



Wakkerstroom Bird Club



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

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER 66 - MARCH 2019

Hello fellow birders,

Already time for another newsletter, which means March is here, and a feeling of autumn approaching – the evenings are getting cooler here in Wakkerstroom, and we've been fortunate to get some good rainfall over the past weeks. Everything is at last looking green and lush, and the water in the wetland is spreading out. It's come over the Martin's Dam wall several times this month, which is always a welcome sight. The photos below, both by Brian Guerin, demonstrate the effects of the rain – the first one was taken from the bridge on the Wakkerstroom – Amersfoort road, the one on the next page shows Martin's Dam overflowing.





Here is some great news for “our” White-winged Flufftails from BirdLife South Africa

Last year, BirdLife South Africa’s work on the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail uncovered two major scientific breakthroughs for the species, which have been integral milestones in furthering the conservation of this very rare bird. The first ever breeding record, outside of the known sites in Ethiopia, was discovered at Middelpunt Wetland, Mpumalanga, in early 2018 and, later that year the first recordings of the call of the White-winged Flufftail were made in both South Africa and Ethiopia. Prior to these two discoveries, the species was thought to be a non-breeding, silent, summer migrant to South Africa. Through the development and implementation of novel and innovative research and monitoring methods, BirdLife South Africa has once again been able to confirm that breeding White-winged Flufftails have been recorded at Middelpunt Wetland, thus confirming the species as a regular breeding bird in South Africa. BirdLife South Africa’s work has resulted in the need to rewrite the field guides and history books for this elusive wetland bird and has reshaped our understanding of, and ability to, conserve the White-winged Flufftail.

The White-winged Flufftail is only known to occur with any regularity in high-altitude wetlands of Ethiopia and South Africa. The species has only been found in South Africa during the austral summer months (November to March), while its presence in Ethiopia has been recorded during July to September. It was therefore considered a migrant, flying the 4 000 km between these two known regions. Prior to BirdLife South Africa’s discovery of breeding birds in Middelpunt Wetland, Mpumalanga, South Africa, the only known, current breeding site was Berga Wetland in Ethiopia.

To further the understanding of these elusive birds, BirdLife South Africa’s Robin Colyn and Eskom ecologist Alastair Campbell developed an innovative method to survey cryptic and elusive wetland species. This technique was dubbed the BirdLife South Africa Rallid Survey Method (Colyn et al. 2017, Ostrich 88: 235-245) and it uses a cleverly-designed camera trap and audio recording system to capture the secret life of the White-winged Flufftail, as well as other wildlife living within these difficult-to-access habitats.



During the current monitoring season, which commenced in October 2018, confirmation of at least two pairs of White-winged Flufftails showing territorial behaviour have been captured, as well as an additional breeding record.

The confirmation of a second season of breeding White-winged Flufftails at Middelpunt Wetland adds significant evidence that the species is in fact a breeding bird for South Africa and further strengthens the need to conserve the key sites for this species within the country. As a result, BirdLife South Africa is able to more efficiently direct conservation efforts and resources to promote the persistence of this species across the continent.

BirdLife South Africa and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust (a trust started solely for the conservation of White-winged Flufftail and its habitat), in collaboration with other institutions, have rolled out a number of research projects to focus on the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail. Much of this conservation work has been driven towards the implementation of a conservation plan, which is being implemented under the auspices of the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA).

BirdLife South Africa's work on the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail is undertaken with the support of a range of donors and collaborators, including the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), Eskom (Ingula Partnership), Airports Company South Africa, Kimberley Ekapa Mining JV, Dullstroom Trout Farm, Middelpunt Wetland Trust, the National Zoological Garden of South Africa and Rockjumper Birding Tours.

As part of their commitment to supporting the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail, BirdLife International Species Champion and Rockjumper Birding Tours arranged an exciting fundraiser aimed at raising the profile of the species and generating much needed funds for its conservation. This fundraiser took the form of the *Kruger Birding & Wildlife Challenge*, a ten-day adventure through the iconic Kruger

National Park, South Africa, from 6-15 February 2019. Eight teams, including 45 international delegates, competed to see which team could record the highest number of bird and mammal species during the friendly challenge, while covering the reserve from south to north. All proceeds raised during the event will be donated to Middelpunt Wetland Trust to continue the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail.

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Vulture Conservation

Here is a brief about “Champion of the Flyways for Vultures 2019”, by BirdLife South Africa’s Vulture Conservation Manager, Beckie Garbett, Ph.D:

This is to make you aware of and ask for your support with a flagship example of BirdLife Partner-to-Partner support in raising money for vulture work in Africa.

In brief, Champion of the Flyways (COTF), for those of you that haven’t heard of it, is a race hosted by our Israeli partners each year to raise fund for a specific area of global bird conservation that BirdLife partners are involved in. The last few years, our European partners have been recipients for their work tackling the illegal killing of birds. This year, African vultures have stolen the spotlight and funds raised from the race will go directly to Nature Kenya to continue with their anti-poisoning work across the country. Last year the race raised \$100,000, so it’s not an opportunity to be missed out on!

Essentially, each team that enters the race fundraises through their own networks. BirdLife Africa and the Global Secretariat provide support with communication materials and race promotion through utilising the fantastic network that is BirdLife to widely promote this event; not only to raise money but to use it as a tool to create awareness of the plight of Africa’s vulture.

Herewith are the links to the COTF website where you can read more and see the team pages - Nature Kenya’s team is “Zeiss Vultures Unlimited”. I am also providing the link to the dropbox containing promotional materials that can be circulated amongst networks and used for any fundraising activities.

<http://www.champions-of-the-flyway.com/>

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/qdi1plfm6jvp13o/AAATtUEx9xEV7yGDIB82wsJXa?dl=0>

This is a really fantastic platform that has an incredibly broad reach, so we must monopolise on this! It has the potential to fund more partner vulture work over the next 2 or 3 years, through the same unique collaborative concept.

The race is a mere 5 weeks away, so please share and speak widely within your respective networks so that we can maximise on this opportunity.

Proposed Martin's Dam to Vukuzakhe Pipeline – Update 25 February

By Rupert Lawlor, WNHA

At present we are still following certain legal processes to obtain relevant information and data that we have requested.

This week had a very pleasant meeting with Jacques from Hensal Civil Construction, (based in Nelspruit), he is the local contractor on-site. He has indicated that their companies engineer would like to have a meeting with us, in the next few weeks. Agreed that we would be very pleased to meet with them.

Some points of interest from chat:

- Department of Water Affairs are funding project
- This project has been on the cards for a number of years
- This pipe would only be used for emergencies!!
- They will now start the digging from Wakkerstroom side, as due to community demonstrations in Volksrust their equipment was under threat
- They are going to “de-silt “the two dams in Volksrust and also Martin's Dam
- They will be doing repairs to the water pump plant. This is to increase capacity as it is not fully functional. Not sure what pump!
- They have had meetings with Mr Buthelezi from LM, who acknowledged that parts of the community have problems with this project. Buthelezi commented that LM”would be in touch with us”. Nothing ever heard from him or LM
- He was surprised to hear our comments that no EIA had taken place, and that LM would not respond to any queries for documentation

This proposed meeting may not be totally beneficial to us, but perhaps we could get some additional information.

Update 1 March:

The WNHA is well aware of all the issues related to the pipe line currently under construction. There is a dedicated team working tirelessly on this matter on your behalf. It is a known fact that we have sent out many briefings, in a number of languages, to the community, as well as a map of the proposed water pipe line. Press releases have been issued as well as talks at open meetings. The community has been kept apprised of what is being done on their behalf at all times.

To-date all costs of this legal process have been funded by private sponsors. However, we may need the community to fund any further legal action going forward. The costs could be in excess of R200 000!!

At present we are still following certain legal processes, in order to have this project thoroughly reviewed to ensure that it has been undertaken with due regard to the Water Law, the Environmental Law and administrative justice. On the evidence currently available to WNHA, it does not fully satisfy any of these obligations. Therefore proceeding with major engineering works is likely to be a waste of taxpayer's money, a threat to the water security of both the village and wetland, and damaging to the environment.

We continue to work hard on this issue and will do our best to keep the community updated on any progress in this matter.

Thank you all for your support, and look forward to any suggestions and help from any of the members of our community, which can positively contribute to this challenge.

Regards
WNHA

Interesting Local Sightings:

Lesser Jacana

“On an early morning outing with Billy and Noeline Hare at around 8h10am on the open, shallow water in front of the Clive Beck hide we spotted a Lesser Jacana which appeared relaxed and was feeding amongst the vegetation. It caught us by surprise, although we know that birds can fly but we never expected to see it there!” Norman Mncube, Wakkerstroom Bird Guide. Nor would most of us, Norman, thanks for the news.

Black-winged Pratincole

First reported by Lucky Ngwenya and later by Mike Maxted – a flock of +/- 100 at Fickland Pan.

Brief Encounters : Week 7 of 2019 - Certainly wet, but quiet?

At the vlei, a pair of *Grey Crowned Cranes* were obviously enjoying the conditions and dancing to their own music. Surprisingly, when joined by a third bird there was no sign of animosity, merely a nodding of heads before the commencement of a *pas de trois*, spread over some ten minutes or so before the ‘outsider’ simply flew off.

A sighting of what could well have been the most miserable and forlorn looking male *Little Bittern* on this planet. Spotting one being chased by a female in what appeared to be a “domestic” situation made me hope it was not the same bird, but such clear views of the differing plumages certainly brightened my day!

Standing quietly on the bridge, I was somewhat taken aback when a *Red-chested Flufftail* broke cover and flew directly over my head. Taking off from the embankment a couple of meters from where I was standing on the bridge; an abrupt change in flight-path indicated the surprise was mutual

Small flock of *Southern Bald Ibis* comprising 14 birds – four of which were juveniles

Two *White-backed Whistling Ducks* seen one afternoon at the air-strip end of the big pan. The next morning, there was barely a bird to be seen, and that includes Coots!

Finally, a moment of despair on spotting a Black-shouldered Kite dangling from a power-line and, when it began weakly flapping its wings, thoughts of Gary to the rescue surfaced. Suddenly it flapped in earnest, hanging by one foot and then the other as a second Kite began dive-bombing it. After a while the first bird left the wire and flew off, hotly pursued by the other. The display of submission or appeasement obviously not too well received – or (to some) simply treated as an act.

Spotted Crake

Marjorie Nunns and her husband saw a *Spotted Crake* at the wetland on the first, second and third of January and kindly sent us a couple of photographs, below. This is quite a remarkable sighting for us, thanks Marjorie.

I have Marjorie’s e-mail still which contains a video clip of an *African Rail* sharing this same small pond, neither of them taking the slightest notice of the other! If anybody would like to see it I’ll send the link.



Kamfers Dam Flamingo Crisis – Latest Update

1. It is the unfortunate responsibility of BirdLife South Africa and Ekapa Mining, following their intensive work at Kamfers Dam during the past month, to announce that **a mass rescue of over 5000 Lesser Flamingo chicks will very likely be necessary in the next two weeks.**
2. Despite a recent increase in the flow of sewage effluent into Kamfers Dam, the water level of the dam is dropping rapidly and it is highly probable that the dam will dry up completely in the next two weeks.
3. Further compounding this problem, BirdLife South Africa has been monitoring the productivity of blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) in the dam using remote sensing methods and in consultation with specialists. We predict that a rapid drop in the density of algae in the dam is imminent – possibly within a week if there is no rain. Blue-green algae are the primary food source for flamingos at Kamfers Dam so the delicately balanced system that supports the Lesser Flamingo population may well collapse before the dam dries up completely.
4. Our most recent counts indicate that 5250 Lesser Flamingo chicks are currently present in the crèche at Kamfers Dam. The age of these birds varies from about 20 to 60 days old. We estimate that conditions at the dam – both water levels and algal densities – would have to remain favourable for at least another two months for all these youngsters to develop to the point that they can fly with the adults to alternative feeding sites.
5. A concerted effort has been made during the past few weeks to address the effluent reticulation problems that have so drastically reduced the flow of water into Kamfers Dam. Despite limited initial success, current inflows are not sufficient to stem very rapid evaporation rates.



6. Storms in the area during the first half of February were encouraging but associated rainfall was not sufficient to fill the dam. Unfortunately, there is no significant rainfall forecast for the next two weeks, while temperatures are predicted to be high.

7. The details of the current situation (and the possible, imminent need for a mass rescue operation) has been reported to Les Abrahams, the Acting Head of Department of the Northern Cape Department of Environment & Nature Conservation, and to the Department of Environmental Affairs. We have suggested that an urgent meeting be held in Kimberley, with all relevant role-players present. The main aim of this gathering will be to discuss and assess options for the immediate future of the flamingos at Kamfers Dam, which probably include the need to capture, house and care for >5000 Lesser Flamingo chicks. The details of this meeting will be announced on Monday 25 February.

8. It should be noted that Kamfers Dam is at the current time no longer suitable for the release of the c. 1000 flamingo chicks held in facilities in Gauteng, Cape Town and Durban.

9. Should it be required, the rescue of more than 5000 flamingo chicks would be an intervention of unprecedented scale and complexity. It will present massive logistical, veterinary, husbandry, rehabilitation and financial challenges, and will have to involve expert biologists, zoo-keepers and veterinarians, supported by a large number of dedicated volunteer carers, and coordinated with military precision to stand any chance of success.

March Diary:

Saturday 2 March: Our monthly Vlei Walk from 7am, as always on the bridge over the wetland, on the road to Amersfoort. Coffee and tea available, and usually some good banter. Oh, and lots of birds 😊

Tuesday, 12 March: Our outing on 12th March is planned for Newcastle ponds, via the back route, to do lots of birding en route.

Mike Maxted is very familiar with the route and has agreed to "lead" the outing.

Meet at the Library at 07:00. This will be a long day, so do plan to share lifts and bring along snacks and lunch, your binoculars, hat, sunscreen and a chair.

Any inquiries, please contact Claudine on 083 347 2770.

Look forward to seeing you there!

That's it from me for this month, enjoy your birding!

Chris