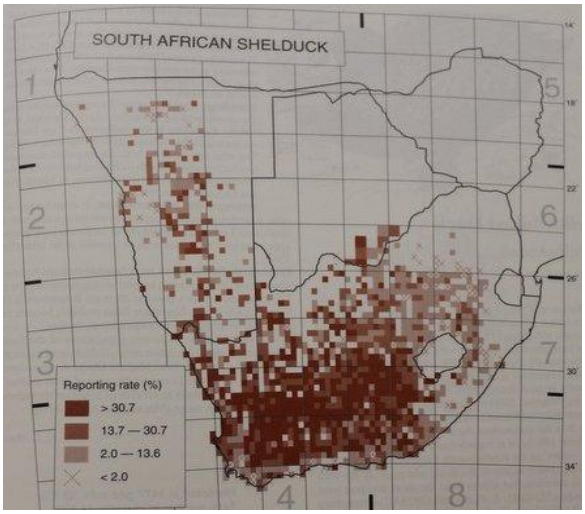
Scientific Name/Meaning: Latin – a Shelduck, may be from *adorna* – decorated or made beautiful. In the same way that the English Shelduck is from the German *schildern*, meaning painted, *cana* – grey, in particular, grey-haired, as in the head of the drake.

General: These colourful ducks (closely related to the Egyptian Goose) are still fairly common on the vlei, sometimes in large numbers. They have been recorded in our pentad in 41 weeks of 44 (or 93.2%) of the survey's existence.

Description: See picture, a distinctive duck, even in flight. The male has a grey head and face, the female has a variable amount of white on the face. Slightly smaller than the Egyptian Goose which has a pink bill compared to the shelduck's black bill.

Status/Conservation: A Southern African Endemic, common. The second most common waterfowl species (after Egyptian Goose) in 15 large irrigation dams in the OFS. These birds are the most common large ducks among the more arid west coast of South Africa.

Male (front) and Female



Food and Feeding Methods: Mostly vegetarian. Forages most of the day in wetlands and but frequently feeds in crop fields to which it flies up to 50km morning and evening. The young feed mostly on submerged vegetation including algae.

Habitat: Favours shallow, brackish seasonal pans, dams, rivers and sewage works. Prefers muddy shorelines and open, shallow water, rarely recorded in marine environments but occasionally uses coastal lakes, estuaries and lagoons.

Breeding: Monogamous, solitary nester, territorial. Sometimes they nest far from water. Pre-existing holes in the ground, especially Aardvark holes seem to be preferred although nests in rocky areas have been recorded, and one in a haystack! 6-15 unmarked white or cream-

coloured eggs are laid. Overall, breeding pairs raise 5 young/year to fledging and 86% of pairs breed successfully.

New Members

We welcome Bea Tindall and Bilkis Moola to our midst. Kevin Twomey has rejoined and given us a useful donation. We hope we enjoy a long and fruitful association with them.

Spiked-heeled Lark by John McAllister

This month I want to talk about one of my favourite larks – Spike-heeled Lark. While not at all rare – quite common in fact – these delightful birds are often found small family groups feeding at the roadside. Once having stopped your car all you have to do is wait for a few minutes and these wonderfully confiding birds will come right up to the car so have your cell phone or electronic "mik en druk" ready for some wildlife shots that you can impress all your non-birding friends with.

Spike-heeled Larks belong to the genus *Chersomanes* and are Near Endemics to southern Africa (you do remember what a "Near Endemic" is don't you?). Until fairly recently the genus was a monotypic one. The overwhelming majority of the birds were to be found in southern Africa and the extreme south of Angola, but there were small isolated populations in the southern DRC and in Tanzania on the dry and dusty plains just north of Mount Meru.

The Tanzanian birds were so isolated from the main population that they stirred up the interest of South African ornithologist, Keith Barnes, who did his PhD dissertation on them. They also exhibited some minor morphological and behavioural differences from the southern African birds. The Tanzanian population of Spike-heeled Larks, also sometimes known as Pygmy Spike-heeled Larks because they were so much smaller than their southern African cousins, are found in an extremely small range on the dry, dusty plains just north of Arusha on the way to the Kenyan border. To cut a long story short it was shown that these birds were sufficiently genetically different to the southern birds to warrant their elevation to a full species status and Beesley's Lark was born (hatched?). The new species was given the scientific name of *Chersomanes beesleyi* and the genus now consists of two species. Beesley's Lark is classified as Critically Threatened by the IUCN and has overtaken Rudd's Lark as the world's most threatened lark. The total population is now thought to be less than 50 individuals.

Beesley's Lark on a Tanzanian postage stamp

Anyway let's get back to the southern African birds. Here the Spike-heeled Lark, dubbed *Chersomanes albofasciata* if you prefer the Scientific Name, has no fewer than nine subspecies.

If you'd like to get out your low loader again and open your copy of Roberts VII to Page 878 you'll see an interesting map showing the distribution of these subspecies in southern Africa. According to this the nominate subspecies (*Chersomanes albofasciata albofasciata*) is to be found in the central parts of South Africa including somewhere quite close to Wakkerstroom at the north-eastern end of its range. The subspecies that occurs around Wakkerstroom quite commonly is *C.a. alticola*, whose adjoining distributional range lies just north of *C.a. albofasciata.*

I have separated these nine subspecies into two major groups – those that have a generally brownish appearance and those that have a generally greyish hue. This seems to make a bit of sense to me, although there is no real scientific basis for this.

The following subspecies have a generally brownish appearance:

C.a.albofasciata – found in n.e. Karoo from the lower Vaal River and Victoria West east to n.e Eastern Cape, Free State and n.w. KwaZulu Natal;

C.a.garrula – east of *C.a.albofasciata* to the Richtersveld south to the Olifants River (the border between the Western and Northern Cape);

C.a.arenaria – north of the above two subspecies from the extreme north of the Northern Cape north into Namibia as far as Damaraland;

C.a.kalahariae – east of *C.a.arenaria* into central Botswana; and

C.a.albofasciata near Springfontein
-courtesy of Warwick Tarboton

C.a. alticola near Wakkerstroom – Courtesy of Warwick Tarboton

C.a.alticola – the subspecies found around Wakkerstroom, whose distributional range is sandwiched between *C.a.albofasciata* and *C.a.kalahariae*.

The subspecies that I feel are generally greyish in appearance are:

C.a.erikssoni in Etosha National Park - Courtesy of Warwick Tarboton

C.a.erikssoni – found in and in the vicinity of Etosha National Park in Namibia;
C.a.boweni – found to the west of *C.a.erikssoni* and north of *C.a.arenaria* through the Kaokoveld to the Cunene River and probably s.w. Angola;
C.a.barlowi – north of C.a.kalahariae and the Makgadigadi Pan area
C.a.macdonaldi – Tankwa Karoo, Western Cape and north-east to Aberdeen and Queenstown in the Eastern Cape.

To add to all the confusion Richard Dean, who wrote the Spike-heeled Lark section for Roberts VII, points out that the differences between subspecies are broadly clinal – meaning that the differences between the subspecies that have adjoining distributions blend into each other in the areas of overlap. Wakkerstroom, for example would seem to me to be a possible area of overlap between *C.a.albofasciata* and *C.a.alticola*.
Dean also suggests that further studies of Spike-heeled Larks may result in some of the present subspecies being collapsed into fewer subspecies. Just looking at the birds I would think that *C.a.alticola, C.a. albofasciata* and *C.a. garrula* must be good candidates for this.
The good news is that all Spike-heeled Larks, no matter what their basic colour may be, have features in common that make them quite easy to identify. They all have a characteristically upright stance, shortish tails which are conspicuously tipped white, clear white throats and chins and a longish, down-curved bill. Often the birds exhibit conspicuous rufous-brown ear coverts and this can also be quite a helpful identification feature. As the name indicates all of these larks have a prominent spike on the rear of their feet, but this is often difficult to see so is not terribly useful when trying to identify birds in the field. They are a good example of how colours can be very variable and misleading and how other features are more constant and thus more reliable identification features.

Drummond Hide.

Keith Davidson and Brian Guerin have been busy making long overdue changes to the Drummond Hide that will enhance the birding from the hide. The benches have been raised a few centimetres, the opening flaps reversed to open upwards and shelves fitted all around. The hide is now much more comfortable to use.

Well done, guys!

NEWSFLASH by Judy-Lynn Wheeler

Wow! Don't you all just love this time of year! Chilly mornings, chilly nights and beautiful warm days – warmer than our summer days, for sure. Earlier today, whilst caging newborn turkeys I was caught in a healthy shower of falling elm leaves – great fun and a reminder that winter is almost here.

As a rule I don't feed my resident birds but I do keep on hand some homemade fat cakes, just in case we have snow. My fat cakes comprise all left over wors/lamb fat, toast crumbs, raisins, sultanas and a little bird seed made into a patty which is then frozen until needed. A few patty rounds on the zinc roof during tough times are always well received. I'm sure many of you have your own special recipes for our fine friends.

Around this time of year we begin to anticipate the appearance of Guineafowl and Duiker on the plot. Spotted Eagle Owl is mostly evident by their call early morning with Fiery-necked Nightjar singing on clear nights. This week we've had at least three Nightjars calling – one in the garden, another towards the back pasture and the third calling from behind our water tanks. Quite a symphony! (Night time Piet-my-Vrous!)

Lesser Spotted Genet have been resident here for almost ten years – whether it's the same genet I cannot say, but judging by the antics on the ceiling boards, there is now a family up there.

Got a few of Mum's friends coming for two nights – all from the city - although they are keen birders and love the outdoors. Hopefully our furry friends will behave!

A Black-headed Heron has dropped in this week together with two Secretarybirds who appear to be finding something tasty in our field.

Diary for June:

N.B. We advise carrying a drink, snack, hat and insect repellent to all outings.

Saturday June 7 – our regular monthly trip to the vlei – note "winter time" start at 07h30, last month we had delightful weather, so let's hope! There will also be a Vleimark at De Oude Stasie that same morning. We will have a book stall there, so please come and support us.

Tuesday 10 June – our monthly Outing, details to be advised.

Wednesday 18 June – Evening meeting, details to be advised.

Alan Mason and his wife recently visited Wakkerstroom for the weekend. Whilst his wife attended the Wakkerstroom Fibre Fair Alan was busy taking photographs. Thank you for sharing your beautiful results Alan. Please come again!

Juvenile African Purple Swamphen feeding.

Common Moorhen

JOHN BARROW - EDITOR