



Wakkerstroom Bird Club



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

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Hello fellow birders,

Everyone is saying how long January has seemed to go on for – I find that it's flown by! The WBC committee has been planning a few exciting events which seemed months away just a minute ago! Well one is, but it will soon be here ...

Bird Club AGM, Saturday 9 February

The first of those events is the WBC Annual General Meeting – and if that sounds too boring, read on! We have managed to get a fabulous speaker for the day, and are also planning to expand your waistlines ☺

The AGM itself will get under way at 11am, at the BirdLife South Africa Centre – this **is for bird club members only, and only paid-up members can vote on Committee matters**. If you have not received your voting and proxy forms from Brian, please drop me a line and I will send again.

After all that seriousness a “comfort break”, and then we're happy to open the meeting to all members as well as non-members. We'll settle down to hear a talk by Dr Gus Mills – I'm sure you will have heard of Gus who has been around for hundreds of years it seems (although he's only 19 ☺), and is very well known for his research on cheetahs, wild dogs, and hyenas, among other things. He is sure to be entertaining with all his tales.



FROM WILDCRU.COM: “Gus has conducted research on African carnivores for over 40 years. His major studies include behavioural ecology of brown and spotted hyenas in the Kalahari and population ecology of wild dogs in Kruger National Park. He retired from SANParks as a Research Fellow in 2006 and returned to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, South Africa/Botswana to conduct a cheetah study. The aim of the study was to define the

ecological role and adaptations of the species to an arid environment, incorporating studies of feeding ecology and energetics, ranging behaviour and habitat use, mating system and reproductive success, demographics and conservation status. The results have been published in a book 'Kalahari Cheetahs: adaptations to an arid region'. He is now an advocate for the conservation of ecosystem integrity as the pivotal conservation objective and a mentor and supporter of young African conservationists. He is writing a popular account of 'Kalahari Cheetahs'.

Following Gus's talk, we will aim to replicate (and better!) our very popular desserts from the Christmas party, which were a big hit with all who attended. We thought this is a bit (okay, a lot) different from a bring 'n braai, and we hope you will really enjoy it. So far we already have around 12 desserts arranged from a whole host of "chefs", and if you would like to contribute please give Judy a shout/ WhatsApp/ email judy@bruwer.net or cell 060 427 2819.

WBC's First Birding Bonanza!

I hinted at this in the last newsletter, but can now tell you a little more on this exciting venture for us: we are planning a three-day Birding Bonanza weekend in October, specifically the 11th to 13th, where we are hoping to host numerous entertaining speakers, events, and a separate programme for the younger birding enthusiasts, all spread out over several different Wakkerstroom venues. We will keep you updated over the next months of course, but to say that we are hugely excited about this is an understatement!



BirdLife South Africa Secretarybird Badges now Available from Kristi Garland at R30:



Interesting Local Sightings:

We re-introduced this section in the newsletter last month to very good reception and ALL contributions are welcomed – and remember, a picture if possible! Pictures don't need to be salon quality, just good enough to identify the bird.



On 12 January Denise and Tony Schuil saw this **Abdim's Stork** near the airfield and snapped a picture through the fence. The last record we have is of +/-10 birds from off the Amersfoort Road in 2011.



On the 26th January 2019, during the Summer CAR (Co-ordinated Avifaunal Roadcount) Kristi Garland and Judy-Lynn Wheeler were out on a route, behind Volksrust, "... when we stopped to log our first Sacred Ibis of the day. Whilst scanning the surrounds Judy picked up a small bird scurrying around in the short grass. Looking more closely, Judy and I almost fell out of the car window – a **Temminck's Courser**!! 'Get your camera!' shouted Judy as I started to click away at this magnificent

sighting, all due to a Sacred Ibis. To add, the last time Judy saw this species was in Kruger Park in 2001.

As per the IUCN Red Data List of 2016, this species is of Least Concern as the population trends report this species as being stable. An exciting record for our area." (Contributed by Kristi Garland.)

Lilac-breasted Roller Judy-Lynn Wheeler reports that one of these birds has now been in her garden for five consecutive days. It apparently finds food in the grey water from the house and is apparently relaxed there, much to the irritation of the resident Common Fiscals.



We have seen the Lilac-breasted Roller here in summer several times, it is a non-breeding Vagrant to our area.

White-browed Sparrow Weaver. A single bird was reported several months ago on a WBC outing to a nearby property. Last week four of them were sighted together in the same area. It seems that the original bird has found a mate and produced two offspring and they are free-flying. I couldn't get a picture of the birds but the untidy nest was quite visible in a tall exotic tree. A single bird was recorded in Wakkerstroom in October 1996 (J McAllister) and in October 2000 (A Botha, P Benson).



January Outing to “Bergen”

The WBC members were joined by CREW (Custodians of Rare and Endangered Wildflowers) on their outing to Ben and Martie Pretorius’s farm “Bergen”. Both groups had some lovely sightings, and enjoyed the braai afterwards, set in gorgeous surroundings. Thank you Ben and Martie, for making us feel so at home! Here are some photos by Jenni Maxted Smith, used with kind permission:



Tawny-flanked Prinia



Wakkerstroom Geranium



Jackal Buzzard



Dragonfly

Of Interest To Our Afrikaans Birders

This heads-up comes courtesy Ernst Retief: “Please note that the Afrikaans version of the BirdLife South Africa Checklist of Birds in South Africa 2019 is now available online at this link: <http://www.birdlife.org.za/publications/checklists>”

New Blog About Our Very Own Kristi Garland!

Country People – Meet Kristi Garland, Wakkerstroom by Liza Roux

The town of Wakkerstroom is the second oldest town in Mpumalanga. It was originally named Uysenberg and then Wesselstroom and eventually changed to Wakkerstroom, meaning awake or lively stream, an Afrikaans translation of a Zulu name of the river that flows near the town called Utaka (Awake). (Source: Wikipedia)

Meet Kristi Garland, Centre Manager of the BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Tourism and Education Centre, Base Manager for Wakkerstroom Working on Fire team, Project Manager of the Biodiversity Stewardship Project. Kristi is normally the one who is behind the lens and not in front of it. This is clear to see in the beautiful Wakkerstroom images she sent me.

Tell us a bit about yourself? Your life story, how did you end up where you are now? After finishing high school, I enrolled at Technikon SA to study a diploma in Nature Conservation. I was contacted by one of my lecturers to do volunteer work at the Wildlife Society of South Africa's education centre's in Durban – which was right up my alley. After a year, I was offered a full-time position which offered me a host of opportunities within the environmental education sphere – from running educational tours and courses to project management. In 2008, after nine years of city life, I accepted the position of Centre Manager at the BirdLife South Africa's Wakkerstroom Tourism and Education Centre. What a change! Not only with regards to the surrounding environment but also a way of life. The focus of my work took a slightly different slant – from being quite broad to more directed towards birds and their habitats. As environmental education had never really taken off in the area, it took some time to build up relationships with the teachers and learners alike. I also had to get used to travelling that much further to schools, as opposed to being 'just down the road' in a city. Wakkerstroom and the surrounds have definitely taught me much about myself, my work and the people living here. When I first moved to Wakkerstroom I must have dropped the average age by at least 20 years! My life, actions, views and work lean more toward understanding people's, mostly children's, connection to the natural environment and using that as a platform to develop additional skills and knowledge about our avian heritage. I really like the phrase: 'From head, to heart, to hands' – understanding something leads to an appreciation or love for it and ultimately taking action for what you believe in.



What is your favourite part of working and living in Wakkerstroom?

My favourite part about living and working in an area like Wakkerstroom is really about breaking out of the box. One day is never the same as the previous and it always brings challenges. Working through these challenges with the support of a wonderful community – most of whom have become like an extended family. That to me is far more precious than the city lights and the convenience of malls etc. My work takes me across Mpumalanga and KZN, working with schools and communities who seem to have fallen off the map. My ultimate is watching a child use a pair of binoculars for the very first time. Their eyes light up as suddenly the world doesn't seem so unattainable, sitting in rural Mpumalanga or KZN.

What does a typical day in your life look like? I don't think there is ever a typical day in Wakkerstroom. We can experience all four seasons in a 24-hour period. Maybe it's more about the people – however, they too are not too typical of a small highveld community.

Wakkerstroom lies at an altitude of 1760m, not too much different to Johannesburg. However, we lie in a valley surrounded by Ossewakop (at an altitude of 2156m) on the one side and slightly lower hills on the other. This means that we have a cooler climate and a shortened summer growing season so we have really escaped large-scale transformation of the landscape. Instead of rolling hills of maize and plantations, the area focuses on more sheep and cattle farming. Our little village and surrounding areas, have over time become a mecca for nature lovers, and especially birders. The fauna and flora of the district attract visitors from all over the world to experience the host of species – birds, mammals, reptiles and plants.



Wakkerstroom has long been known globally as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area and is listed as such in the IBA directory as IBA SA020. It is a birding haven with marvels to entice both the experienced and newcomers to this rewarding pastime. A visit to Wakkerstroom, in the company of a BirdLife South Africa trained guide, will almost guarantee you the opportunity to see three endemic species which are restricted to Southern Africa's high altitude grasslands – Rudd's Lark, Botha's Lark and Yellow-breasted Pipit. Other specials include Blue Korhaan and Southern Bald Ibis.

There is much to discover about Wakkerstroom's history. In November 2019, we turn 160! Established in 1859 to serve as an eastern administrative centre in the old Transvaal Republic, which then extended well into the northern reaches of KZN. Wakkerstroom featured, peripherally in two Anglo-Boer Wars as well. In the early 1900s, Wakkerstroom was the stamping grounds of Austin Roberts (of Roberts' Birds of South Africa fame, whose father was the minister of the Anglican Church in the village). A couple of endemic species have been located and typed for the area – Rudd's Lark, described in 1908 by Captain Claude Grant of the British Museum, the Sclater's Golden Mole, described by Austin Roberts in 1924, two rare butterfly species, a number of plants – including our very own geranium.

The community of Wakkerstroom is like extended family. There is always someone willing to give a hand or has great knowledge to share. Life in Wakkerstroom can be a little slow at times but this is not always the case – when we pull together for an event, we know how to make it happen – from restaurants, shop owners, local associations and companies. There are some rather eccentric characters in the village but they always make life a little more colourful.

Any interesting story you would like to share? Moving from Durban 10 years ago, I don't think I was entirely prepared for Wakkerstroom's winter. Experiencing -17 degrees is not for the faint-hearted! I almost handed in my resignation... Frozen water pipes till two in the afternoon, having to mend burst pipes at 10'o clock at night and learning to layer your clothing for a day out took some getting used to. Looking back, I don't think I would ever change my decision to stay in Wakkerstroom and continue the work I do in and around the community. It has been the most rewarding work and, even though at times taking a little longer to see results, that much more meaningful.

Birding Big Day 2018

On Birding Big Day (BBD) 2018 more than 1200 people recorded 646 species and logged nearly 42 000 sightings on the mobile app BirdLasser. And this was achieved despite the very dry and hot conditions that prevailed at the time, although they probably accounted for slightly fewer species being reported than during BBD 2017, when 650 species were logged. Many teams also indicated that they had missed some common species, especially migrants, which turned up late in the season. There was a slight increase in the number of teams and people taking part, and after the event there were numerous postings on social media about the wonderful time everyone had.

This time many teams registered for the first time with SABAP2 in their name, indicating that they would be focusing on collecting data for SABAP2. Some teams even concentrated on only one pentad, with the aim of seeing as many species as possible within it – one team logged more than 200 species! It's amazing to think that such a small area (roughly 60km²) can host so many species. We hope that this practice will grow in future BBDs.

The 2018 winning team was Zonke iNyoni, comprising Selwyn Rautenbach, Joe Grosel and Henk Nel, who saw 323 species. Team Hamerkop (Ehren and Johan Eksteen, Duncan McKenzie and Lourens Grobler) came in a close second with 320 species – well done to both. Wat-Kyk-Jy and Soaring ISUZUs also passed the 300 mark, while six teams saw more than 250 species. Closer to home, the local teams that did best were The Wakkerstroom Picnickers (139 species), the Dana Dikkops (96), and the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Club (75 – and they achieved that on foot!)

The next Birding Big Day will be held on 30 November 2019 and preliminary details about the event will be sent out early this year.

ERNST RETIEF, REGIONAL CONSERVATION MANAGER



While we're crunching numbers, in last year's **Newcastle Challenge** our own Mike and Jenny Maxted-Smith came second all round with 320 species! Well done to them!! In 12th position was Kristi Garland (224), and John and Penny Burchmore came 15th (201). Hopefully by now you've joined this year's Newcastle Challenge on BirdLasser, and are well on your way to do even better than this!

Vlei Cleanups – Please Add To Your Diaries

Carol Preston has asked us to please send this to our members and friends, and since surely all of us are interested in the well-being of our Wetland we're happy to do here:

VLEI CLEANUP SATURDAY 2nd MARCH 9AM TO 1PM

WNHA Project: monitoring of environmental pollution, with specific focus on litter.

The vlei and surrounding waterways are in serious need of a clean-up! Because the water levels are so low this gives us the opportunity to access areas that are usually under water.

There will be a clean-up of the vlei and waterways on Saturday the 2nd March. Two canoes are being used to clean out litter from within the water and I am appealing to villagers to assist with picking up litter on the banks and anywhere where access is free.

We will meet at the bridge where volunteers will be briefed, areas will be allocated and bags and gloves will be issued. The clean-up will end at 1pm but this does not mean that volunteers need work until then – please do what you can. We also need people to assist with handing out bags and gloves and fetching refreshments, so if you are unable to pick up litter there are other tasks that you could assist with. Black bags will be placed on the bridge for collection later.

PLEASE CONFIRM WITH ME IF YOU WILL BE ASSISTING IN THIS IMPORTANT TASK AS I NEED TO PROVIDE BLACK BAGS AND RUBBER GLOVES, AND FOR REFRESHMENTS.

VILLAGE CLEANUP 9TH AND 10TH MARCH

As we head into March for the Music Festival, I would like to appeal to residents that we all take some time on the weekend of the 9th and 10th March to clean up our village. If we all spend an hour cleaning up a few blocks around our respective homes then we will have a village to be proud of when our visitors arrive. The council will be doing the main public areas but not the extended village, so let's pull out the stops and get our village clean for the festival. If you need any assistance please call or email Carol.

Carol Preston 0837014670 cranmore.lodge@gmail.com

That's it from me this month, hope to see as many of you as possible at the AGM on the 9th of February. Enjoy your birding!

Chris Voets,
Editor.