



# Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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The Wakkerstroom Wetland and the adjacent areas are Wakkerstroom's most precious asset and it is imperative that the area is managed using the most modern methods and techniques. With this in mind the Wakkerstroom Bird Club organised a very successful and informative Workshop on Managing Fire for Bio-diversity at the Wakkerstroom BirdLife Centre on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> August. The lecturer was Dr Bob Scholes of CSIR, one of Southern Africa's foremost Ecologists. Considering the very short notice and the bitterly cold weather it was well attended and participants commented on how comprehensive and practical the Workshop was.

The opening session of the Workshop dealt with the modern concepts of Conservation. The commonly held belief that Nature needed to be cared for has proved to be incorrect. Nature is not a sissy and given the opportunity can well care for itself. Man only needs to step in where constraints on the natural system are imposed and then intervention should emulate the natural processes.



*A section of the audience including members of the Wakkerstroom Hotshots.*

There is good evidence that fire has been a factor in the evolution of species for 7 million years and very little damage is done to the species that occur in the Highveld Grasslands by Fire. Only 10% to 20% of fires are caused by lightning, the majority are caused by man.

Another misconception is that of the "Hot or Cold" Burn. Grass always burns at the same temperature. The variation is in Intensity which is governed by the amount of material, the humidity and the wind strength. The measurement of these factors was demonstrated. The intensity of the burn needed to control bush encroachment is quite different to the burn needed in a Wetland or the burn on a Stock Farm. It is possible to choose the type of burn required by burning at



the right time of day and only burning when the humidity and wind speed are suitable. It is not possible to adhere to a strict timetable, it must be flexible. In our case it is recommended that 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the area be burnt each year and that it be spread throughout the period from April to July. The burn should be in relatively small patches and the burning of Fire Breaks in the same place every year should be avoided if possible. Particular care should be taken with the timing etc where nesting birds are involved.



*Dr. Bob Scholes demonstrating the measurement of Humidity, one of the factors needed to calculate the Intensity etc of the burn. The metal device with the red handle is used to measure the density of the material to be burnt.*



*Dr Bob Scholes (L.) keeps a watchful eye on Brian Guerin, Chairman (R.) as he measures the Wind Speed.*

The information and the methods discussed and demonstrated will be a great help in planning and implementing the future fire regime of the Wakkerstroom Protected Area. We would like to thank Bob for his excellent, eye opening, Workshop. We are indeed fortunate in having Bob and Mary Scholes as weekend Wakkerstroemers and members of our Bird Club.

*Report and photos by Norman Dennett*

## Numbers Matter: Report Violations of Environmental Rights

Together with many other organisations working to improve environmental rights in South Africa, the Centre for Environmental Rights has long argued that government invests too few resources in compliance monitoring and enforcement of environmental laws.

We need to ensure that the demand for compliance monitoring and enforcement more accurately reflects the actual scale of environmental rights violations. To achieve this, we need to focus on the Environmental Crimes and Incidents Hotline, a 24-hour hotline that has been operated by an independent operator for the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) since about 2005.

This hotline is the only reporting mechanism for violations of environmental laws that produces numbers that are published annually around November. The Centre for Environmental Rights calls upon concerned citizens and groups to report all significant environmental crimes and incidents.

The problem does not have to be new or recent –you can report violations that have been ongoing for a longtime, or that you have reported in the past. To ensure that compliance monitoring and enforcement of environmental laws are escalated and intensified, government must allocate more money and more people for compliance monitoring and enforcement.

Take the time to dial the Environmental Crimes and Incidents

Hotline on **0800 205 005**.

Catherine Horsfield, Centre for Environmental Rights, [chorsfield@cer.org.za](mailto:chorsfield@cer.org.za)

## Interesting Local Sightings:



Capped Wheatear

26 July (CAR Count) – Capped Wheatear- seen and photographed by Mike and Jenny Maxted-Smith on route MW07. This is a very interesting sighting as the bird's normal distribution is far west of here, see your Field Guide. Warwick Tarboton listed it as an "out of range vagrant" in his Birds of the Wakkerstroom District, (2001). Only two sightings, one in 1994 and one in 1996, the latter by John McAllister, are included. Local birders have, on rare occasions, recorded it subsequently but details are not available at time of writing.

26 July - Long-crested Eagle, seen at BP's Dams on July 26. On the same trip: Rock Kestrel, Greater Kestrel, Black-winged Lapwings and 4 Secretarybirds. Ann Cleal.

A late report on the last Vlei Walk (or Gawk) if you prefer the Dennett definition on 2 August. A lovely morning again, with only a brief cold breeze that didn't stay too long. Although birds were fairly abundant a total of just 35 species were recorded, not bad for mid-winter. The sight of about 15 African Sacred Ibises looking like so many scoops of ice-cream, taking much time to thaw was a highlight, African Purple Swamphens in numbers and several sightings of African Snipe (a personal favourite) made for an extremely pleasant morning. Mike Maxted-Smith's once in a lifetime picture of a Purple Heron with 2 "impaled" African Snipes is pictured on the right! - Brian Guerin.



10 August – Common Sandpiper, at the Oude Stasie/Amersfoort Road corner. Seems to be an early arrival and giving a very clear sighting. Also 6 otters, clearly hunting as nearby birds scattered on their approach! Ann Cleal.

## Diary of Forthcoming Events.

Saturday September 6 – Our monthly Vlei Walk – the first for the long-awaited Spring! Let's meet at the Bridge at between 07h00 and 07h30. We can update the sightings list over coffee which will be at the Guerin Chuckwagon. Sightings go into the Atlas (SABAP2) project so come along and take part.

Tuesday September 9 – Our monthly outing – pencil in the date – details and venue to be advised.

Saturday September 20 – note the changed date! A very special return visit and talk by Claudia Holgate, the subject to be confirmed but her last one was a cracker! Keep the date free, venue BLSA.



**Bird of the Month: African Marsh Harrier. (Afrikaanse Vleivalk - of Paddavreter).**

The African Marsh Harrier rejoices in the scientific name of *Circus rana*, *Circus* from the Latin to habitually fly in circles and *ranivorus*, also Latin, meaning a frog eater. The similar Greek word *kirkos* means harrier.



African Marsh Harrier . Photo taken by Alan D Manson 20 Aug.2013

Harriers are generally slender, long-winged, long-tailed birds that usually fly very low, quartering the ground for prey, only two are resident, this and the rare (in our area) Black Harrier. Their closest relatives are the goshawks. The face is, similar to owls, disc-shaped but with dual discs on each side of the bill. This allows forward placement of their eyes and better sound-gathering capability. They have unfeathered yellow lower legs and strong feet. Eyes are also yellow. Females are larger than males, sexes are otherwise similar. Their colouration is generally dark brown, females are darker and with more rufous on the belly, and the underwings are heavily marked giving an almost speckled appearance from a distance. There is some paler streaking on the “shoulders”, nape and mantle area. The tail is dark above, pale below and barred.

Their Red Data Book status is Vulnerable due to the usual cacophony of pressure on sensitive wetlands, pollution, encroachment of alien trees and inappropriate burning regimes are all contributing factors. It is hoped that the new

Red Data Book (if and when it appears) will give us more information.

African Marsh Harriers fly low, head down, searching for prey of small mammals, especially Striped Mice and Vlei Rats, but birds, reptiles, frogs and insects are also taken. Records exist of them hanging upside down at weaver’s nests tearing them open to catch chicks. They can forage over large areas particularly when feeding young.

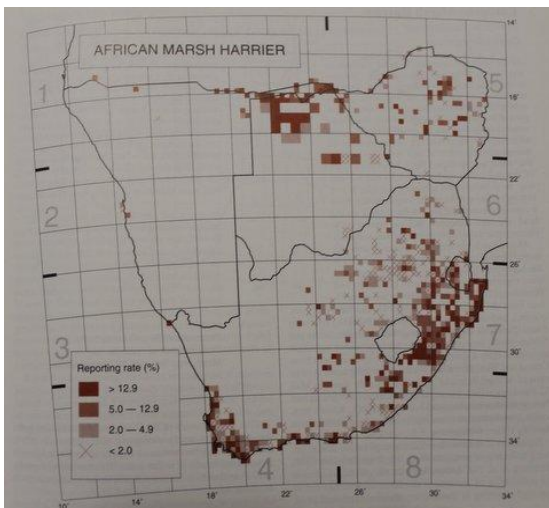
These birds are dependent on wetlands, particularly permanent ones for breeding, nesting and feeding but they prefer to breed in larger wetlands. Nests are mostly placed in reed beds over water but they will occasionally nest in sages and scrub.

They are monogamous with fidelity to the mate very strong. The territory and nest sites are fairly consistently used year after year.

Usually three eggs are laid a few days apart and the female alone

incubates. Males deliver food by dropping it to the female who flies underneath him and catches it in mid-air! Females will assist with hunting later in the season as food supplies diminish. Their breeding cycle is most interesting and further reading is recommended.

**New Membership:** We welcome Anton Muller who joined us during the Vlei Walk on 2 August. This brings our grand total of members to 61.



## **Great Bower Bird.** by Bronwen Davidson

On a recent trip to The Kimberley in the very north-west of Australia I was fortunate to have several sightings of the Great Bower Bird and very excited to see 2 bowers, both of which were decorated with white pebbles. This species only occurs in the north of Australia. It is a bold, curious bird and seems to enjoy the attention its bower attracts.

Bower Birds occur in Australia and probably in Papua New Guinea. It is a fascinating group of birds, of which at least 8 different species occur in Australia. They are distinguished by the fascinating building of bowers by the males, for display and mating purposes. These bowers are small avenues of fine twigs and grass, built on the ground with an opening at each end and slightly open at the top. The male then lines them, especially leading up to the two entrances, with brightly coloured stones, shells, berries, or man-made artifacts, such as bits of coloured plastic.



Adults at the Bower



Bronwen's pic of the Bower

## **The Secretarybird is back in Wakkerstroom!** Eleen Strydom

After a long cold winter, I am back in Wakkerstroom to recommence the monitoring of the Secretarybirds in the area. I spent the last three months on indentifying prey remains at the Ditsong Museum (old Transvaal Museum) in Pretoria. Processing the remains was a brand new experience for me and the findings were very interesting.

During the rest of the season with the help of Wakkerstroom locals and farmers in the surrounding areas, I found more potential nest sites as well as six additional nests. This means there are 13 pairs of Secretarybirds in and around Wakkerstroom. Further good news is that of these nests, six individuals fledged. I am looking forward to the next breeding season where I will hopefully find more nests and more fledglings.

The analysis of the prey remains proved to be extremely interesting. The Secretarybird has a wide variety of prey and is known for capturing reptiles, especially snakes. My analysis has shown that the most abundant prey species is insects consisting mainly of locusts and beetles. Insects might be the main food source as it is easy to capture as well as a good source of protein.

The next prey species is mammals. I found mostly Vlei Rat, Striped Mouse and House Mouse. Interestingly, Golden Mole (two individuals) also formed part of the prey species. Snakes formed a large part of the dominant prey species, but unfortunately these have not been identified yet. Some other interesting findings were scorpions, crabs, Elephant Shrews and other shrews.

I am very excited for this breeding season as I will be able to tell how well this population is doing and how their existence is linked to the high rainfall and elevation in the area.

I would appreciate if people keep on notifying me on sightings and possible nest sites. I would also like to thank everyone that contributed to this project in any way, whether it was reporting sightings, showing me nests or just a pat on the back.

As a first attempt at offering some educational material for our members we will serialise this easily readable chapter from Stephen Moss' book over the next few issues.

## **WHERE DO BIRDS GO? (Migration):**

**What is 'migration'?** Migration, at its simplest level, is defined as a regular seasonal movement of a population of organisms. Birds are probably the best known of these, but it is also a way of life for an amazing variety of other animals - from anchovies to zebras. Usually, though not always, migration takes place between breeding and wintering areas; so usually, though not always, it involves two journeys each year: one outward, and one return.

**Why do birds migrate?** Birds migrate in order to find food and somewhere to breed, neither of which is available in one place all year round. Take a typical insect-eating European migrant as the Willow Warbler. After breeding in Britain and northern Europe during summer, it flies up to 10,000km (6,200 miles) to southern Africa in order to avoid the cold, foodless northern winter. There, it spends the winter (the southern African summer) in a warm, sunny environment with plenty of insect food, before returning north in spring when conditions are once again suitable for breeding.

**Migration.** Isn't migrating riskier than staying put? Although undertaking such a long journey may seem a risky strategy, the dangers of staying put for the winter, in a cold climate with little or no insect food, outweigh the dangers encountered on migration. Migration gives birds the best of both worlds. In fact, perhaps we should turn the previous question on its head and ask 'why don't all birds migrate?'

**So why do some insect-eating birds spend winter in Europe?**

A few mainly insect-eating species, including the Goldcrest and several species of tit, do remain in northern and western Europe all year round. They survive by exploiting hidden food sources, such as tiny insects hiding beneath the bark of trees. It is lack of food – not cold weather itself – which kills birds in winter. So even in Arctic Norway, Goldcrests are able to survive in temperatures of more than 30 degrees Celsius below freezing, because they can find plenty of food deep in the heart of coniferous forests.

**So why do migrants bother coming back again?** Most songbird migrants from Europe and North America spend the winter in sub-Saharan Africa and South or Central America respectively. But the abundant food supplies they find there do not last all year round. If they were to remain through to the breeding season, when extra energy is required to produce eggs and feed young, it might become harder to find enough – especially when there is so much competition from local, resident species. Birds that return to temperate areas such as Britain tend to have larger clutches (and sometimes more broods) than birds in tropical regions. This all suggests that the plentiful food supply available in the northern summer allows these birds to enjoy a more successful breeding season than if they had remained in the tropics. The longer daylight hours of the northern summer also assist with the rearing and rapid growth of young birds, as there is more time to search for food.

**Taken from the RSPB publication “Everything you always wanted to know about birds..... but were afraid to ask!”, by Stephen Moss.**

**Pentad Survey Report – to W/Ended 33.** By Brian Guerin

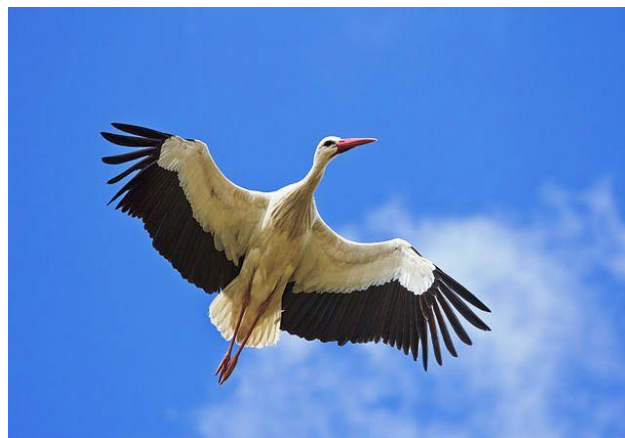
From the survey cards handed in for the first seven weeks of the 2014-2015 year a total of 113 species have been recorded so far. As these are all “winter weeks” this is not too bad! The total for the previous year still stands at 205 (subject to a final check before publication). A combined total for the survey from the beginning to now should be available in the next report.

Talking about winter, the next Saturday Vlei Walk marks the first walk of Spring – please join us!

**BirdLife SA and The Spring Alive Project:**

Spring Alive is an international project organised by BirdLife International, a worldwide organisation for the protection of birds. The campaign is designed to promote children's interest in nature and its conservation through tracking the arrival of spring. The core component of Spring Alive is the website [www.springalive.net](http://www.springalive.net) with contributions from participants in over 40 countries in Europe and Africa. All citizens, but specifically children and families, are encouraged to observe and record the arrival of five migratory bird species each year: White Stork, Barn Swallow, Common Swift, Common Cuckoo and European Bee-eater

The Spring Alive project is originally from Germany. In 1987 in Bavaria, the first programme campaign was led by the German Birdlife Partner. Since then, Spring Alive unfolded both in terms of number of countries involved and observations made. At the moment the project is conducted by BirdLife Partners in over 40 countries across Europe and Africa.



White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) by Carlos Delgado



For further information, please contact: Ms Kristi Garland, Spring Alive Officer, BirdLife South Africa, Mobile: 083 227 0128, E-mail: [kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za](mailto:kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za) For more information please visit [www.springalive.net](http://www.springalive.net)

**The Migrants are Coming, The Migrants are Coming – Brian Guerin**

It's that time of year again – the long-awaited return of our migrant species to brighten up our birding lists, hearts and minds! In order to try to start off a list for Spring/Summer of relative arrival dates of those species who pass through or stay in Wakkerstroom for our summer we have a simple request: tell any Committee member of your sightings, with dates and the area in which you made the sighting – usual story – Warwick Tarboton map reference or GPS reading if you have one, or photographs if possible. All information is useful even if you don't have any of these items to hand at the time!

To start the ball rolling I have seen my first White-throated Swallows at the Uthaka Bridge along the Newcastle road on 14 August.



The White-throated Swallow, a breeding migrant, feeding demanding young in January, 2013. These birds move between the southern DRC, Zambia, Angola, Malawi and is locally common in Zimbabwe. They arrive in South Africa in August and most depart by Mid-April.

**THE EDITOR**

**JOHN BARROW**