



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER 31– FEBRUARY 2015



Phragmites australis is a Perennial Grass that grows in the wetlands of the temperate and tropical regions of the world on all continents except Antarctica. It is thought to have originated from Phrygia in Asia Minor. In Europe it is rarely invasive, it is even used as an ornamental plant, but everywhere else can be a major problem. It does have its uses; thatching, making arrows, youngsters eat it and it can be dried and ground into a fine powder that, when moistened, can be toasted like marsh mallows. In Egypt it is used for making a flute-like musical instrument, maybe that's why another name here in South Africa is Fluitjiesriet. Its most important use is for bioremediation where excess nutrients and pollutants are removed from dirty water and sewage pond waste water by bacterial action on the *Phragmites* roots and leaf litter.

The downside is that it is highly invasive



WoF operatives hard at work



plant that crowds-out other wetland plant species reducing overall plant, animal and bird diversity. It can spread at the rate of 5m per year from horizontal runners, rhizomes up to 10m long that produce a new shoot every 300mm. It is allelopathic i.e. it releases toxins from its roots that stop the growth of other plants. It out-competes native plants for nutrients, water and sunlight. The outcome – a 3m plus tall, handsome plant that forms a deceptively beautiful monoculture!

Phragmites is difficult to control and impossible to eradicate entirely. Research in this country and the United States has found that the most advantageous method of control is to spray with a suitable herbicide and then to burn the dieback later in the season. Burning on its own tends to

stimulate the plant to produce more runners and spraying on its own is not effective enough. A one-time application of herbicide followed by burning can significantly reduce the abundance and allows rapid regrowth by indigenous species. This is borne out by Mr Stan Madden who has been advising us on how to proceed. Stan has considerable experience at Marievale and other Reserves in Gauteng and very kindly visited Wakkerstroom to help us set up our programme. Our intention is to improve the birding at popular birding areas and Hides by removing sufficient areas of Phragmites to produce more open water, mud flats and loafing areas.

The WNHA has financed the purchase of a High Pressure Pump and considerable quantities of herbicide for our use. Delivery of the trailer to carry all of the equipment is expected soon. The project is off to a very good start. There is lots of information available on the Net. Google was definitely my friend whilst producing this. By the way! *australis* does not mean the plant came from Australia, it just means Southern. We can't blame the Aussies for this one!

Norman Dennett.

African Dusky Flycatcher, Afrikaans Donkervlieevanger, *Muscicapa adusta*, is a small passerine bird of the Old World flycatcher family, Muscicapidae. It is a resident breeder in Africa from Nigeria, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Ethiopia south to South Africa. It is very common in its woodland habitat, which includes riverine forests, evergreen forest edges and clearings, especially near water bodies such as lakes, dams and streams, and well-wooded suburban gardens.

Description: The African Dusky Flycatcher is 13 cm long and weighs around 11 gm. Its upperparts are plain brown, with the only facial marking being an indistinct narrow eye-ring. The chin is plain pale grey, and the rest of the underparts are grey-brown with indistinct streaks. The short, straight, laterally flattened bill is black, the legs and feet are grey, and the eyes are brown. The sexes are similar, but the juvenile is spotted with buff above, and is whitish spotted with brown below.

This species is similar to the common migrant, the Spotted Flycatcher, *Muscicapa striata*, but is smaller and darker, especially on the underparts, than that species. Spotted Flycatcher also has a streaked forehead, a feature not shown by the African Dusky Flycatcher.

The African Dusky Flycatcher has soft, high-pitched "tzeet" and *tsirit* calls.

Behaviour: The African Dusky Flycatcher builds a cup-shaped nest in a tree cavity a few metres above the ground, and lays two or three green eggs. The hole in the tree is normally reused in the next breeding season. This species is monogamous, mating for life.

The African Dusky Flycatcher is usually seen singly or in pairs. It forages from an open perch for insects typically taking its prey in a short flight.

Conservation status: This common species has a large range, with an estimated extent of 2,300,000 km². The population size is believed to be large, and the species is not believed to approach the thresholds for the population decline criterion of the IUCN Red List (i.e. declining more than 30% in ten years or three generations). For these reasons, the species is evaluated as Least Concern.



Picture taken by "Oom Kosie" in Swellendam SA on 26/07/2008 (Wikipedia)



Photographed by Tom Tarrant (January 2006) at Ruhija Bwindi NP in Uganda

References

1. BirdLife International (2012). "*Muscicapa adusta*". *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2013.2*. International Union for Conservation of Nature. Retrieved 26 November 2013.
- Ian Sinclair, Phil Hockey and Warwick Tarboton, *SASOL Birds of Southern Africa* (Struik 2002) ISBN 1-86872-721-1

John Barrow

Bird of the Month: Peregrine Falcon (Afrikaans: Swerfvalk)

The Peregrine Falcon's scientific name is *Falco peregrinus*. Latin *Falco* – falcon, or also *Falx*, -a sickle, referring to its swept back wings or the sharp, curved talons, and Latin *peregrinus* – a wanderer. There is an Indian sub-species which visits South Africa from November to March, this bird is noticeably larger and paler, with less spotting and barring on the underparts. Approximately 19 sub-species are recognized around the world, the only major ice-free land mass where it doesn't occur is New Zealand which makes it the world's most wide-spread raptor.

The sexes are alike, females considerably larger than males, 730g compared to 500g. Their black 'hangman's hood' appearance, their compact build and densely barred underparts are diagnostic. The juveniles are browner above, underparts pale to beige with conspicuous narrow streaks, not bars.

Peregrines are scarce to uncommon with both resident and migratory (rare) populations; they are regarded as Near-threatened. Confusion is also possible with the more common Lanner Falcon which is smaller with a rufous crown and white underparts. Lanners are said to outnumber Peregrines by approximately eleven to one.



Illustration by John James Audubon (1785 – 1851 - Wikipedia)

The Peregrine Falcon is considered the noblest of birds of prey as the flying skills of these dashing raptors are legendary and falconers believe it has no equal. It has been credited with such a great range of speed in stoops that it seems unlikely not to be wiped out with its prey!

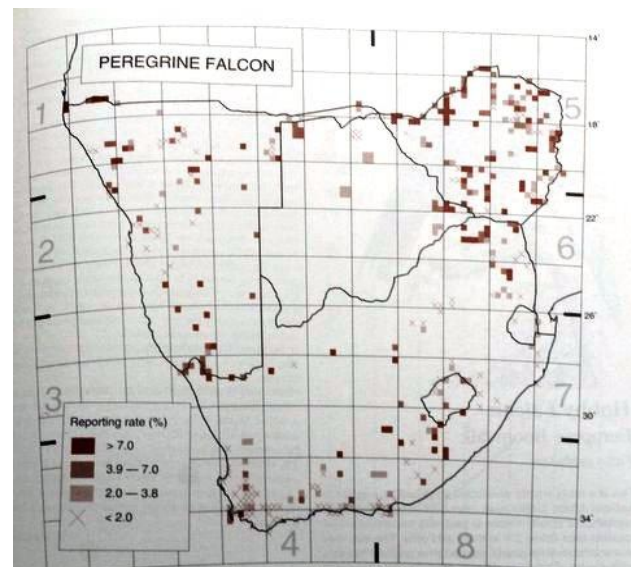


Lanner Falcon, note Rufous Crown -Picture taken by Alan Manson near Tugela Ferry Wikipedia

Today, peregrines are regularly paired in captivity with other species such as the Lanner Falcon (*F. biarmicus*) to produce the "Perilanner", a somewhat popular bird in falconry as it combines the peregrine's hunting skill with the lanner's hardiness, or also the Gyrfalcon - to produce large, strikingly coloured birds for the use of falconers.

Peregrines usually hunt from high cliffs with good visibility or from high up. Pigeons and doves are most important prey group, supplemented by swifts, starlings, sandgrouse and small granivores. In woodland, they take a cross-section of resident birds (incl hornbills, hoopoes, and mousebirds). More unusual bird prey includes Cape Cormorant and Little Grebe. They will also take bats and occasionally insects. Sometimes they kleptoparasitise (steal food from) other raptors, including the Black-shouldered Kite. A pair will sometimes hunt the same quarry together.

Peregrines mate for their lifetimes but a lost mate is soon replaced. Nest sites are nearly always on inaccessible cliffs or sheer faces of old mine shafts or quarries. On average 3 eggs are laid, the nest is a vigorously defended but rudimentary scrape on a ledge, cliff face etc. The success rate of raising fledglings per pair/year averages 1.3



Visit by Ernst Retief, BLSA.

On Friday 6 February we had a visit by Ernst Retief, the SABAP 2 fundi from BirdLife South Africa Head Office.



Ernst showing the editor how to use the program “Lynxbirdticks” Brian Guerin and Mike Maxted-Smith looking at birds

The purpose of his visit was to explain the workings of the South African Bird Atlas Project 2 (SABAP 2), its aims and objectives as well as the submission of data electronically to the Animal Demography Unit (ADU) in Cape Town. He also attended the Vlei Walk on the following morning.

Ernst’s talk was very interesting and comprehensive with an excellent PowerPoint presentation to illustrate the forms used to help gather information on sightings.

For those who have an Observer (now Citizen Scientist) Number, which is fairly easy to get on the ADU website, there is a wealth of information there, well worth a scratch around! If you are not already an active

Atlasser it is still worth visiting for information on all the ADU projects in progress. The web address is www.adu.org.za

Ernst also gave information on the Co-ordinated Waterbird Count (CWAC). More details will follow on this project, which has in fact lapsed in our area, as the Committee is looking into reviving it – depending on response from the members.

Brian Guerin.



MEDIA RELEASE

Bird of the Year 2015

Johannesburg, 23 January 2015:

The Bird of the Year for 2015 is the famous five cent bird, South Africa’s national bird, the Blue Crane.

“Selecting this Crane will help everyone realise the need to conserve the country’s wetlands and grasslands,” BirdLife South Africa’s Chief Executive Officer Mark Anderson said.

This decade has seen Tristan Albatross, White-winged Flufftail, Barn Swallow, African Fish Eagle and Lesser Flamingo all getting the honour, but this year it is the iconic Blue Crane.



Picture supplied by Kristi Garland

‘Bird of the Year’ is BirdLife South Africa’s annual initiative for awareness about birds and bird habitat conservation. The Bird of the Year 2015 initiative is proudly sponsored by Waltons. “Each year choosing the bird is highly contested, with nominations and furious voting and support for various species, but this year the Blue Crane won,” said Nikki McCartney, events manager of BirdLife South Africa. Educating people is a key component of BirdLife South Africa’s conservation work. The bird conservation NGO is developing

learning materials using the Blue Crane as a flagship species. This will be an incentive to conserve wetlands and grasslands. The Blue Crane, other crane species and many other less charismatic, but equally important species, depend on these habitats.

The Blue Crane is endemic to southern Africa, with more than 99% of the population occurring within South Africa. A small breeding population occurs in northern Namibia, in and around Etosha Pan.

“As the ‘five cent bird’, the Blue Crane is generally well-known to South Africans,” said Anderson. “This, and its attractive and charismatic life style, account for its popularity. It is a good choice for Bird of the Year 2015,” he added.

Poisoning, habitat alteration and power line collisions are all significant threats to Blue Cranes. Poisoning occurs intentionally and inadvertently. Loss of South Africa's natural grasslands threatens Blue Crane habitat.

Mainly found on privately owned farms, a key to their conservation is good relationships between landowners and conservation agencies to ensure appropriate management of these environments.

The African Crane Conservation Programme of the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) works on awareness and environmental education for landowners, local communities and other stakeholders; reducing crane/farmer conflicts, community involvement in sustainable use and conservation of wetlands and grasslands, monitoring of crane populations, the trade in captive cranes and works with Eskom to reduce power-line collisions.

End

For further information, please contact:

Nikki McCartney at events@birdlife.org.za or 083 636 1060

What are feathers made from?

Feathers are made from a horny substance called keratin: a light, strong and very flexible form of protein. Keratin is also found in a bird's beak and claws – and indeed in human hair and fingernails. Feathers have several component parts: the central shaft, which is hollow at the base and attaches to the bird's skin; the barbs, or sidebranches, which are attached to the shaft; and tiny barbules, which branch off the barbs and mesh with each other, giving the feather its unique combination of strength and lightness. Different types of feathers have different uses: such as the large wing feathers which enable a bird to fly; the ‘contour’ feathers which cover and streamline its body; and the soft downy ones which keep it warm.

From the book: “Everything you wanted to know about birds but were afraid to ask” by Steven Moss

Interesting Local Sightings:

Saturday January 29 (CAR Count) – Vicious interaction between a Black-shouldered Kite and a Common Buzzard which the Kite appeared to win as the Buzzard eventually fled. We assumed the Kite had a nest in a large tree nearby but we couldn't spot it. Roberts V11 says the buzzards kleptoparasitize (steals food from) Black-shouldered Kites – maybe that is what was happening. Norman Dennett. John Barrow, Brian Guerin.

Saturday February 7 – Namaqua Dove, 1 male on the Amersfoort Road, outside our Pentad though! Also 1 Green Wood-hoopoe, in town. Judy Ryder and Penny Fox.

Saturday February 14 – Black Sparrowhawk and Black-throated Canary, also both just outside our pentad. These canaries have not been recorded in the Survey of the Wakkerstroom pentad, 2720_3005. Judy Ryder and Penny Fox.

Sunday February 15 – African Harrier Hawk at the “Fast-food Drive Through” i.e. the small bridge over the vlei. It was all over in less than a minute! The raptor swooped under one side of the bridge and straight out the other and settled in the “seating area” amongst the poplars to eat his catch, which appeared to be an adult White-rumped Swift. Ann Cleal.



Black-throated Canary. Pic by Alan D Manson (Wikipedia)

Do birds perspire?

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

From the book: “Everything you wanted to know about birds but were afraid to ask” by Steven Moss

Brown-hooded Kingfisher –*Halcyon albiventris*

The following is taken from Roberts Birds of Southern Africa, 6th Edition.

Measurements: The bird's measurements are: length 22-24 cm, wing, 103-106-112, tail 63-70, tarsus 11,5-13, culmen 45-52. The male of the specie weighs between 49,6 to 69,4g with a mean of 60,2g whereas the female weighs 45,6 up to 80,5 g with a mean of 63,1g.

Identification: It's a medium sized bird, crown brown, upper back is black or brown, lower back, rump tail and wings are blue. Below buffy white, washed ochre on breast and flanks; bill all red, grading to dark tip.

Voice: Its voice is a repeated phrase of 3-5 sharp notes, falling in pitch accented on 1st note; also long series of even louder notes at same pitch; trilling in display.

Distribution: S Africa to Gabon, Zaire. Kenya and Somalia; absent from most of Highveld and all of dry W and Kalahari sandveld.

Status: Common resident

Habitat: Thickets in woodland and denser savanna, forest edge, riverine and coastal bush, gardens and parks

Habits: Solitary or in pairs; pairs display to each other with open wings; bobbing, pivoting and calling. Perches on branch, posts or telephone wire, scanning ground below for prey; sometimes dives for fish, but less expertly than aquatic kingfishers.

Food: Mainly insects; also lizards (including chameleons), crabs, small rodents, birds (warblers, waxbills, sunbirds) small snakes; scorpions.

Breeding: *Season:* Mainly September to December, but as late as April in KZN. *Nest:* Tunnel, about 1m long in bank; about 1-3m above ground level, chamber lined with regurgitated arthropod fragments. *Clutch* 2-3.7-5. rarely 6. *Eggs:* white; measure mostly 27.7 x 24,5; *Incubation:* About 14 days. *Nestling:* Unrecorded. Fed by both parents.

Brian Guerin, Ann and I were fortunate to see, not one but two of these delightful birds during our outing to the Waite's farm on Tuesday. 10 February 2015. Unfortunately, they were too far out of range of my camera (indeed, as soon as a bird sees me with a camera in my hand it's a no-no!) so I wasn't able to get a pic. **John Barrow**



Picture taken by Renier Maritz in the Kruger National Park (Wikipedia)

Kingfisher Pictures Required:

Over the next few issues we are planning to do a Bird of the Month series on the other Kingfishers we see in our area. This series will be aimed at both the sexual dimorphism of each species, i.e. the visible differences (in plain words.) Differences between the Malachite and Half-collared Kingfishers will also be covered.

In future issues we would also like to use members' own pictures in the newsletter as frequently as possible and with this in mind we are asking for your pictures of:

Malachite Kingfisher,

Half-collared Kingfisher, especially juveniles,

Giant Kingfisher, male and female, and

Pied Kingfisher, male and female.

If you are interested in taking part and would like to "personalize" your Newsletter please e-mail your pictures to: bguerin@nelweb.co.za.

How do birds digest their food?

After swallowing, food passes down a bird's oesophagus, either into the 'crop' (a storage area in the throat) or directly into the first section of its stomach, where digestive juices begin to dissolve it. Afterwards it passes into the second section, known as the gizzard, whose powerful muscular walls grind hard substances – effectively doing the same job as a mammal's teeth. However, some food items such as fur and bones are impossible to digest, and are regurgitated as a 'pellet'. Owls are particularly well-known for their pellets, which can often be found beneath trees at regular roosting sites.

From the book: "Everything you wanted to know about birds but were afraid to ask" by Steven Moss

Update from Glenn Ramke

One seldom has feedback from readers in regard to articles and when there is, it is great, first to know people read it and secondly, that they have taken the trouble to give some comment, ideas or criticism and somehow that makes putting *fingers to keyboard* worthwhile and pleasurable.

Mbata crane family:

After my last bit about the Mbata Grey Crowned Crane family and their problems, Sarah Burns wrote to me with a suggestion for helping the crane family and I was so pleased to hear from her as I had thought of boards some time ago but took it no further. Thank you, Sarah.



A tasty morsel for a young chick

The suggestion for having a board asking people to slow down for possible cranes crossing is appealing as besides hopefully filling that mission, it makes people aware that we are set on helping our cranes to survive and that this wetland is home to one of the largest number of breeding pairs in a single wetland in the country.

The thought I had would be to erect the boards *only* during the three months when the cranes may be near the road then remove them until the next season – in that way hopefully the impact would be

greater than when people keep on seeing – and eventually not seeing – the boards because they are so used to them being there. However the next step which I believe is the most difficult is to obtain permission to erect the boards – or just to take a chance as they won't be up permanently – and then trying to raise the funds for decent sized boards. It would be great to get them up this season but if not, definitely next year. Any thoughts or suggestions?

Still on the Mbata family – they have two chicks that are doing well so far with still about 6 weeks to go before they hopefully fledge!

An interesting chapter opened this season. One of the first families living along the wetland where this pair breeds was the Philand family – when I came here I knew Ouma Philand quite well as did most people then. She died and her daughter moved to KZN but now her grandson has returned and has been renovating the old house. Martin and I have had a lot of contact and he is most concerned about the crane family. I asked him, his builders and young son to keep a look out for the cranes moving towards the gravel road and if necessary, to walk around them and slowly direct them back to the wetland. They have done this and at present the cranes spend much of their time below Martins house. Obviously this may not work all the time as at times he is out, his builders have gone back to KZN and his son is at school but hopefully after he talks with the neighbours, there will be a good number of people checking on the movement of the birds and we can keep them from the main road.



You have learned well, my chick

Other pairs:

All the pairs of GCC that breed on this wetland have names and another pair that is well known to many is found at the other end of the Amersfoort road where one turns off to the Oude Stasie and this pair is called the Roos pair. When I first saw their chicks this year they had two but a few days later Rita and Bertus told me there were three – one being much smaller. After another few days that little one was no longer around but more sadly, a few days later neither were the other two. So the normally very successful Roos pair had a bad year losing three chicks. This is probably due to natural causes BUT it may not be totally natural in that apparently there are a large number of feral cats in and around the wetland and I think these are a serious threat to small chicks of many of the bird species. I have also been told of otters taking ducklings in quantity and of course we seem to have a large number of Servals around too. How one goes about controlling this is cause for endless discussion.

Feral cats are a big problem in many places and are largely due to people not neutering or spaying their cats and they then produce endless numbers of kittens. Abandonment is also a big problem. People *must* take responsibility for their animals.

A few weeks ago, Ann Cleal and I were watching a GCC family en route to Groenvlei also with 3 chicks and while we were watching Ann saw a cat nearing the family. One of the adult cranes chased the cat then returned to the family but *'the cat came back* and, once again it was chased into the mealie field where the Crane spent a long time perhaps keeping the cat at bay. Sadly when I saw that family last weekend, they were down to just one chick! Can't say it was definitely a cat that caused their disappearance, but again, one more pressure on birds whose young are "ground-bound" for three months so very vulnerable to many problems!

As of today, Thursday 12th Feb, there are 6 chicks between 4 pairs, on our wetland and a couple more pairs who elude me all the time so perhaps one or two more chicks. If 6 fledge, that would be a good year, so readers, keep everything crossed that 6 or more little Crownies eventually take to the air.

It's important – don't be shy;

One last thing – please do not hesitate to send via phone, sms or email, any interesting observations about sightings of birds or mammals. One may see something that is unusual behaviour and contrary to anything known and can add to the information bank – don't even think that what you saw is of no value. My number is 081 795 9009 or one can pop into the Crow's Nest or BirdLife with your news.

Diary:

Saturday 7 March – Vlei Walk. Last month's total of 51 species has to be beaten! 07h00 at the Vlei.

Tuesday 10 March – Outing to Sarge Brits Farm to see the Sungazer Lizards, aka Giant Girdled Lizard, or *Cordylus giganteus*. Classed as Vulnerable in the Red Data Book these lizards can grow to 40cm in length and we have been trying to organize such an outing for a long time. Don't miss this one! Direction/departure times will be advised nearer the time.

Wednesday 18 March – Meeting at BLSA 17h31 for 18h00 - Bronwyn Howard from Utrecht, publisher of Urban Eco Life E-Magazine, will talk on a wide range of practical topics on how we can best assist in promoting “the Green life” In the meantime I suggest you have a look at the magazine on urbanecolife@wildworldbooks.com and see for yourself why it has just passed 1000 in circulation! Bronwyn is a respected person in her field, definitely not to be missed!

Appeal for Support for Sneeuwberg Protected Environment.

We earnestly ask that you take the time to do as Ernst asks and go to the web address below and give your support to this vital cause, the more land that is protected the bigger the contribution we will make to future generations.

“Hi Kristi

Can we please send this to all the members of the Wakkerstroom Bird Club and ask them to support this initiative?

Thanks

Ernst

From: Ernst Retief [<mailto:ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za>]

Sent: Thursday, February 05, 2015 1:00 PM

To: 'sabirdclubforum@yahoogroups.com'; staffforum@yahoogroups.com

Subject: Support for Sneeuwberg Protected Environment

Hi All

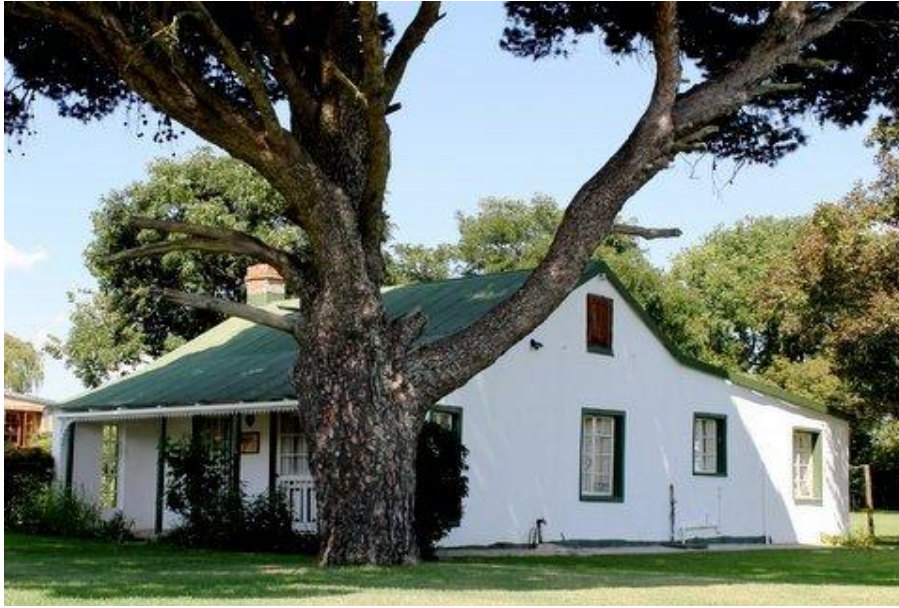
During the last number of years BirdLife South Africa in partnership with WWF-SA, have been assisting the Free State Provincial Government to formally proclaim certain farms in the Memel area as a Protected Environment. These farms are extremely important for bird conservation as they host habitats such as grasslands and wetlands, which are used by species such as the globally Vulnerable Wattled (*Bugeranus carunculatus*) and Blue (*Anthropoides paradiseus*) cranes and the Endangered Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*). The area is also important for other threatened bird species such as Southern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus calvus*), Blue Korhaan (*Eupodotis caerulescens*), Denham's Bustard (*Neotis denhami*), Yellow-breasted Pipit (*Anthus chloris*) and Rudd's Lark (*Heteromira ruddi*). By proclaiming these properties a protected area, it provides protection from unsuitable land use practices for this area, such as mining. Management plans will be developed to improve the habitats in the area, for example through the removal of alien plants and improved burning practices.

On Friday 16 January 2015 the intention to declare this Protected Environment was published in the Free State Provincial Gazette Notice No. 91 (see attached document) and members of the public are now invited to comment on this proposal. BirdLife South Africa would like to obtain as many letters of support as possible. **To indicate your support for this initiative please consider adding your name and email address to an online letter created by BirdLife South Africa: <http://www.123contactform.com/form-1282836/Sneeuwberg-Letter-Of-Support>.**

BirdLife South Africa will print the letters and, under a cover letter from BirdLife South Africa, submit them to the MEC. For more information about this initiative please contact Ernst Retief at ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za.”

THE EDITOR – JOHN BARROW

BIG TREE COTTAGE, KERK STREET, WAKKERSTROOM



Big Tree Cottage

The Perfect “nest” for bird lovers! (Sleeps 8)

This charming in-town property with a large garden has two separate "nests" the Main Cottage and The Branch.

The set up is ideal for a large family or two smaller families who prefer privacy.

The cottages are cozy, each sleeps four, and they have everything required for a self-catering stay including dishwasher and a BBQ.

Regret no TV.

The premises are doggy-friendly and there is a single garage on the property.

Simply dump your cases, pop your food into the fridges and you are ready to go birding.

Tariffs:

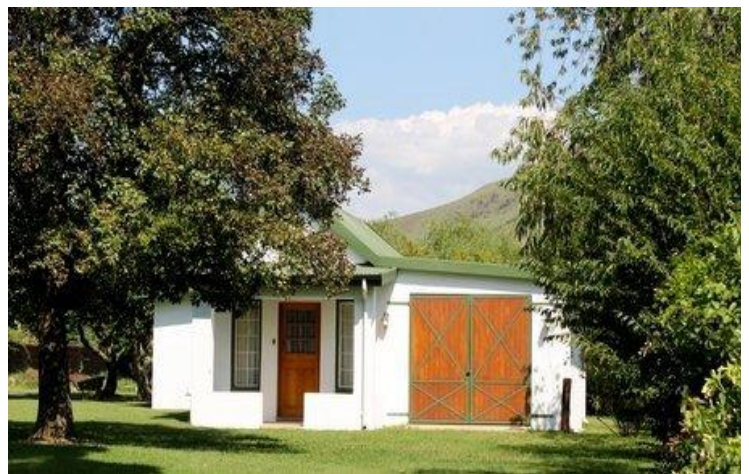
The Main Cottage - SPECIAL is R 275.PPPN

“The Branch” SPECIAL is R 250. PPPN

Kiddies under 12 - half price

A 15% discount applies for stays of more than three nights (2 to 5 people)and 20% (6 to 8 people)

Contact Rosmarie Weber 081 271 0153 or e-mail rosmarieweber18@gmail.com for further information.



The Branch



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