



Wakkerstroom Bird Club



Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa

Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 69 – JULY 2019

Hello fellow Birders,

Lots to tell you about this month – our mascot's name, the Sandy Twomey competition winners, updates on some of our ongoing projects, as well as the plight of Rudd's Larks and Cape Gannets and the worldwide impact on wild birds by house and feral cats. Sit back and enjoy

Let's start with the **Sandy Twomey Photographic Competition** winners – as you know this goes on for ten months every year, with the best photos selected on Facebook pages becoming monthly winners and going forward to the final round. Warwick Tarboton then has the unenviable task of trying to decide between some truly spectacular photographs, and this time he came up with these:



Ilze Botha



Congratulations Ilze on your winning photo! Ilze wins a mid-week break for two at *Forellenhof Guest House*, a full-day guided bird tour with Lucky Ngwenya sponsored by *BirdLife South Africa*, as well as a dinner for two at *Grasslands Guest House*!



Charmaine Benadi



Charmaine's second prize wins her a breakfast voucher at *Wetlands Country House and Sheds*, a half-day guided bird tour with Lucky Ngwenya sponsored by *BirdLife South Africa*, and a voucher for *The Garret Emporium*. Enjoy!!



Linda Michelmore



Linda's dramatic veld fire photograph wins her a meal voucher for two at the *Bistro Restaurant*, a half-day guided bird tour sponsored by *BirdLife South Africa*, as well as a meal voucher for *The Oude Stasie Restaurant and Pub*.

Special Mentions:

Anneli Myburgh



Claire Knoechl



WELL DONE TO ALL THE WINNERS!

We can't thank our sponsors enough for their generosity – we are truly thankful that time after time we can call on you, and always get a positive response!

Keep eyes open for the start of the next competition, and keep those cameras at the ready!!

Name Our Mascot Competition

Thank you to everyone who participated in this on Facebook. We are proud to present to you (Drum roll) **LORDFLUFFYBOTTOM!!!** Here he is with the very happy winner of the competition who came up with the name, Nicoli Breedt – well done, Nicoli, enjoy your very own Lord Fluff!



Bird Club Outing to Wesselsval, 11 June 2019

Members of the club left Wakkerstroom at 8.00am to visit the Wessels farm near Dirkiesdorp plain. Our first stop was at the bridge that crosses the Assegai river: birding was good with Cape Grassbird, Cape Sparrow, Cape Wagtail, Yellow-fronted Canary, Brown-throated Martin, Common Waxbill, Hadedda Ibis , Western Cattle Egret, and four Black-winged Lapwings. We had a beautiful view of a male Namaqua Dove which was perched on the power-lines alongside the road.

We met the owner of the property which is on both sides of the road. While chatting to him he mentioned a dam on his property which we could visit. As we were not in a hurry we set off to find the dam. The access road to the area was quite busy; four-wheel drive tractors and trailers, and inter-links carting maize. After travelling for a while and not reaching the dam we decided to return to the main road and set off to Jori and Colleen's property. From a distance the dam looked promising. This could possibly be for another club outing.

We logged 34 species for the pentad 2705_3020 & will submit it as an Ad-hoc card as we were not in it for 2 hours.

We arrived at the Wessels' garden, had a cup of coffee and then started looking for our target species, Gurney's Sugarbird. Unfortunately we were a bit late for the Aloe arborescens, but some of the plants were still flowering. We managed to log Malachite Sunbird in eclipse plumage, Amethyst & Greater double-

collared Sunbird, Fiscal flycatcher, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Cardinal Woodpecker, Fork-tailed Drongo and Black Saw-wing in the garden (photo below by N.M.Thomsen), and on a walk we saw a female Cape Batis.



Thanks to Colleen for catering for us and Juri for allowing us to visit their indigenous garden. The cake was special Colleen, I'm afraid that we didn't leave much for your three boys! A Black-headed Oriole and African Goshawk were seen after we had left the house. An exciting end to a very productive winter atlassing morning, with 38 species logged for the pentad 2705_3015.



Welcome to the atlassing team Jennifer Russell. Jennifer completed her first full protocol card on her Birdlasser app, well done Jenny hope you and Peter complete many more. (John Burchmore)

Birdlasser Updates (as of 30 June)

IBA Challenge: 1st Johan van Rensburg (501 species)
34th Mike and Jenni Maxted (268)
35th John and Penny Burchmore (249)
74th Brian Guerin (115)
79th Kristi Garland (83)

Newcastle 100k Challenge:

1st Mike and Jenni Maxted (312 species) – CONGRATS MAXTEDS!
7th John and Penny Burchmore (193)
17th Chris Voets (116)
19th Kristi Garland (83)

Atlassing GEM Pentad 2650-3015, In the Sheepmoor Area

Heavy frost and a minimum temperature of -6C degrees were not very encouraging for an early start to the day! However the three of us, myself, Penny and Jennifer Russell, a new atlasser, set out to cover a pentad that had only been done once by Peter Lawson in 2010.

We have always enjoyed the Sheepmoor area and were looking forward to an interesting day, but we had not bargained for all the Interlinks transporting maize, so travelling through the maize- fields was rather dusty & bumpy. The roads were pounded into a fine dust by the large vehicles and not many birds were seen.

Finally we reached the pentad and logged Red-capped Lark, African Stonechat, African Hoopoe and a flock of Black-throated Canaries in a small maize field. As we moved further into the pentad Red-throated Wryneck, Yellow-fronted Canary and a Secretarybird were seen. A Fork-tailed Drongo, House Sparrow, Cape Sparrow and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow were found in the vicinity of a village. A small flock of five Blue Waxbills feeding at the edge of the road as we entered the plantations was an unexpected sighting for us.

On our return trip we logged a flock of Bronze Mannikins close to the road, Southern Bald ibis, Groundscraper Thrush, and Jackal Buzzard as well as a Black-shouldered Kite as we moved up the edge of the escarpment. We saw another two Secretarybirds in the same area as the first and suspect that one of them was the one we saw in the morning.

We stopped in a nameless plantation where we were able to shelter from the cold wind to enjoy our brunch, before returning back to Wakkerstroom.

Thanks to SAPPI for enabling us to visit another new area. A fun day was had by all, but only twenty eight species were logged for the day. However we were able to add another thirteen species to the Pentad list on the ADU site and initiate a new atlasser to the BIRDLASSER app. (*John Burchmore*)



BirdLasser

Spot. Plot. Play a part.

Diary July 2019

July looks like being a busy month - starting with:

Saturday July 6 - our monthly Wetland Walk - recent cold weather has put a dampener on these walks but the hardened birders usually pitch. Let's start at 08h00 (or earlier if you prefer) and keep the series of walks going, tea/coffee as usual on offer! We will be having our 80th Walk shortly so pencil in the date of September 7 for a special Spring Walk.

ALSO Saturday July 6 – Don't forget the Stargazing Evening at BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre. It's called "One Night, One Million Stars". At 15h00 there will be a presentation by Professor Derck Smits who is Head of Astronomy at UNISA, called "A quick tour through the universe". Then we'll have stalls and vendors selling food and HOT DRINKS yay!! Fires as well to keep us warm. Meanwhile the telescopes will be set up, and at 18h00 once it's dark we'll check out the stars and planets. Looking forward to this!! Around 100 people have already booked – don't miss out! R100 pp, under 12s R80. Bookings through Kristi (kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za or 081 726 5282 or payable on the evening.

N.B. - The draw for the Orion SkyQuest XT8 Dobsonian Reflecting Telescope (below) will also be done on the evening, good luck to all who took tickets! Tickets are still available at R100 each, R150 for two and R250 for three. This is a super piece of equipment for those who spend time staring into space!



Tuesday July 9 – The Committee feels that members are reluctant to go out early on winter mornings and, combined with the fuel price, as a trial July and August outings for this year won't take place. We feel that this is just facing facts and not an avoidance of organizing these outings. Only four people attended the Wessels farm outing in May. We also intend to drop Wednesday evening meetings for those months for the same *reason but replace them* with Saturday talks as below:

Saturday July 20 – A talk by Rina Pretorius on last season's Amur Falcon triumphs and tragedies. And there certainly were some ups and downs, notably the two hail events! Rina's talk will be followed by a bring and braai, all at BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre. The talk will commence at 11h30 and braai fires will be available at 13h00. Let us know what you think of these changes so we can finalise the August arrangements.

Something to think about

THAT CUDDLY LITTLE KITTY?

Researchers from the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and the Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that domestic cats in the United States – both the household pets that only spend part of the day outdoors and the unnamed strays and feral cats that never leave it – kill about 2.4 billion birds and 12.3 billion mammals a year. Note this is JUST IN THE UNITED STATES – Imagine that worldwide impact!

From ENVIRONMENT MAGAZINE 14 / AUTUMN 2013

Have you noticed this, Birders?



Thanks to Bob and Mary Scholes, and Paul Grobler, who have added a 'nook' for birders and walkers alike – a cleared area with great views across the wetland with a seat to rest your feet after a stroll from the village to the Oude Stasie. Look out for this neat little area at the Oude turn off the Amersfoort Road.

If you are going to bird from here, please do ensure you pull off the road sufficiently to allow traffic to pass safely etc.

Do you have a really good name for this corner? Send your suggestions to: wnha.secretary@gmail.com

Paper Published on the Decline of Rudd's Lark around Wakkerstroom

Well done to the researchers (Wesley G Gush, David H Maphisa, Chevonne Reynolds, Paul F Donald, and Claire N Spottiswoode) to get this published in the prestigious Cambridge journal Bird Conservation International recently. The paper is available in total at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095927091900011X>

*Declines of the globally threatened Rudd's Lark *Heteromirafra ruddi* in one of its last remaining strongholds*

Summary

Rudd's Lark *Heteromirafra ruddi* is a globally threatened species endemic to eastern South Africa's highland grasslands, where climate envelope modelling has predicted a dramatic reduction in its already small and fragmented distribution. Here we assess recent changes in one of its last strongholds, the Wakkerstroom grasslands. We assessed changes in Rudd's Lark population and habitat condition over 12 years, within a core section of an area intensively surveyed in 2002–2004. Our 2016 survey found lower absolute numbers of Rudd's Larks (five transects with Rudd's Lark present compared to nine in 2002; nine individuals compared to 32), as well as a lower probability of encounter. Transects with shorter grass and higher altitude had a higher probability of Rudd's Larks occurrence, consistent with findings in 2002. Point locations where Rudd's Larks were recorded had shorter grass, higher forb cover and more bare ground cover, and tended to be at higher altitudes than random locations in the surrounding grassland. Remotely-sensed fire data showed that late-season fires, which pose a threat to Rudd's Lark nestling survival, are generally uncommon. Field observations indicated that seven transects (of which two previously contained Rudd's Lark) that had previously been grassland had been converted to intensive crop production. While Rudd's Lark may be affected by direct loss of grassland habitat through conversion to crops, the species has also declined within remaining grassland habitat. The drivers of decline remain unclear but this recent observed local decline of Rudd's Lark in the immediate Wakkerstroom area supports the species' recent IUCN uplisting to globally 'Endangered', given that its previous downlisting was based on habitat requirements and breeding success from this area.



Cape Gannet Article

The following is just one of a number of alarming articles from the BirdLife Magazine “Red List Special” from early last year. So many bird species are in serious decline, here and worldwide, “our” Cape Gannet just being just one of them:

Gannets Nosedive (by Christina Hagen, Marine Conservationist at BirdLife South Africa)

The word “gannet” is synonymous with gluttony – but lack of food is becoming a serious problem for the Cape Gannet *Morus capensis*.

The global population of this seabird, endemic to South Africa and Namibia, has dropped by more than half between 1956 and 2015 – resulting in its uplisting from Vulnerable to Endangered in this year’s (2018) Red List update.

The main cause is lack of food. In Namibia, overfishing of the gannets’ preferred prey, sardine and anchovy, caused the almost complete collapse of fish stocks in the 1960s, and they have yet to recover. In South Africa, the fish stocks have shifted from the west coast to the south and east.

To make up for these shortages, Cape Gannets congregate behind fishing vessels in search of Cape hake and other sea floor-dwelling fish. The boats process their catch as they go, dumping the heads, tails and guts of the filleted fish overboard. But while there is evidence that eating hake discards has helped adult Cape Gannets maintain body weight and condition when they cannot find their natural food, it has proved to be a double-edged sword. Until very recently, thousands of seabirds, including gannets, were being accidentally tangled and drowned in the fishing gear of these vessels. Thanks to the work of the Albatross Task Force these deaths have been dramatically reduced, however, because of their unique feeding style, some gannets still die from plunging vertically into the net.



Another disadvantage of the hake discards is their energy content. Sardine and anchovy are full of Omega-3 fatty acids that we humans are always being urged to eat. Hake discards are not.

While a junk food diet can sustain the adults, research has shown that chicks fed on hake discards grow more slowly and have a lower chance of survival than those fed on a more natural diet. And it's not just sub-standard food the juveniles have to worry about. On Malgas Island in South Africa, food scarcity means that both parents are often forced to forage simultaneously, leaving the young unguarded and exposed to attacks from the Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*.

To add to their struggle, Cape Gannets also face threats from oil spills in an increasingly active shipping region at the southern tip of Africa.

Something to worry about I'm sure you agree Of course your BirdLife South Africa membership helps in issues such as these, as does sharing awareness of them.

Do You Like A Challenge? We Need Some Help

ANOTHER CHALLENGE!! Yes, but this one is our area, Wakkerstroom. We are using the map in the back cover of Warwick and Michele Tarboton's book (WAKKERSTROOM bird and nature guide).

12 million records have been submitted by atlasers (citizen scientists) for the Southern African Bird Atlas Project. The data is used to detect on-going changes in species distribution over time. It can also help to assess the impacts of climate change on birds.

We need to continue monitoring bird distributions covering the pentads in our area. The more pentads that are atlased the more accurate the data collected about bird distribution. It's not necessary to list your sightings on a piece of paper or notebook, use the highly rated Birdlasser app. Download the free app from Google Play onto your cell phone. It is user friendly and if you have a problem there is always someone in Wakkerstroom Bird Club who can assist you. Join the thousands of other atlasers contributing to science while having fun. In 2011, 5,298 pentads were atlased in South Africa.

There are approximately 1000 kilometres of gravel roads that radiate out from our village that will enable you to explore the Grassland Biome. The 110 pentads (atlas blocks) that cover the area need to be atlased regularly. A pentad is an area approximately eight by nine kilometres. The Challenge is to turn these pentads green. Green is a minimum of four full protocol cards per pentad.

Members of the Wakkerstroom Bird Club atlas regularly, but we need more bird club members/ Wakkerstroom residents to take part in the Challenge. If you are interested in assisting in any way with the challenge, please contact Brian Guerin the Chairman of the Wakkerstroom Bird Club on 083 415 6701 or 017 730 0570. It is a fun way of getting to know our area. (*John Burchmore*)

That's about all from me – see you in August!

Chris