



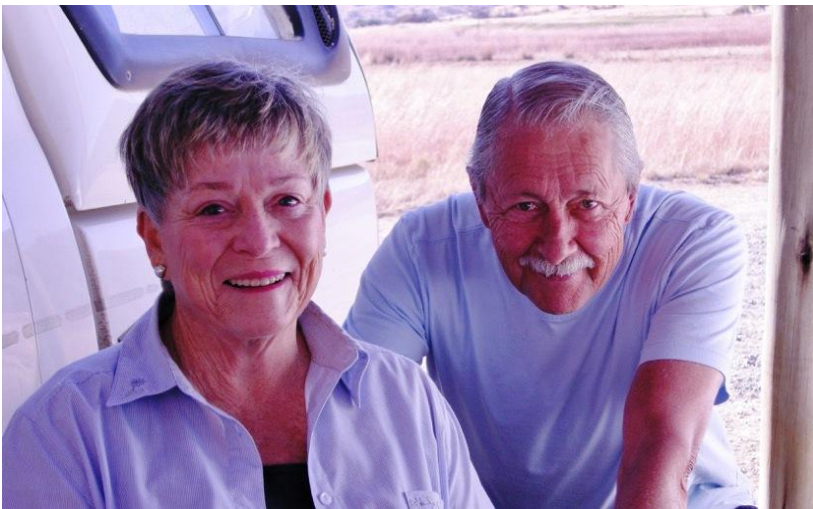
Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER 30 – JANUARY 2015

The Trailer Competition

The Wakkerstroom Bird Club is pleased to announce that the winners of the Trailer Competition are John and Judy Ryder.



The prize is a weekend for four in one of the self-catering cottages in Forellenhof, donated by Johan and Ronelle van Eeden, a dinner or Tapas for four to the value of R500 at the Bistro donated by Lizzie Lack, a morning's Birding with Lucky Ngwenwa and a copy of "Robins of Africa" both donated by Kristi Garland of BirdLife South Africa, Wakkerstroom Centre. We trust they will enjoy their prizes. Congratulations to them and a huge "Thank You" to all those, both near and far, who bought tickets, made

sizable donations and donated the prizes. We are well on our way to purchase the Trailer needed for our Alien Eradication Programme.

Can birds use tools?

Quite a few do, and usually to find food. The most famous example is the Woodpecker Finch of the Galapagos, which habitually uses a small twig or cactus spine to provoke an insect to emerge from a crevice or to physically prise it out. The New Caledonian Crow goes one stage further by fashioning its own tool from a twig in order to prise grubs out of a tree trunk. Some birds that fish for a living have also learned to improve their success rate by using bait. For example, the Green-backed Heron will drop insects or small pieces of bread on the surface of the water to attract fish, which it can then seize with its dagger-like bill. Several species use hard objects to obtain food: either dropping stones onto eggs to break them (as one African population of Egyptian Vultures does to Ostrich eggs); or by dropping an item of food onto a hard surface (gulls dropping shellfish onto concrete, or Lammergeiers releasing bones from a great height). This behaviour has passed into legend: the Greek playwright Aeschylus was reputedly killed by an eagle dropping a tortoise on his bald head; the 'eagle' is more likely to have been a Lammergeier (though legend doesn't recall what grudge it held against playwrights).



New Caledonian Crow - John
Gerrard Keulemans (1842-1912)

How many ornithologists gave their names to secret agents?

OK, so there's only one. But it's the big one! Author Ian Fleming was a neighbour and close friend of the author of Birds of the West Indies, a certain Mr James Bond. Legend has it that inspiration struck when Fleming glanced at his friend's book while searching for a name for 007. The rest is literary and cinematic history.

A New Year – and new additions

Although I have been monitoring the pairs of both Blue and Grey Crowned Cranes in and around Wakkerstroom for 20 years, I still get a warm, fuzzy feeling when I see those newly hatched little balls of fluff bowling along at the feet of their enormous parents.

Today I was watching very new little Crownie chicks and comparing their size to the crown on the top of an adults head – and I reckon they were quite a bit smaller!

Blue Cranes, grassland nesters, lay their eggs on a patch of grass (land) with a good view all around and water not too far away. The earliest pairs may begin breeding in mid to late October and later pairs could start in mid to late November. Should a pair lose its eggs or small chicks, it will possibly give it a second bash so starting earlier could be like an “insurance” of time to try again.



Grey Crowned Cranes – lovingly nicknamed

Crownies, start about a month later than their cousins above and of course are wetland nesters preferring tall-reed wetlands as in our large wetland. In other parts where there are no tall reeds, or wetlands have changed, they use lower vegetation. Their nests are large platforms of tramped down reeds and their view – is of reeds!!

Cranes share brooding of the eggs so every few hours there is a “change-over” and it is interesting to watch the changeover of the Blue Cranes where it takes the one going *on* duty about 40 minutes or more to slowly amble towards the nest, eating, stopping to preen, resting, eating, preening and so on. When it eventually arrives, the “sitter” gets up and moves off happily while the new arrival turns the eggs, pokes around into the vegetation and fiddles some more before finally sitting. Every so often it will get up, turn the eggs and sit again.



On the other hand, when change over time comes for the Crownies, the one out feeding goes through the preening and mooching around bit then takes off and flies over the reeds given a couple of calls. Obviously this is to warn the mate that it is on its way and it is not an unwanted bird arriving. Down it goes into the reeds and anything between 3 and 15 minutes, out flies the “sitter” – free of duty and very hungry!

Well the Crownie news is that the first tiny chicks are on our wetland. And the first two to enter the big wide world did so on the 1st January – and are the offspring of the poor pair that gave the village such heartache last season when they lost all four chicks in one go. My name for them is the Mbata pair and over the years they have been a very successful pair – so we are hoping that this year will be a 100% improvement on last year.

I have been trying to think of some way to ensure they do not endure the same fate again but have not really come up with a sound solution. One of the things I did wonder was that if anyone is driving past and sees the family near the main road, that they park and slowly walk towards them and hopefully move them back towards the wetland. A few people have shown interest in doing this but I really do not have any idea if it would work. My real worry is that they cross the main road and a vehicle flying along – as they tend to do – hits them. Unfortunately last year they were seen across that road twice at least so it is a very real fear. If anyone has ideas, please contact me on 0817959009.

The other pair is the well known pair at the other end of the wetland where birders do a lot of viewing from the road bridge – they are the Roos pair and have also been a successful pair over many years and they have two tiny chicks probably hatched on the 6th or 7th of January.

Any ideas or any help will be happily looked into – and thank you to those people who phone with information such as Jillie Robertson who excitedly called Daphne Pyott as she did not have my number, and asked her to tell me about the Mbata chick which although I did know about, delighted me to hear that others are interested and watching out for OUR CRANES. *I can never hear of sightings too often!*

Glenn Ramke.

Diary of Activities:

Saturday 31 January – the Summer Car Count will take place and once again we would like to field a full side to cover all routes on Saturday. New volunteers are welcome and 4*4 or high-clearance vehicles, too. The reasons for seeking additional people are threefold:

1. Car Counts should be a “snapshot” of birds on the routes on one day – counting missed routes on a later day can result in double-counting which is to be avoided as far as possible. Judy Wheeler will do the usual briefing on Friday 30th at Wakkerstroom Country Inn (Hotel) in the Owl Room. Time 17h00.
2. We need to increase the pool of people who are able to help and we team new beginners with the “old hands” for training. The purpose of this day is accurate recording of terrestrial species, Corvid & specific raptors, but it is a day of fun and for the past 10 years, this event has been enjoyed by all. Please consider coming forward to take part in this worthwhile, long standing project.
3. Simply for your pleasure will be a FUN FORM which will allow the teams to record all other interesting information plus bird & mammal sightings, and to record any difficulties on the routes. This form will be handed out on Friday evening.

There will be a "Bring and Braai" from 5.00pm on Saturday at BirdLife SA. This is to touch base with all the teams after the count. Bring all your food/refreshments/cutlery. BLSA will provide the fires.

Friday 6 February (1) – Special weekend workshop to round off World Wetlands Week. This will take the form of a two-day SABAP2 and CWAC workshop, 6 – 7 February which comprises a brief introduction to SABAP2 and CWAC on the Friday evening with a practical SABAP2 and CWAC count on the Saturday morning during our Vlei Walk. The full program will be forwarded via email/Facebook/notices about the village. Data captured from these two initiatives are extremely valuable to the science of bird distribution. They are great fun too! This is the full programme:

Friday 6th February 2015 (2):

17:00 – 17:20 Brief introduction to SABAP2 and CWAC

17:20 – 18:00 Demonstration of SABAP2 website

18:00 – 18:15 Tea

18:15 – 19:00 - How to compile & submit a SABAP2 & CWAC list. Pentad maps and datasheets will be demonstrated.

Why not join us for a "Bring and Braai"? Braai fires, crockery and cutlery will be provided. Bring your own meat, salads, chairs and glasses.

Saturday 7th February 2015

06:00 – 09:00 SABAP2 and CWAC counts

09:00 – 10:00 How to submit data electronically to the Animal Demography Unit, Cape Town.

Please contact Kristi Garland on 083 227 0128 or kristi.garland@birdlife.org to book your place before the 4th February 2015 Self-catering accommodation and camping is available at the Centre should you require.

Saturday Vlei Walk – This will take place from 06h00 to 09h00 as the practical session of the SABAP2 and CWAC workshop, sightings made will be submitted to the ADU, with Ernst to show the way. Everyone is welcomed. Please come and join the fun.

Tuesday 10 February – this Tuesday’s outing is to the farm of Robin and Karen Waite, adjacent to Gert van der Merwe’s farm on the Amajuba road. We will depart from the library at 07h00 sharp. The purpose of these outings primarily is to record the bird species on the farms, both summer and winter seasons. Birders and spotters are essential to the success of these outings. We welcome volunteers and visitors who wish to take the opportunity of these outings as a refreshing morning getaway. Please feel free to bring your breakfast/tea hampers with you.

Wednesday 18 February – Evening meeting at BirdLife. John McAllister will expand on the talk entitled “The importance of Wakkerstroom as a Birding Destination” he gave to the SANParks KZN Honorary Rangers group on the Friday evening of their January birding weekend here. Reports on the evening suggest the talk was well received. Do not miss these informative talks!

The usual pattern of first Saturday (Vlei Walk), Second Tuesday (outing) and third Wednesday (meeting) will continue until June when we may have to reconsider for the winter months.

Interesting Website.

Lynx Edicions, producers of fine natural history books, including the superb set entitled The Handbook of the Birds of the World has an equally superb website – lynxeds.com- which is a natural history fan’s delight, crammed with world-

class photographs, videos and details of new and used books. Heartily recommended, but make sure you have an hour or more to spare.

Membership

In December and January, we are happy to welcome Dave and Janet Birchenough, BP and Karen Greyling, Mark and Karen Kotze and Peter Naylor and Sue Picken.

We hope they will all enjoy being members and will take part in our activities

Eradicating Alien Invasive Plants.

Invasive alien plants pose significant threats to our Wetland and the surrounding areas. They displace and can out-compete indigenous species and change the function of the ecosystem. There are seldom any natural control systems of the offending plants. Being away from their home habitat they have no “enemies” and often no bacteria or fungi to keep them in check. Some are poisonous and can cause losses of livestock and animals. If they are allowed to gain a foothold in the area the population acts as a reservoir that can spread to adjacent farmlands and pose significant threats to human livelihoods as well as a considerable fire risk. Although the Bird Club has no legal responsibility we have accepted the challenge of helping to conserve the area in a pristine ecological condition. By maintaining and improving the facilities we try to ensure that our members and visitors to the area enjoy a worthwhile birding experience.

To this end, with the co-operation and funding assistance of other interested organizations, we have embarked on a programme of Alien Plant Eradication. The purchase of a High Pressure Herbicide Pump, funded by the WNHA, the imminent purchase of a trailer to transport the equipment, funded by our recent Trailer Competition and the generous labour so willingly offered by the Wakkerstroom Working on Fire Team has ensured that the project is off to a good start. Over the next few months we intend to include in our Newsletter some brief notes on the various plants that we have to deal with, their origin, the threat they pose and the methods used to control them.

Scotch Thistle, Skotsedissel, *Cirsium vulgare*. (Also known as Spear Thistle and Plume Thistle.)



An aggressive weed that came from Scotland to South Africa in the Eighteenth Century. It is Scotland’s National Emblem. Classified as a Category 1 Invasive Weed, the Scotch Thistle invades grasslands, road sides, vleis, dam margins and river banks in high rainfall, moist areas. It is an attractive 1.5m plant with pink to mauve thistle type flowers. The first picture shows its effective dandelion-like method of seed dispersal. A biennial, it produces only leaves in its first year of growth, in the second year it flowers, sets seeds and dies. Birds collect the silky seeds to line their nests. Flowers from September to April. Causes heavy infestations and reduces the carrying capacity of the veld. Does not have any uses and is a serious, worldwide problem. It is a major threat to natural habitats and can injure animals and man.

Control measures which centre on physical removal of the plant, are expensive and time-consuming. The method we use here in the Wetland and adjacent areas is to chop the plant at ground level and treat the carrot-like root with a herbicide. If possible it is best to remove the plant during its first year when it grows a +/-450mm dia. flat rosette of leaves, second picture.

The Scotch Thistle is a good example of a handsome attractive plant becoming a weed when it is in the wrong place.

PS. I think it should be called the Scot’s Thistle, Scotch is something you drink!

Norman Dennett

Bird of the Month: Little Bittern (Afrikaans: Kleinrietreier ((Woudapie))

The scientific name of the Little Bittern is *Ixobrychus minutus*, Greek *ixos* – mistletoe, although this is highly inappropriate and in this case must mean a reed; *brychus* to howl or roar; so a “reed roarer” although this is more appropriate to the Eurasian Bittern. Latin *minutus* – smallest. This also seems inappropriate as the Dwarf Bittern is smaller.

Two sub-species may be seen in South Africa, *I.m.minutus* and *I.m.payesii*, the first is a migrant from Europe and the second is resident with some local movement. The two are difficult to separate in the field with the resident bird being slightly heavier and paler.

All three bittern species are shy, skulking birds which when alarmed normally assume the *bittern* posture with their necks and bills pointing upward. During this display



Little Bittern -Photographer - Ferran Pestaña, Barcelona, Spain



"*Ixobrychus minutus* 1 (Marek Szczepanek)" by Marek Szczepanek

the eyes peer around the bill, i.e. looking forward in the normal direction. This “sky-pointing” as it is called brings into play their excellent streaked-neck camouflage in their preferred reed-bed habitat. Other habitats used include edges of wooded streams and rivers, and rank vegetation around ponds, incl sewage ponds.

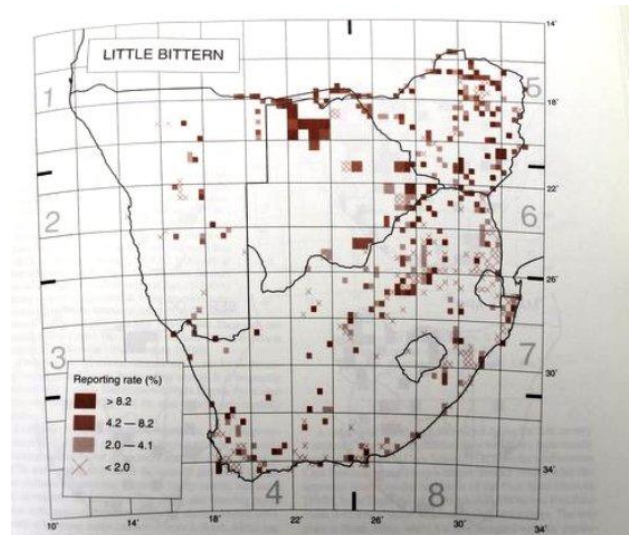
These colourful small bitterns are around 36cm in length, weighing only +/- 110gr are fairly distinctive, in flight or standing in the *Phragmites* or *Typha* reeds they prefer. Confusion should only occur with the Dwarf Bittern which does

not occur in our area. There are some colour differences male to female with the female a duller black and with more brown on her wings. The juvenile is much more heavily streaked than the parents.

The Little Bittern is classed as “not threatened” in the Red Data Book, previously “Rare”. The bird (though generally uncommon) has been recorded in at least 37 wetland sites in South Africa and the estimate of the number of breeding pairs is >100.

When foraging for food they prefer to use the edges of reed beds and channels, sometimes stalking in the water, from where they spear larger prey. They retreat into cover and swallow their catch whole. Their food preferences are not well known but include fish, frogs, lizards and small invertebrates.

Usually 2-5 chalk coloured eggs are laid with an average 3.3 over 25 nests. In the event of a lost clutch (usually due to predation or wind blowing nests down) it will be replaced with another clutch and they also regularly double-brood in a season. An interesting aspect of their breeding behaviour is that the first male to establish a breeding territory prevents other males from doing so until his female has completed her clutch. The second male then prevents a third male from doing so, and so on.



Long-legged Buzzard *Buteorufinus*

On 20th December 2014 we were going to check one of the Southern Bald Ibis colonies with John and Penny Burchmore when we came across the bird in the picture on the right. We initially thought that it was a Common or Steppe Buzzard but when it landed, we realized that this bird was substantially bigger than any Common Buzzard we had ever seen, also the flight was more leisurely like an eagle rather than the common buzzard, we would estimate that the bird was 65cm head to tail. It also behaved differently to the way we experience the common buzzards; it was unafraid and continued looking for prey on the ground whilst we took photos from about 15 metres away. We suspected that the bird might be a Long-legged Buzzard as we saw the black edges to the wings as it flew to the tree and, according to Roberts, the Long legged Buzzard has twice been reported close to Wakkerstroom (2002/10/25-12/15 2730AC Mpumalanga Wakkerstroom E.Marais, J.McAllister, J.Isom, A.Marx et al. 2004/12/27 2529CA Mpumalanga Balmoral, 18 km N of R.Fieldwick, P.Tattersall. Additional research we have conducted found reports of hybridisation between LLB + Common Buzzard (Kotyman et al 2008 Hungary.)

We submitted this information to Clive Hopcroft, a renowned raptor expert who confirmed that it was, indeed, a Long-legged Buzzard.

I studied the pictures again and recalled the sighting and reached the following conclusion: There are a few things that drove me to the conclusion that it is not a Steppe, firstly the size, this is a much bigger bird, even in the pictures I can see that it is a heavier bird, the wings sweep way back over the tail, the flight was much slower, the way the branch bent as it landed, also when I study the pictures and compare the top mandible seems to overlap more than the other pictures I have, more like an eagle.

Also Steppes fly away as soon as you get near this one was less afraid. Finally if it were not for the size I would never have questioned the find but this bird was just too big to be a Steppe.

Malcolm Wilson, the Raptor expert commented that from what he has seen and heard this bird is different to the Raptors normally found in South Africa.

We are still awaiting adjudication from Trevor Hardaker and Ulrick Oberprieler.

MIKE AND JENNI MAXTED-SMITH

Pentad Survey Report.

At last the half-way point was reached at the end of December 2014 with 153 species recorded in the year so far to 205 in the first full year to 30 June 2014. So there is still work to be done, and more volunteers to be found!

The draft printout for the first full year has been done and is in the process of being checked prior to publication. Comparison with the second and third year data will hopefully provide for some discussion points.

Do birds have a skeleton?

Like all vertebrates, birds have an internal skeleton. However, it has been cunningly customised to suit a bird's unique requirements. Many of the bones are hollow and criss-crossed with internal struts, making them strong yet incredibly light. This keeps a bird's body weight to a minimum, allowing it to take to the air and fly. A bird's skeleton also has

two important modifications: the hind limbs and pelvis have shifted to enable it to walk or hop on two legs; while the forelimbs have been modified into wings, enabling most birds to fly. The huge, keeled breastbone (take a close look at your roast chicken!) is also a special flight adaptation, since it holds the powerful muscles required for beating the wings.



Yellow Red Collared Widowbird



Long-legged Buzzard photographed by John & Jenni Maxted-Smith

Other Interesting Local Sightings:

November 6 – African Black Duck upstream of Thaka River Bridge. I've not seen them from this bridge for a long time, so

near to town. Brian Guerin. Also seen walking along the wall of Martin's Dam, even nearer! Ann Cleal.

November 28 – Willow Warbler, Ann Cleal.

December 3 – Two African Fish Eagles soaring over vlei.

January 2 - Black Cuckoo – John Burchmore.

January 3 – Klaas's' Cuckoo – John Burchmore.

January 3 – European Roller at BirdLife.Errol and Sherry Cromhout, visiting. We seem to get one of these birds recorded every year!

January 3 – White-Backed Duck, seen on Vlei Walk, Brian Guerin. Not previously recorded in the Pentad Survey period which began 1 July, 2013

January 5 – Red-Jantjieshoek road. Maxted-Smith.

January 16 approx. – first for the Pentad Might they become

January 18 – juvenile Guerin.

January 21 – albino to Groenvlei. Mike and



White –backed Duck with yellow bill

collared Widow with a yellow collar, on the Photograph supplied. Mike and Jenni

African Palm Swift at the vlei. This was a Survey last year and was added to the list. regulars? Ann Cleal.

African Fish Eagle over the vlei. Brian

Ant-eating Chat on the early part of the road Jenni Maxted-Smith.

Sandy Twomey Photographic Competition



Winning entry – “Morning Mistry”

The winners of the Sandy Twomey Photographic Competition were also announced at the Vleimark held at De Oude Stasie on Saturday, 17th January 2015. The winner is Andre Steenkamp with his entry “Morning Mistry”.

Second place goes to Brian Guerin (The African Snipe) and third place has been awarded to Wendy Watson (Southern Bald Ibis).

Certificates of Merit were awarded to Linda Michelmore (Village Weaver), Jenny Maxted-Smith (Crested Barbet), Conrad Cockcroft (Clouds over the railway track) and Ronelle van Eeden (Tractor at work).

The Committee was very impressed with

the standard of the entries and would like to thank all the people who submitted them. We would also like to thank Bronwen Davidson who judged the competition and all the sponsors who donated the prizes:

1st Prize -Sunday Lunch for 2 at De Oude Stasie, Winning photo to be framed by Grant du Plessis, A year's membership in the Wakkerstroom Bird Club, and a hamper from The Crow's Nest

2nd Prize – Breakfast for 2 at Wetlands Country Lodge & Sheds, a hamper from Ye Refill Shoppe and 4 blocked pictures of the winner's choice from “Just Because”

3rd Prize – 2 bottles of wine from The Wakkerstroom Country Inn and a copy of “Robins of Africa” donated by Birdlife South Africa, Wakkerstroom Station.

OUTING: TUESDAY 13TH JANUARY 2015 : FARM LANGFONTEIN

We woke to a mild morning, low lying mist with blue skies appearing above. We had a great turnout with numbers reaching 27. Our host, B P Greyling and his gracious wife Karen welcomed the group with enthusiasm and we were treated to a sumptuous array of edibles with a never ending flow of refreshments.

Strolling through the established garden of 27 years one was inspired by the dedication to layout and impact planting. Sitting on the sprawling patio overlooking a babbling brook feature watching the interaction between a feisty Southern Red Bishop and a pushy Lesser-Masked Weaver was just a moment in this enjoyable morning.



BP Greyling and Karen surrounded by members of the Bird Club



splendid form. Within the garden and close surrounds 25 bird species were counted.

Meandering about, I discovered people simply relaxing on benches beneath Silver Birch trees enjoying the many facets of this peaceful landscape while others debated plant species; then there were those keen photographers who took advantage of the light and colour combinations.

Soaring overhead were Little Swift, White-rumped Swift and Greater Striped Swallow while closer to the ground, Brown-throated Martin were witnessed snatching up loose goose down.

We thank our host and hostess for opening their home for this outing.

Both Malachite and Amethyst Sunbirds were in

Judy-Lynn Wheeler – Outings Organiser

2015.

The Editor and the Co-Editor wish you and your family a healthy, safe, happy, and prosperous year ahead with plenty of interesting birding.

We trust you will enjoy the year's newsletters that we produce.

John Barrow
THE EDITOR