



Wakkerstroom Bird Club



*Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa
Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs*

Postal Address: P O Box 93, Wakkerstroom. Cell Phone Number: 0822556778
Facebook page: Wakkerstroom Bird Club e-mail: wakersbirdclub@gmail.com

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 63 – DECEMBER 2018

Hello fellow birders,

This is of course our last newsletter for 2018 as we look forward to winding down another successful year for the club and hopefully for its members. This past weekend we “celebrated” Birding Big Day, and also had a wonderful talk by visiting crane researchers from Uganda and Zambia (oh, and from Chrissiesmeer and Newcastle, both a bit closer to home!). December will see us wrapping up 2018 with our end-of-year celebration, but more on that later.

Birding Big Day is always a date that birders look forward to in South Africa. By 6h30 last Saturday there had already been 11,000 records logged nationally via the Birdlasser app, and by the end of the day an incredible 41,673 records had been logged, with a total of 660 species seen – that’s amazing! Closer to home, two groups (*Vlei Folk* and *The Picnickers*) were neck-and-neck all day, and were only separated by one single species in the end (140 and 139 species respectively) – well done to both teams. Special mention should go to the *Dana Dikkops* who logged 96 species and hardly left the Wakkerstroom Pentad - the requirement was to bird within a 50km radius of your starting point.

(photos below courtesy of Graham Spencer)



Trying out new routes during Birding Big Day



Some of The Picnickers doing their name proud

Doing it the hard way by WALKING their entire routes were our very enthusiastic *Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Club*: with Kristi Garland's and the bird guides' assistance, they saw an incredible 75 species, the undoubted highlight being a Red Chested Flufftail calling early in the morning – what a way to start! This year, as in 2017, they were the only junior club registered in all of South Africa – a huge feather in their cap! Well done, Juniors, we are very proud of you!



Junior Bird Club (photo: Kristi Garland)

Of course the main aim of Birding Big Day for all was not just to log as many species as possible, but to have fun doing it – and from what I've heard this was certainly achieved!



Photo: Graham Spencer

New Members

We welcome Keith and Gudrun Robinson to the Club, and hope they'll enjoy their birding and will join us for many events to come.

November Wetland Walk

A small group of regular members - augmented by two Pretoria visitors and six American birders on a private tour - turned out for our November Wetland Walk. The weather could have been warmer, but the birding was good and 69 species were recorded. Highlights were three species of Kingfisher (Pied, Giant and Malachite), Wood Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilts, as well as Yellow-billed Ducks and Egyptian Goose, both with young. A pair of Grey Crowned Cranes flew in, calling loudly. They landed and walked around in the area where these birds have bred before.....

Several migrant species, especially Swallows and Martins, were swooping around in good numbers. Join us for the last Wetland Walk of the year on Saturday 1 December.



Photo: Brian Guerin

Bird of the Year 2019

BirdLife South Africa has just announced that next year's Bird of the Year will be the Secretary Bird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*). We are fortunate that this charismatic bird is often seen around Wakkerstroom's grasslands - it has been uplisted recently from Near-threatened to Vulnerable, and although it is present in all nine provinces, numbers are sharply in decline.

A Fond Farewell

Last Wednesday was the occasion of the farewell get-together for two Wakkerstroom stalwarts, Philip and Rita Steenkamp. Although not members of WBC they certainly included birds and birding and the welfare of our environment in their daily lives, and were always happy to help out with sponsoring prizes for the Club. Philip was an active representative on the Wakkerstroom Interest Group (WIG) which, among other things is vigorously fighting the pipe line being erected between Martins Dam and Vukuzaki. He also kept a sharp eye on the sewage work and was our early warning system on any/all environmental matters,

They will be a hard act to follow and we wish them a long and happy retirement with family in Harrismith.



Ongoing herbicide spraying of the Wetland

A few days ago Graham Spencer and Brian Guerin managed to complete the first successful herbicide spraying on the wetland for this season. Strong winds from early in the mornings have played havoc with the spraying programme so far – along with a couple of well-earned breakaways! The picture shows Graham spraying alongside the R543 near the first bend on the way to Volksrust. This time the wind played ball and they were able to use it to gain wider coverage. They have sprayed this area before to good effect and are trying to open it up further. An otter was seen in this water a couple of weeks ago.



Talks on Crane Research Further Afield

Last Friday there was a fascinating talk at BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom. Glenn Ramke knew of two researchers from Zambia and Uganda who would be in our area for just one night – both of them are involved in crane research and community work, and Glenn asked them if they would do a presentation for the WBC. So along they came - Mawape Schlogo from Zambia and Dr Adalbert Aine-omucunguzi from Uganda, accompanied by Bradley Gibbons of EWT and Steven Sebang from Chrissiesmeer who are involved in the same research in their respective areas. They first joined the attending club members at a bring 'n braai before royally entertaining us with their presentations.



Mawape Schlogo, Bradley Gibbons, Adalbert Aine-omucunguzi and Steven Sebang kept their audience entertained

It soon became clear that both Uganda and Zambia have similar issues and problems as South Africa (and other countries) where conservation and the environment are concerned. Burgeoning populations, governments who regard conservation as less important than many other issues, dwindling and polluted water resources, agricultural practices that are destroying areas previously utilised by wildlife, and communities who are unaware of how important every creature is to the survival of all of us.

When one looks purely at the statistics of how cranes are affected by these issues, it is easy to become totally disillusioned at their future prospects. However Mawape, Adalbert, Steven, Bradley and others are ensuring that everything that can be done to beat the odds is getting attention: research of the bird populations, involving communities and particularly the children in understanding the birds' value to them, and continuing to educate and involve government officials, are only some of their day-to-day jobs.

The presenters were engaging and everyone who attended enjoyed the night. The enthusiasm of the researchers made it clear that, indeed, all is not lost while they and others are keeping an eye on things. Thank you, Gentlemen, for making the effort to come to our little town and involving us – “our” cranes are very important to us too and they give so many people much joy.

Some Wonderful Conservation News

Last month the Department of Environmental Affairs announced that Cabinet had approved a network of 20 new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) that are representative of South Africa's rich coastal and ocean biodiversity. This will increase protection of the ocean around South Africa from 0.4% to 5%. The new areas will advance ocean protection by approximately 50 000 km², an area two and half times the size of the Kruger National Park. Mr Derek Hanekom, the then-Acting Minister of Environmental Affairs said “This network of 20 MPAs, approved by Cabinet on Wednesday, 24 October 2018, will considerably advance South Africa's efforts to protect our ocean heritage for future generations. They will contribute to fisheries sustainability, advance marine ecotourism, and will help maintain resilience in ecosystems that are under stress from climate change.”

According to Dr Kerry Sink of the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) – one of the lead drivers of this initiative – “This is vitally important for the protection of deep water ecosystems but also our critically endangered Leatherback turtles and coelacanths which need offshore protection to secure their habitat and foraging areas.”

I know this is not directly about birds but we are total conservationists, aren't we – and this is certainly good news for what is already a fabulous success story! – *Brian Guerin (Article edited from original)*



Leatherback Turtle



“Old Four Legs”, The Coelacanth

December Calendar

Saturday, 1 December: Our last Wetland Walk for the year – we'll meet as always at the bridge on the road to Amersfoort around 7am; tea/ coffee available.

Sunday, 9 December: End-of-year WBC get-together at BirdLife South Africa Centre from noon onwards. Please bring own meat and drinks; salads and other goodies will be provided. Fires will be lit at 11h45. There will be photo booth accessories for fun photographs.

Regret member families only. Or take the opportunity to join the Club on the day – only R130 per family per year!
RSVP for catering: Claudine 083 347 2770 by 6 December.

That's about it from me, other than to wish you and yours all the best for the Festive Season, and please travel safely to and from your holiday destinations.

Chris



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