



Wakkerstroom Bird Club



Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa

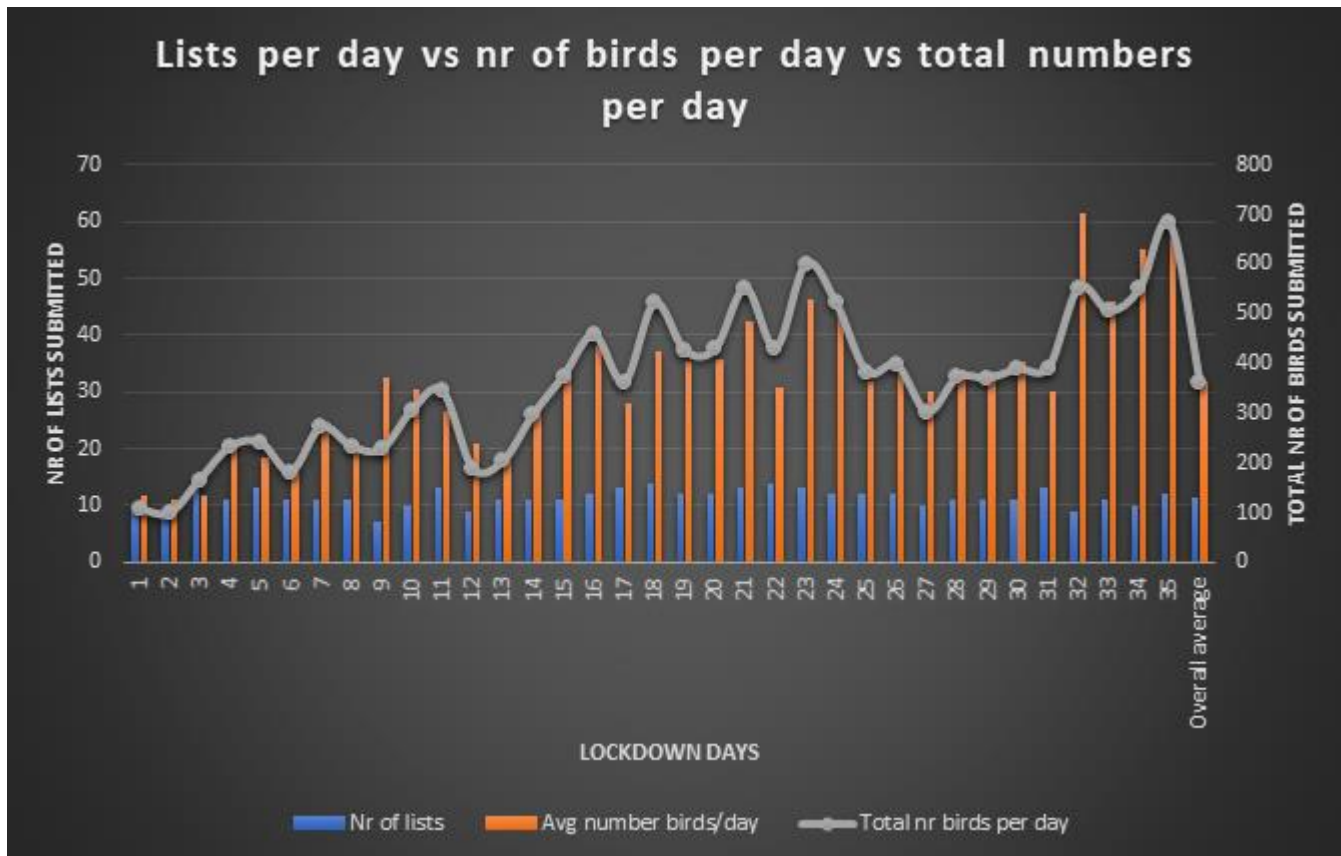
Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 76 – May 2020

Hello fellow Birders, Self-Isolators, Quarantiners, and Lockdowners,

During these rather unusual times, I hope you have all been staying healthy and aren't too frustrated in your own four walls. And while we discuss, panic, console, query, sanitize, wear masks, nervously smile and carry on ... the birds are having a wonderful time here in Wakkers, as the Lockdown Garden Bird Challenge is demonstrating!

Around 12 teams eagerly participated in Kristi's Lockdown Challenge daily, submitting their sightings every day to her, and the "lead" constantly changed hands. By the end of the challenge after Day 38 (30 April), an incredible 134 species had been seen, and the teams had seen an average of 340 birds a day and even days with over 700 birds! There were some really interesting sightings that surprised everyone, like Bush Blackcap that had not been seen here in many years. Great work, everyone, and thank you to Kristi for all your daily updates and all the work put into this!



Now that we are permitted to roam our area during Stage 4, the challenge has been changed to the Lockdown PENTAD Challenge from 1 May where you can record birds within 5km of your home, and all teams start from scratch. More news on this in the June newsletter, and after Kristi has "crunched" the numbers of the Garden Challenge.

Conservation Conversations

During the Lockdown, BirdLife South Africa has been presenting free once-weekly webinars on a variety of topics. I've watched a few of them so far, and they've been really interesting. In order to participate, you need to load an App called ZOOM on your laptop, iPad or smartphone, and check either on the BirdLife South Africa website <https://www.birdlife.org.za/blsa-conversations> or an email sent to you what upcoming webinars interest you. You then register for it by recording your name and email address which only takes a few seconds, and you will receive a code you need on the relevant night. Here is what's coming up in May:

Melissa Howes-Whitecross - Bird of the Year 2020 - The Southern Ground-Hornbill (5-May-20 at 19:00)

Duncan McKenzie - Birds of Kruger: a virtual tour (12-May-20 at 19:00)

Hanneline Smit-Robinson - Giving Conservation Wings at BirdLife South Africa (19-May-20 at 19:00)

Mark McNulty & Tony Johnstone - Birdies, Eagles & Albatrosses (one for the golf enthusiasts) (26-May-20 at 19:00)



Bird of the Year 2020 – Ground Hornbill

This from BirdLife South Africa's CEO Mark Anderson:

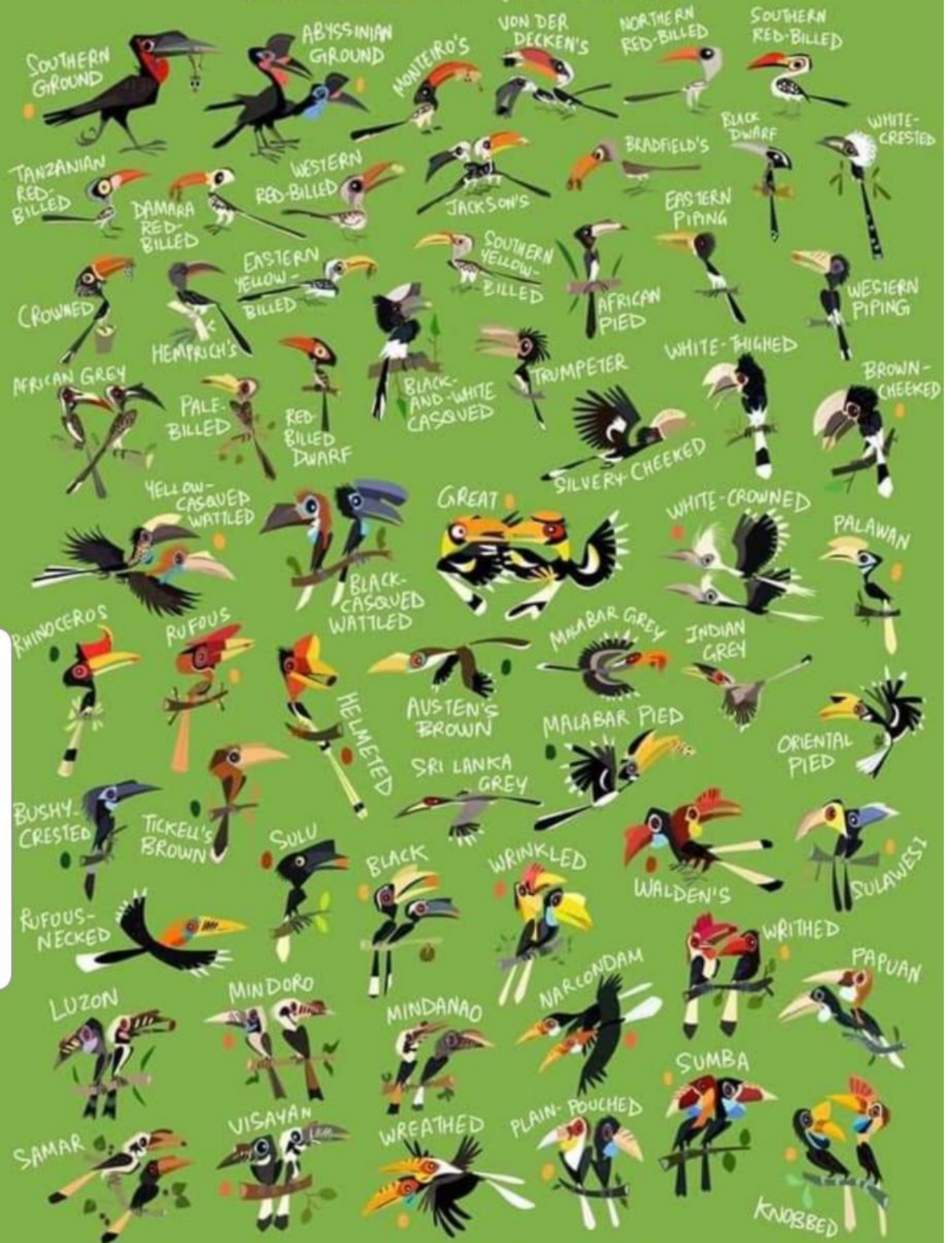
We are excited to provide you with the first FREE lesson plan for our Bird of the Year 2020, the Southern Ground-Hornbill.

This plan introduces the Southern Ground-Hornbill and focuses on how it is adapted to life on land. It aims to help learners to understand that animals are evolutionarily adapted to their environments in unique and wonderful ways. The outcomes of this lesson are that learners will know the main characteristics of the Southern Ground-Hornbill, understand how anatomy relates to behavioural adaptations and learn about Southern Ground-Hornbill social structure and hunting strategy. It is structured to be fun and engaging for a wide range of learning styles and ages.

This lesson plan utilises two of our fact files 'identification and biology' and 'hunting and feeding' which are among the educational resources already developed this year. These fact files, along with the first lesson plan and a host of other free educational resources for our Bird of the Year 2020, are available at <https://www.birdlife.org.za/bird-of-the-year-2020> . Be sure to check this page each month for new materials being released.

Caitlin Judge has produced some lovely and very useful education resources, so please visit the above webpage (and share the information with others).

HORNBILLS OF THE WORLD



● near-threatened
 ● vulnerable
 ● endangered
 ● critically-endangered

www.greenhumour.com

Bird of the Year 2021 Announcement by Mark Anderson

Bird of the Year is one of BirdLife South Africa's important annual activities. The initiative has gained in popularity and, through our numerous activities, has not only resulted in a significant awareness about each Bird of the Year, but more generally about our country's birds.

Every year we invite proposals for Bird of the Year. BirdLife South Africa's Marketing Committee then meets and evaluates the proposals. In fact, we independently score the proposals (including some that have been submitted during previous years) before we convene our meeting. In this way, we bring some objectivity into our discussions and decisions. Of course, the Marketing Committee takes a number of factors into consideration when making its decision. For example, we ensure variation (we do not want two albatrosses as Bird of the Year in two consecutive years, two grassland birds in two consecutive years, etc.). We also determine which species lends itself to education and awareness, especially as the educational resources are a very important part of our annual Bird of the Year activities.

This year we find ourselves in extraordinary circumstance and the foreseeable future is going to be very different and in many respects very difficult. In particular, we foresee financial challenges. Our team is working hard to prepare our organisation for the future and their efforts are admirable.

We are, for a number of reasons, going to be more autocratic in our decision about next year's Bird of the Year. This is because we have a plan, and one that is linked to our activities, to our fundraising work, and to our conservation activities. You have to please trust us this time. We will therefore not be calling for nominations for Bird of the Year 2021.

Then, I'd like to thank you all, and especially our bird clubs and their members, for the tremendous support and understanding we have received during the current difficult times. The many words of encouragement and support we have received are gratefully appreciated by our staff. Thank you!

BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre

*In case you think our Kristi Garland is sitting with her feet up doing nothing during the Lockdown weeks, here is a quick update from the last week by **Mark Anderson** on what she has been up to 😊 Kristi also did one of the Conservation Conversation webinars I mentioned earlier, presenting all about the Spring Alive project.*

The Wakkerstroom Centre is still standing, although we are much quieter than we should be at this point in the year. Kristi Garland continues to address various small maintenance tasks on the property. She has also been keeping in contact with all the staff, namely Lucky Ngwenya, Daphne Pyott and the cleaning ladies. On the remote side of things, Kristi attended the weekly staff meeting on Monday as well as a catch up session with Fanie du Plessis on Tuesday. Kristi spent the rest of the week finalising an application to Spring Alive for funding for the African season and working on developing the supporting resources. At this time, Kristi is developing a 'Catching migration' board game based on a 13th century game. She has called in the assistance of the Wakkerstroom Bird Club members for assistance in developing the game's action cards. Kristi has also been supporting the Wakkerstroom Bird Club with their Lockdown Garden Bird Challenge, receiving lists of sightings each day and compiling results. To date across Wakkerstroom over 115 species have been seen. The highlights include the first ever sighting of a Fiscal Flycatcher and the return of the Bush Blackcap, last seen in Wakkerstroom in 2014! The Working on Fire team continues to check into work remotely.

White-rumped Swifts

Wendy Watson recently shared a fascinating article and stunning photos by **Hugh Chittenden**, about White-rumped swifts which many will know as they're commonly seen at the Vlei here.... Enjoy this!

The growth of White-rumped Swift nestlings

White-rumped Swifts are truly remarkable birds (like all swift species). The growth of White-rumped Swift chicks is extremely slow. It has to be, the fledglings must be exceptionally strong when they take their first flight.

If I told you that their nestling period is approximately the same as that of a Yellow-billed Kite, you'd probably be quite sceptical. But, to be more precise, a White-rumped Swift nestling period is, on average, slightly longer than that of kites!! Kite nestlings can move to side branches from day 40, and fly at 42 - 45 days. White-rumped Swifts fledge from 42 - 53 days, averaging 46 days in SA.

It's not often that one gets the chance to take a look at the growth of nestlings inside fixed mud nests. In this case, that of a Lesser Striped Swallow. White-rumped Swifts do not normally construct their own nests, they usually evict and take over nests of other species such as Swallows and Little Swifts. The nest cup is then lined with feathers and the relatively slow incubation period lasts about 23 days.

The young chicks are of course altricial, born blind and naked.

Below: 2 day-old chicks:



cont.

Below: 4 day old chicks. Most of the eggshell is removed from the nest within the first few days:



Their toe arrangement is particularly interesting. They have pamprodactyl feet (four toes forward). Although all four toes are forward facing, they are paired and pull inwards. This enables them to grip vertical surfaces better. They never land on flat ground, cannot perch, and take to flight with extreme difficulty if they are ever grounded! Their wings are too long and their legs too short to take off easily from a flat surfaces.

Below: A 6 day old chick showing the pamprodactyl toe formation. An adult bird on the right:



Below: Growth of chicks. 8 days, 11 days, and 13 days respectively:



Below: 18 and 21 day old nestlings:



cont.

Below: A 24 day old nestling:



Below: 29 and 35 day old nestlings:



The first nestling to fledge was 43 days old (10th March), and the second, 51 days. Neither returned to roost in the nest.

So why is this nestling period so exceptionally long? White-rumped Swift fledglings must be strong enough to endure non-stop flying on their first day in the skies, and follow adults and learn how to catch food. Their narrow scythe-like wings don't allow them to stall, and be fed by the adults in mid-air, and because they cannot perch (e.g. on branches) to be fed, they have to learn to catch their own aerial prey.

Because the White-rumped Swift fledglings don't return to the nest to roost as the adults do, and because there is no data describing the roosting habits of recently fledged birds, the presumption is that they sleep on the wing, just as the adults probably do in the non-breeding season when on migration and over their wintering grounds (central African tropics). This means that when they exit the nest, **this is the start of a two year continuous flight that will probably only enable them to touch ground again at first breeding.**

Swifts are long-lived birds with a low mortality rate and it has been suggested that they only start breeding at year two. Common Swifts that breed in the northern hemisphere and migrate to Africa, remain in flight for 9 - 10 months, sleeping on the wing. Each evening, they ascend to 1000 - 2000m where they are able to sleep by shutting part of the brain down. They then drop down to lower levels to feed in the early morning.

Below: Close-ups of an adult White-rumped Swift:



Magnificent birds, which we still have so much to learn about.

Hugh Chittenden

All photos copyright © Hugh Chittenden

Many thanks, Hugh, for permitting me to share this!

Atlasing the area surrounding Wakkerstroom by John Burchmore

Wakkerstroom Bird Club members now have an added incentive when atlasing Wakkerstroom surrounds, i. e. **the Wakkerstroom 4 sub-project**. The Wakkerstroom Bird Club Committee have agreed to cover vehicle fuel costs for club members who would like to atlas the pentads of the W 4 sub- project, provided the club members are currently registered with the ADU.

The **W4 sub - project** covers the Wakkerstroom district, which are the four quarter- degree squares 2730AA, AB, AC and AD that are in the publication **Wakkerstroom bird and nature guide by Warwick & Michele Tarboton, Third Edition: June 2004**. The four quarter degree squares have been divided into 110 pentads.

The target of **W4 sub - project** is to green up all 110 pentads, which will then link up with **Greening the Escarpment Mpumalanga Challenge**. **GEM** covers SAPPI plantations from Sabie/Graskop areas to Piet Retief, and is covered by Lowveld Bird Club members. The link between the two areas will be in the vicinity of Heyshope Dam. Pentads 2655 – 3015 and 2700 – 3015.

There are two main objectives which need to be considered when atlasing the Wakkerstroom area; the first is to improve the information collected for mapping services of ADU, that is by turning all pentads green. Green is the colour indicating a minimum of 4 full protocol cards, covering all habitats in the pentad if possible, that have been submitted; and secondly to update this information over four seasons.

(There is No Pentad for which SABAP 2 has ENOUGH Checklists)

Atlasing the area has been done by WBC members as well as a number of other birding visitors to the Wakkerstroom area. At present 46 pentads each need 3 full protocol cards to turn them green.

A systematic co-ordinated system using a spread sheet will be used that will incorporate a specific target for a year once all W4 pentads are green. Club atlasers will be issued with a priority list of pentads which need to be covered over the 4 seasons, winter, autumn, spring and summer.

Wakkerstroom Bird Club members who are interested in taking part in the project should contact the Chairman, Brian Guerin, who has the list of the remaining pentads which need to be covered.

Embryonic learning in birds

Here is a fascinating snippet by **Jennifer Russell** Did you know this??



Taeniopygia guttata (Australian Zebra Finch). Photograph obtained from <http://www.efinch.com/species/zebra.htm>

Coming across an article from the Smithsonianmag.com (2016), inspired me to do a little digging. What I found was absolutely fascinating. Did you know that songbirds sing to their embryos, just before they hatch? We all know that a certain amount of prenatal genetic imprinting occurs in many species, not least birds. But that is a passive transfer of information. Mariette and Buchanan (2016) undertook an experiment using "wild-derived" Australian zebra finches (*Taeniopygia guttata*). They noted that the parental bird produced an "incubation call" while alone on the nest. This call occurred only within the last five days of hatching and appeared to signal unseasonably high ambient temperatures. The consequence of this is that the nestlings are of smaller body mass than those nestlings that have not, at pre-hatching stage, heard the particular call note. Smaller birds are better able to

cope with higher ambient temperatures as smaller body size better facilitates heat loss. This trait of smaller body mass continues into the following generations. The question, of course, arises whether smaller body mass not appear to be the case. Moreover, the heat related incubation call also affects the behaviour in the adult of the hatchling. Mariette and Buchanan (2016) noticed that the adult male finches chose nesting boxes that were warmer than those nesting boxes chosen by finches not exposed to the incubation call. All this bodes well for fitness of birds coping with the trend in rising global temperatures.

References:

Learn, J.R. (2016) Embryonic learning—things birds pick up from their parents while still in the egg—may play a bigger role than imagined. *smithsonianmag.com*

Mariette, M.M. and Buchanan, K.L. (2016) Prenatal acoustic communication programs offspring for high post-hatching temperatures in a songbird. *Science* 353: 812-814

Parental dedication

And here is a report by **Judy-Lynn Wheeler** you'll enjoy as well:

Pied Starlings breed annually in the office roof at Weaver's Country Estate and there have been some losses owing to predation by other bird species, namely Red-winged Starlings and Cape Sparrows. I find chicks of all ages on the lawn having been removed from their nests. Sadly, none survived.

During February 2020, my mom-in-law called me to watch the goings-on at a particular Pied Starling nest site. Mom had her pocket Nikon camera and I had a cup of tea, so we settled down to watch.

Both parents were on the lawn calling to the chick which leaped from roof height to land on the grass in front of the office, feathers all awry and not ready to fly. This youngster hobbled and wobbled to the nearby garden and, closely monitored by a parent, used leg power and clambered up a cedar trunk to a narrow cleft, where it stopped gasping with effort.



Both parents alternated between baby sitting and feeding, and this went on for some time. Mom and I went home to have lunch but a storm was brewing. After a quick snack I went back out to check on the birds. Both parents were on the ground looking up the tree, calling frantically, but on sighting me, went ballistic. Both parents attacked at the same time and I had to put both arms over my head. The chick had climbed further up the tree but was balancing precariously on a slim branch.

With the wind picking up, thunder rolling and rain spots and feral cats and owls, I didn't see much of a future for the youngster so I reached up and grabbed it. One of the parents drew blood on my arm. Feisty!

The densely-leaved apricot tree closer to my home seemed a better bet so I transferred the chick making sure the parents saw what I was doing before hightailing it for home. By this time, it was pouring. Both parents ducked into the apricot tree.

After the storm I went out for a look-see and found a parent close by and the other flying in with food. I got the opportunity to check on the fledging for several days. Each evening the parents would fly in and settle with the youngster. About a week later, all three were rambling about the lawn searching for food and it wasn't long after that the chick took to the air, creating such excitement amongst the other Pied Starlings. I now have Pied Starlings roosting in the apricot tree.

I nicked the following off The Humane Gardener

***The Squirrel and the Silver Maple: A (True) Fable* by Nancy Lawson**



The silver maple and the squirrel: two species that go so well together. Both are much maligned, one for her strong, visible roots and shedding limbs, and the other for her extreme persistence in gathering the seeds she needs. At one time silver maples were planted routinely in front of new human homes, and they in turn gave homes to an abundance of other creatures. But the humans were fickle, as humans are, and it didn't take long for them to decide that silver maple roots were too disruptive to manmade lawns, or that maple seeds were too messy in their manmade gutters, or that it was simply too inconvenient to bend down and remove maple branches from the paths of mowers.

So the humans cut the maple down and planted a tree guaranteed not to drop limbs, not to shed seeds, not to attract insects, not to grow roots that would "invade" the turf grass. But then the humans noticed that something was missing. Where were all the birds? So the humans hung birdfeeders filled with seed grown a thousand miles away and watched delightedly as the cardinals, sparrows, mourning doves and chickadees came to eat. They added more feeders and took pictures and learned to identify every species by name and by song.

One day the humans looked out the window and saw a squirrel hanging upside down on the feeder. "Go away, squirrel!" they shouted. "That feeder is not meant for you!" The squirrel didn't hear them, or maybe she didn't listen, as squirrels are skilled at ignoring humans. The humans got angry, went to the store, and bought the best squirrel baffle money could buy. They went back to their home (and, in their minds, their home only), installed the baffle, and sat back behind their window to watch the birds again.

But soon the squirrel was back, wedged around the baffle he had just chewed half-apart, happily eating seeds. So the humans got even angrier. They bought a live trap and set it outside near the birdfeeder. They were good people they reasoned -- animal lovers, even. They had a dog, they watched birds. They didn't have anything against squirrels out there in the broader environment. But there was no place for them in their yard, which was meant for birds.

The trap worked like a charm, and the humans drove the squirrel several miles away and released her in a field, not realizing they had just separated her from her babies, who would soon begin to starve, and not realizing the mother squirrel would be disoriented and lost, as if in a foreign land, and would soon be picked up by a hawk.

Back at home, the humans congratulated themselves on a job well and humanely done. The squirrel was in a better place, after all -- an open field, and isn't that where all animals want to go? They looked out the window, admiring the bluebirds eating the imported mealworms from a cup on platform. They didn't think about all the native plants the bluebirds could have gathered insects from instead, like the silver maple they'd already cut down. They didn't think about the fact that their bird seed was not just a feeding station but a baiting station, one that would become an endless source of conflict between them and the squirrels, raccoons, mice, coyotes, and even other birds who'd landed on this continent through no fault of their own but were now called "invasive pests."

Over in the corner of that barren yard, though, there was someone else who was already one step ahead of them, someone watching and waiting for her chance to eat at the coveted hanging diner. As the humans turned their backs to the window to go make lunch, the new squirrel came to have a nibble of her own. Little did she know that soon she would inadvertently launch Human-Squirrel War II, for the mere crime of just trying to get something to eat.

Don't be these humans. Nurture and plant the plants that all your wild neighbours can eat and take refuge in. Then sit back for a glimpse of nature like the one above instead — a sweet scene that has unfolded outside our front window every day for two weeks during silver maple shedding season. This is something no amount of money or fancy feeders or wildlife-watching trips can buy.



KwaZulu Natal Province Dam Levels (including Zaaihoek Dam)

Information Supplied by Dept Water & Sanitation



KWAZULU-NATAL DAM LEVELS



GENERATED: Thursday 23 Apr 2020 - 09:52:40

Kwazulu-Natal Province State of Dams on 2020-04-20

Means latest available data

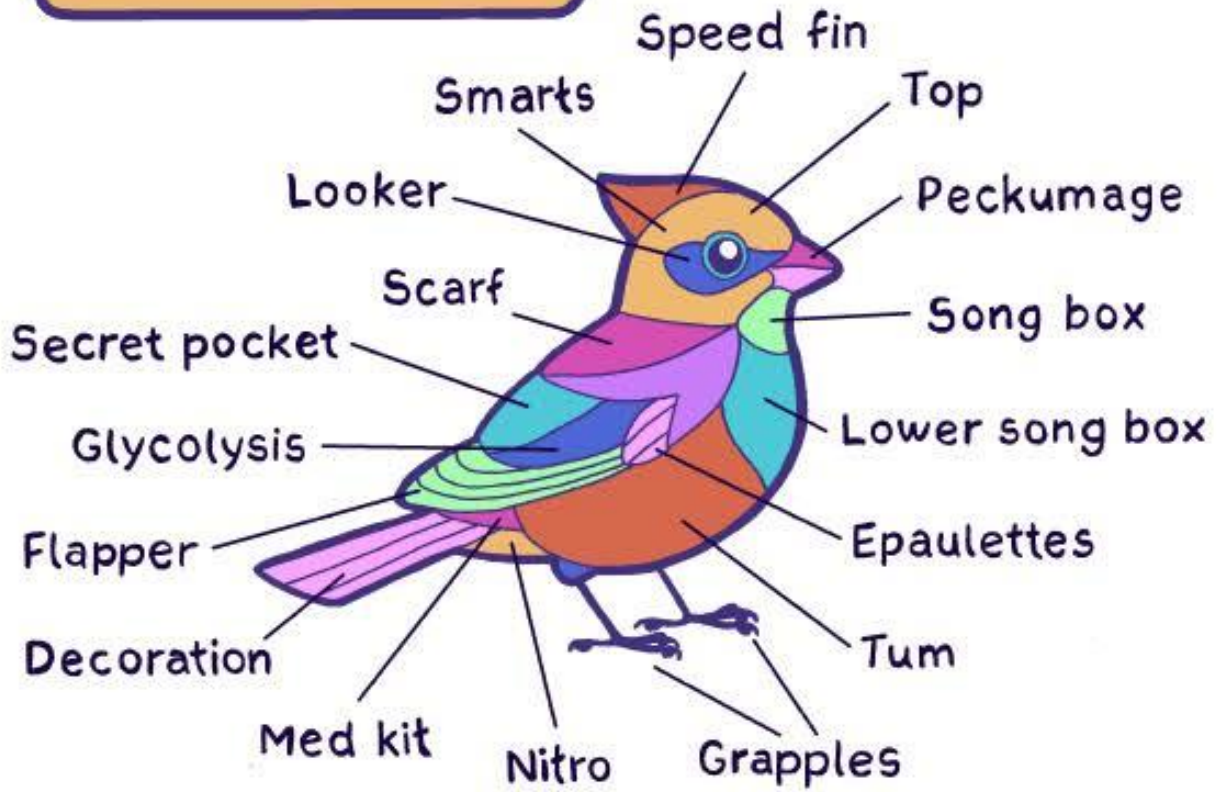
FSC is full storage capacity in million cubic meters

Dam	River	FSC	This Week %	Last Week %	Last Year %
Albert Falls Dam	Mgeni River	288.2	38.0	36.7	41.7
Bivane dam	Bivane River	114.1	100.5	#100.3	101.0
Craigie Burn Dam	Mnyamvubu River	22.5	77.3	73.8	78.1
Driel Barrage	Tugela River	8.7	#95.4	#95.4	93.3
Goedertrouw Dam	Mhlatuze River	301.3	55.7	55.2	50.0
Hazelmere Dam	Mdloti River	37.2	57.5	56.3	53.9
Hluhluwe Dam	Hluhluwe River	25.9	85.6	85.5	91.1
Inanda Dam	Mgeni River	237.5	86.8	85.4	70.0
Klipfontein Dam	Wit Mfolozi River	18.1	74.6	69.8	100.4
Mearns Dam	Mooi River	5.2	50.4	55.3	99.2
Midmar Dam	Mgeni River	235.5	100.4	99.7	100.2
Nagle Dam	Mgeni River	23.3	99.2	96.8	94.8
Ntshingwayo Dam	Ngagane River	194.6	78.5	78.1	82.8
Pongolapoort Dam	Phongolo River	2267.1	43.4	42.9	47.1
Spioenkop Dam	Tugela River	270.7	100.1	100.0	100.1
Spring Grove Dam	Mooi River	139.3	70.7	69.6	77.9
Wagendrift Dam	Boesmans River	55.9	100.7	100.6	100.6
Woodstock Dam	Tugela River	355.5	#94.2	#94.2	93.9
Zaaihoek Dam	Slang River	184.3	69.7	#70.7	78.9
Total		4784.0	62.0	61.5	63.7

So at virtually the end of our summer rainfall season, our main dam Zaaihoek is still only hovering at around 70% ... but as you can see, a lot of other KZN dams have even less water.

A bit of fun to finish off for the month

Parts of the Bird



Keep looking after yourselves please, and stay healthy!

Chris