



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER 26 – SEPTEMBER 2014

HEARTBREAKING – Glenn Ramke

Going out to monitor a Bald Ibis colony, aptly named *Kalkoenkrans*, on Sunday 14th September, Ann Cleal and I stopped at the usually delightful and rewarding pan known as *Vaalpoort*. Besides the masses of water birds always to be seen comfortably from the road, a large flock of over 100 Grey Crowned Cranes have been “hanging out” in the lands and on the pan edge for some weeks. So obviously I wanted to count them again and we were doing this when our binocular panning stopped in horror on a large white bird in the water. Neither of us wanted to mention it as obviously we hoped it was not true – then Ann saw another – and another – and



Two vehicles were at the water's edge with photographers in them and one drove up. It was a farmer from some 12 km

away who comes regularly to use his camera and massive lens. I had spoken to him on a previous occasion and he told me that he had been there the previous Sunday and seen 5 dead Grey Crowned Cranes. Jan is a very keen supporter of all things wild and natural and was very upset.

I drove around the pan and waded in to pull out a couple of carcasses from which to take samples, to give us some idea of the cause of death – I was a bit concerned as they were quite old. There was also one dead Black-headed Heron. One of the things we always look for at such a scene is mielie pips in a pile that may have been put out to poison birds but I could not find any.

This finding obviously put a dampener on our enthusiasm as questions without answers flood through ones thoughts at times like these – sadly far from the first time in my crane career!

On Monday morning I contacted Johan Coetzer, the law enforcement officer from MTPA and it just so happened that he was about to leave for Wakkerstroom to attend a court case. When he called to collect the cranes, the back of his bakkie was FULL of bags of illegally gathered indigenous plants – the reason for the court case. DOES IT NEVER END!

Johan went back to Ermelo via the pan and took one carcass he hoped was fresher and filled the bottle I had given him with water for testing. He also looked for signs of poisoned mielies but came up negative.

Johan phoned to ask me to try and bury the carcasses from the pan – request from the vets doing the autopsy and I contacted the photographer farmer Jan to ask if he could lend me a few farm workers to help dig a hole. He was wonderful in that he immediately said I was not to worry, he would take men and go and do it – he phoned a few hours later to say they had buried 8 cranes – three more than should have been there, making a total of 11 dead, hopefully there have been no more since but as there were still a good number hanging around in the area, I cannot feel anything but apprehensive.

Although there has been a marked drop in poisonings such as this in the past 10 years or so, there are still old and lethal doses of the horror poisons used on lands to kill insects years ago, tucked away on a shelf in a storeroom which in the wrong hands, such tragedies as related above can and do happen. LESSON – for everyone, KEEP ANY AND ALL poisons, herbicides, sprays out of the reach of children, animals or anyone who may use them indiscriminately.

A big thank you to Johan Coetzer and Jan Van Niekerk for their willing help.

Legging It.

The Ostrich has the longest legs of any bird, reaching a whopping 120cm (4ft) from hip to toe. The longest legs relative to body size belong to the Black-winged Stilt (and its various relatives) and constitute about 60% of its total length.

Interesting Local Sightings

Another Claim to Fame! – Norman Dennett



Parent with Chick - Wikipedia

Wakkerstroom has many claims to fame and I would like to add a new one! On Tuesday 2nd September whilst driving from Wakkerstroom to Volksrust I saw all four of the South African Ibis species. Hadedea, Bald, Glossy and Sacred Ibis over a distance of 10km and time of 10 minutes. Does anybody know of anywhere else you can do this?

We often find Hadedea, Glossy and Sacred together but, of course, the Bald Ibis usually occurs in a quite different habitat. In this case the Glossy Ibis was enjoying a braai after a recent burn.

08 September - Malachite Sunbird – this is the first sighting for 16 weeks! This reflects a similar but less pronounced pattern from last year and the reason appears to be altitudinal migration. Ann Cleal.

21 August - Yellow-billed Kite, near Dirkiesdorp.

South African Shelduck – both parents shepherding their 6 ducklings around the vlei have been a regular sight this past week. Others with offspring include Egyptian Goose, Red-knobbed Coot and African purple Swamphen.

The Migrants are Coming!

21 August – Common Greenshank – seen from Utaga River Bridge, poor photographs taken. Brian Guerin.

South African Cliff Swallows have been seen at the vlei.

Wood and Common Sandpipers have also been recorded.

21 August - Yellow-billed Kite, near Dirkiesdorp. Ann Cleal.

17 September –Greater Striped Swallows – John and Penny Burchmore.

Please keep us apprised of your first sightings of all migrants – in OR around our area!

Bird Feeding Station, Badenhorst Street



This Indigenous garden is opposite the "Crow's Nest" in the centre of Wakkerstroom. WBC committee member, John Burchmore, who built and looks after the Bird Feeders would like to thank Janet Rowse and Graham Mellor for their generous donation of the bird seed.

This is an on-going project by John and he would welcome either donations of seed or cash as it is a fairly expensive operation. Donations may be handed to him in The Crow's Nest.

Bird of the Month: African Spoonbill. (Afrikaans: Lepelaar)

The African Spoonbill has the scientific name of *Platalea alba*, which was given by orator and philosopher Cicero. *Platalea* means broad or flat, obviously referring to the bill, *alba* is Latin for white.



African Spoonbill in Flight - Wikipedia

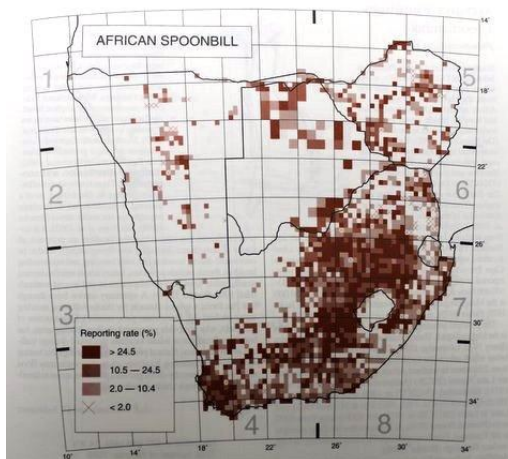
One of the world's six spoonbill species, this is the only one to occur in the sub-region and two more appear as vagrants to North Africa. Their closest relatives are the ibises with which they share long legs and long necks both of which are extended in flight. When moving distances they sometimes fly in lines rather than in the normal "V"- formation.



"Royal Spoonbill with mouth open".
Licensed under Fir0002/Flagstaffotos

African Spoonbills are distinctive and unlikely to be confused with any other bird in southern Africa. The only time confusion is possible is when they sit with the distinctive bill tucked into the "shoulder". The males have a slightly longer, more decurved bill and are generally larger. Even from a long distance their foraging style is distinctive.

Population estimates vary but in southern African it is estimated at some 15000 birds and numbers increased substantially in South Africa and Zimbabwe with the construction of artificial wetlands. Being reliant on water they are partly nomadic, moving in responsive to rainfall.



Their food consists largely of small fish, frogs and aquatic invertebrates, principally gained by moving the head from side to side in the water and snapping the bill closed on contact with some food item. They may use "foot trembling" to disturb prey and sometimes chase after fish.

The food is gripped in lamellae (literally means "thin plates of skin or membrane" and refers to the comb-like food-catching or straining mechanisms present on the bills of filter-feeding birds.)

African Spoonbills prefer a shallow aquatic habitat, as in Wakkerstroom. Also lake and river edges, sewage works and impoundments, also coastal lagoons and estuaries.

Spoonbills are monogamous (with regular casual lapses by males).

They are colonial nesters, frequently in company with African Sacred

Ibis, cormorants, African Darters and herons. 2 to 4 long, oval eggs, are laid, (average 2,6) with the female sitting by day and the male by night. The nest is a flat, roughly oval platform, built by the female with material supplied by the male. Nests are usually in secluded areas and up to 6m above water level. Breeding success does not seem high and is diminished by other risks such as trampling by siblings, wandering from the nest and drowning and sometimes by aggression from other nest-owners.

The Royal Spoonbill (shown above right) is most common in South East Australia, New Zealand, particularly the South Island and sometimes as stragglers in New Guinea, Indonesia and the Pacific Islands.

Membership

Although we didn't gain any new members since the last edition, unfortunately one member didn't renew and has left the club. We are left with 62 paid members and 3 honorary members

Why do so many birds have dark wing tips?

Because melanin, the pigment which makes feathers dark, also makes them stronger. It is an advantage to have stronger feathers at the tips of wings where they are more likely to become worn.

Pentad Survey Report – September:

Sightings over winter were a bit slow but the arrival of some migrants is spicing the birding up a little. The total species count for the first 11 weeks of the current year stands at 121, still a long way to go to reach last year's 205. We will catch up through the summer, I'm sure! I will prepare a summary of the whole period from July 31 2013 for next month's newsletter.

A Helping Hand for the Bees:



Over the last while, ever since the screening of “The Vanishing of the Bees” we’ve featured a number of items to create an awareness of this vital little creature who helps put approximately 30% of our food on our plates. Well, Lynne Goodrum has come up with a means of reciprocating and putting some food on *their* plates. The picture shows how she puts a slice of orange, sprinkled with a little sugar, on a dish and how the bees appreciate it! The rest of the orange should be nailed to a nearby tree for the birds to enjoy.

Our New High-pressure Sprayer



Introducing the new kid on the block (or vlei) – the Honda-powered high-pressure sprayer that we hope will greatly facilitate our spraying activities on the wetland and surrounds. The unit was most generously sponsored by the WNHA whose commitment to providing improved viewing conditions for visitors is commendable. Many thanks to their team for entrusting this work to us!

We now await the first flush of life in the reeds so we can use the unit.

ALL OF WHICH brings us to our fund-raising raffle (Guessing Competition?) by which we hope to raise all or most of the money required to obtain a suitable trailer to move this equipment around on. The present system of borrowing a trailer is inefficient and unreliable if the owner is not available when needed. The unit will be housed at BirdLife South Africa, Wakkerstroom Centre for convenience, thanks Kristi.

More information on this item (including prizes) will be announced by e-mail next week!

NewsFlash!!

Kristi Garland of BirdLife South Africa, Wakkerstroom Centre is offering an accommodation special for September and October 2014 – Book for two nights during the week and get the third night **FREE!** (Subject to availability). Contact Daphne on Wakkerstroom@birdlife.org.za or 071 718 1566 to book.

CAR COUNT JULY 2014 REPORT - Judy-Lynn Wheeler, Precinct Co-ordinator Wakkerstroom

Hi Everyone,

As always, my sincere thanks go to all Team Leaders and Volunteers who made this day the success it was. Your continued support for this worthwhile project is much appreciated.



Jackal Buzzard taken by Alan Manson in Itala Game Reserve, KZN - Wikipedia

We had great weather on Saturday 26th July. A bit dusty but visibility seems to have been good all round.

Helmeted Guineafowl were counted on 5 of the 7 routes with good numbers being seen. A total of 721 birds were counted over the 5 routes. This is good news.

Cape Crow were seen on all 7 routes with a total of 107 birds being counted.

Bald Ibis were counted on all 7 routes with a total of 87 birds seen.

Black Shouldered Kites were seen on 4 routes with a total of 11 birds counted. This is an exciting number of birds for us.

Team MW08 Dirkiesdorp Plein (John Burchmore and Ann Cleal) had the highest number of birds counted at 305/9 species. Of this number were 46 Cape Crow, 204 Helmeted Guineafowl and 26 Black-headed Heron, 4 Secretary Birds, 5 Jackal



Adult Black-headed Heron painted by Louis Agassiz Fuertes –Oppenheimer

Buzzards. Well done guys.

Interesting to note is that Route MW06 Amersfoort yielded very low numbers, but 9 species were counted. Of importance were the Secretary Birds with 4 being counted. A family of 2 adults / 1 Juvenile, then a single adult later in the day.

Due to space considerations, the spreadsheet for this count is available from John Barrow or me, Judy.

n.b. The painting of the Black-Headed Heron was originally from the Album of Abyssinian Birds & Mammals (1930) – Editor

Developments at Drummond



Esau, our painter, has been busy giving the Iain Drummond Hide another coat of Waxsol Wood Preservative – and it looks very smart!

This wide-angle view shows how our spraying of the reeds has opened up the viewing area around the hide. Our new, more powerful sprayer will enable us to extend this area to some 50 metres into the wetland and will make a big improvement to birding from the hide. We hope to see more waders from there in the coming months.

We are looking into the feasibility/cost of replacing the walkway to this hide which is in urgent need of attention.

Migrations

Due to space constraints, we have decided to carry over the second instalment of this article until the next issue.

Working on Fire Wakkerstroom Base

The Simunye Hotshots have again been out into the community with their awareness campaign – this time at Dana on the 16th September 2014. The morning started with a presentation and display from Zero Tolerance, primary focussing on safety in the home and the different extinguishers that are available.

The team marched onto the grounds, led by Crew Leader Hendrick Banda. Base Manager, Kristi Garland, introduced the team to the residents and gave a brief background to the Working on Fire (WoF) Programme. She also spoke about the partnership that has developed between WoF and BirdLife South Africa and in particular the Wakkerstroom Centre. After each the attending ten fire fighters introduced themselves, Thebelani Hlatshwayo presented a



Hendrik Banda and his team demonstrating some of the tools used in firefighting

small slot on what the team is involved in – from awareness programmes to pre, during and post the fire season. Bonginkosi Tsotetsi eloquently wowed the crowd with his poem about fire and when it is our friend or foe. Hendrick then demonstrated all the tools the fire fighters use out in the field.

The presentation ended on a high note with the team doing a drill which showed of their ability to follow commands as well as work together as a unit. The crowd enjoyed this show of dedication and commitment to making a difference in our community. We also think it brought back some memories of the good old army days....

Diary for Balance of 2014

Saturday 4 October – Monthly Vlei Walk, 07h00 (or thereabouts) on the Amersfoort Bridge. Coffee will be available at the Guerin Chuckwagon. As this date is at the end of Clean-up Month a special “treat” is that everyone is encouraged to bring a supermarket bag to collect rubbish from the road! Kristi and the Working on Fire team have major plans for the day and we thought a small “gesture of solidarity” would be appropriate!

Tuesday 14 October –Monthly Outing. Venue – A return visit to the Newcastle Ponds. We will leave the Library at 07h00 sharp, more details later.

Wednesday 15 October – Evening meeting – a talk by Peter Greaves who gives illustrated Birding Adventure Talks on his many travels. His talk is entitled “Fabulous Peru” and discusses Nazca Lines. The Candelabra, Macha Pichu, a motorized canoe trip up the Amazon and the “Road of Death” to Manu. Usual 17h30 for 18h00 at BirdLife SA.

Saturday 01 November – Monthly Vlei Walk, 07h00 on the bridge.

Tuesday 10 November – Monthly Outing, details to be advised.

Wednesday 19 November – Evening Meeting– Details to be advised.

Saturday 06 December - Monthly Vlei Walk, 07h00 on the bridge.

Also on that day, Saturday 06, – our Annual Function, again at Forellenhof by popular request, a “Bring and Braai”. More details at a later stage!

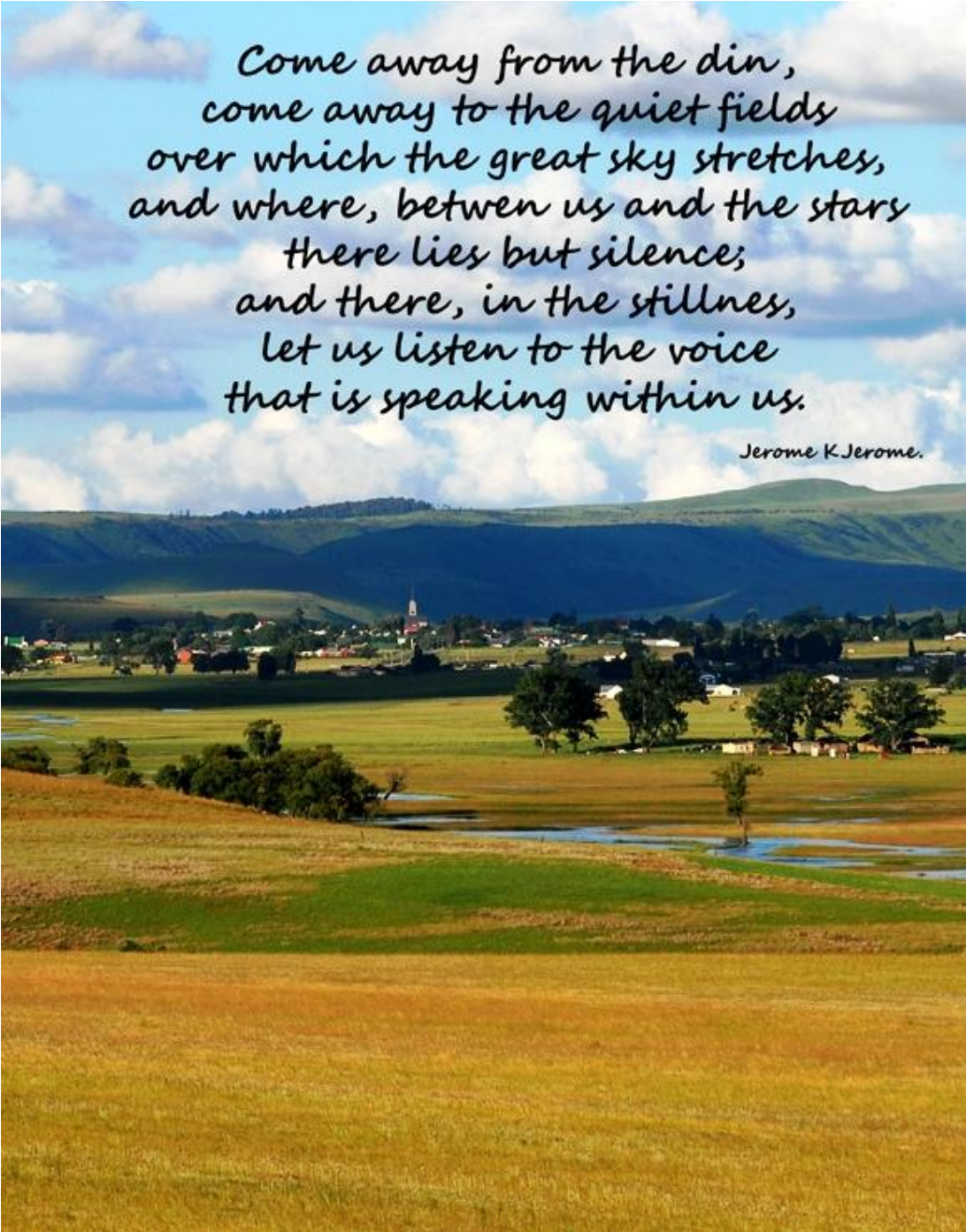
Saturday, 13 December 2014 – The Country Fair in Badenhorst Street. We are having a stall, so please come and support it.

How fast does a bird’s heart beat?

This depends on the bird’s size - and what it is doing. Large birds tend to have slow heart rates (the Ostrich is only about 38 beats per minute), while most songbirds range between 200 to 500 beats per minute.

Do birds perspire?

No. birds don’t have any sweat glands on their skin, so they lose excess heat by panting and seeking shade.



*Come away from the din,
come away to the quiet fields
over which the great sky stretches,
and where, between us and the stars
there lies but silence;
and there, in the stillness,
let us listen to the voice
that is speaking within us.*

Jerome K. Jerome.

Wakkerstroom from the South. Photo by Norman Dennett. Poem by Jerome K Jerome.

THE EDITOR

JOHN BARROW