



Wakkerstroom Bird Club



Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa

Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 77 – June 2020

Hello fellow Birders, Self-Isolators, Quarantiners, Lockdowners, and other Inmates – welcome to Day 15407 of 2020!

Well done - if you're reading this, it means you've got past stages 5 and 4 of our current humanitarian hiccup, and can look forward to some sort of "normality" returning this month! The hardy birdwatchers have been out from 6am to 9am to find something to get excited about (other than frostbite over the past week or so), and they as well as the folks doing the daily Pentad Level 4 Challenge are continuing to help collect some valuable data for the Wakkerstroom area. There have been some interesting species spotted that are either unusual for the area, or hadn't been seen for some years. No doubt Kristi Garland will release the highlights of the Challenge soon, which we will send on to you all. - Now that exercising will no longer be limited to those first few chilly hours of the day, I'm sure many of you will be going out further afield than your own gardens and surrounding 5km. The always-inventive Kristi has of course devised a new challenge starting on the 1st of June, the **"Lockdown Level 3 Birding Challenge"**, and here she tells us what it's all about:

The last two months have shown us all how important communication and social interactions are in our daily lives. It has been a trying and difficult time for many of us, especially those living alone. Over the last few weeks, we have seen your commitment, to initially the Lockdown Garden Bird Challenge and then the Lockdown Pentad Challenge.

These challenges have resulted in incredibly important data for our village with regards to various birds' occurrence and numbers, the monitoring of birds in general and their reaction to change – migration, human impact, and climate change on the whole. We have also used the data to form our area's bird list which will soon be available to residents and visitors to the area. These challenges were and are not set up as a highly competitive activity. Yes, results have been released each day, noting the positions of the participants, but the main aim was and still is, to provide a coordinated activity to keep us all sane during the lockdown period. *(Cont. on next page)*



Purple Swamphen © Penny Burchmore

As we enter another uncharted level of lockdown, we would like to open the Lockdown Level 3 Challenge. Things will work a little differently than before. There are four sections that you can participate in – either selecting those that tickle your fancy or participate in all four.

Section 1: Most species of birds recorded

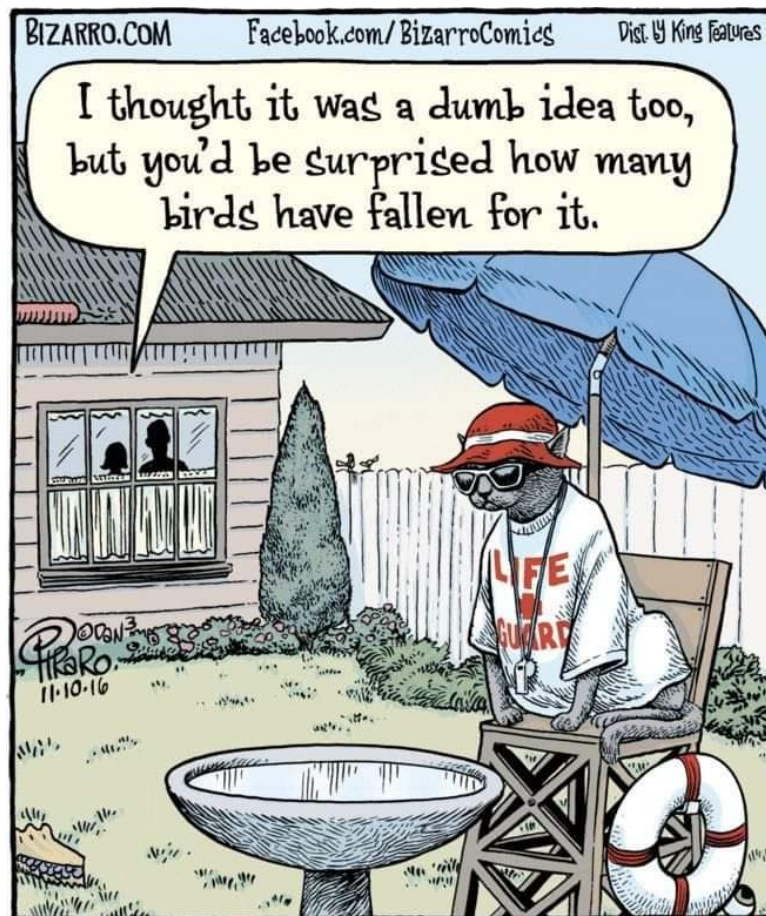
Section 2: Highest number of individual birds of a specie

Section 3: Species of the day photograph – Each morning a note will be sent out detailing more on a certain species. You will have the whole day to capture a moment with that specie and submit your photograph.

Section 4: Interesting behaviour of the day – Submit a note on something interesting you noticed between a specie or different species during the day. Maybe you saw Black-winged Kites mobbing a Cape Crow or had a closer look at a hunting strategy of a wader.

All section submissions should be sent to Kristi Garland, either via WhatsApp on 081 726 5282 or kristi.garland@birdlife.org.za by 17h30 each day. You would need to be specific with regards to which section you want your data to go to, i.e. species, individuals, photograph, or behaviour or all. Results will be released by 09h00 the following day as well as posted on facebook.

If you need some more support or have any questions, please contact Kristi – details above. Let's make this lockdown more interesting and fun, before we all lose our marbles. Remember, this Level 3 Challenge is open to anyone in Wakkerstroom. Feel free to get your neighbours and friends involved.



Global Birding Day, 9 May 2020

We've had two reports from this year's GBD, a local one from John and Penny Burchmore as well as a detailed submission from Mike Maxted who is currently working in England – thank you to the three of you for these!

Local is Lekker – John and Penny's Global Birding Day in Wakkerstroom

Global Big Day is the biggest birding day of the year and birders all round the world took part in making a list of birds in and around where they live.

Last year 92,284 checklists were received from 35,209 eBirders from 174 countries, after a single day's birding. The target this year is 100,000 checklists to be submitted for the Global Big Day. This is not a competition to see who hears or sees the most birds. All data collected is used by scientists to give them better understanding of birds. Data is processed by Cornell University Lab of Ornithology in the United States of America.

Last year Wakkerstroom Bird Club members took part in the Global Big Day, and four teams spent the day in and around Wakkerstroom logging all they saw or heard. Brian Guerin's team finished 11th in South Africa with 98 species.

This year, using our house as the centre, we pinned a radius of 5km, the area we were permitted to travel around in Lockdown. Jenny Maxted-Smith also used her house as a pin point and went out on her own, doing garden birds as well as some birds up Ossewakop.

Starting at the vlei we were able to log Black Crake, Purple Heron, Lesser Swamp Warbler, African Fish Eagle, and an African Darter at Martin's dam. Along the road past the old landing strip, we saw Long-tailed Widow, Grey Crowned Crane, White-rumped Swift and African Black Swift. We then decided to stop along the road to have our coffee and a sandwich and to enjoy the peaceful surroundings. After stopping we went up past eSizameleni, and found Mountain Wheatear and Drakensberg Prinia (*photo below, ©Penny Burchmore*)



When we drove up the road to Zaaihoek dam we found a juvenile Verreaux's Eagle at the edge of the road, it appeared to be eating a road kill. Unfortunately our area ended at the first bridge so we had to turn around and go on to the last road within the 5km radius which was the gravel road behind BirdLife South Africa's property leading towards Oude Stasie. We had a beautiful view of a Malachite kingfisher at the stream next to Oude Stasie entrance.

On passing the vlei again we logged Olive Woodpecker, as well as Cape Crow and Zitting Cisticola. We atlassed three pentads, 2720 – 3005, 2720 – 3010 and 2715 - 3005 and covered a distance of 67 km. We combined our list with Jenny's, giving us a grand total of 83 species for the day to submit to eBird.



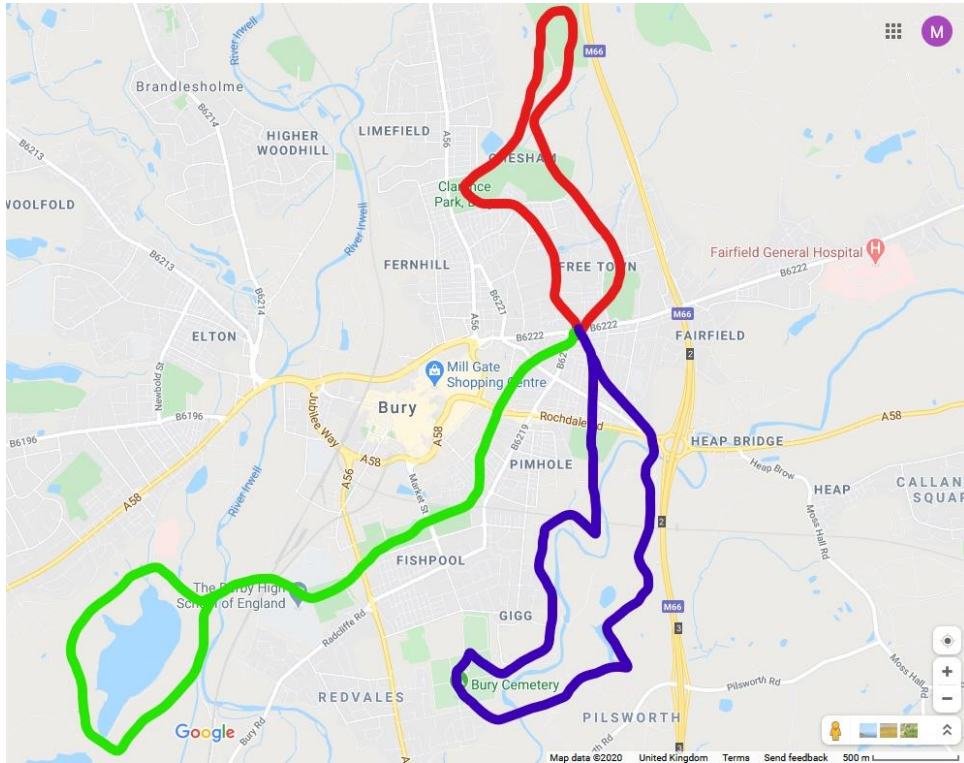
Mountain Wheatear, dark morph © John Burchmore

Foreign is Lekker too – Mike's Global Birding Day in Bury, NW England

The lock-down rules are a little different here than in South Africa, we are allowed to go out once per day for exercise, driving is discouraged except for going to work, hospital or the shops, they even have road blocks on the motorways to discourage people from travelling, so in light of this I planned my birding to be compliant with the law of the country. I am living in Bury, just North of Manchester where the ring is on the map ...



For all those who have birded with me you will remember that I take a scientific approach to my birding, and through research and planning I came up with a plan that would net me the best chance of getting a good number of species; the second consideration was that eBird UK had offered a pair of Zeiss binoculars to one lucky person who submitted three cards on Big Birding Day. So I carefully planned my routes to take in as much different habitat as possible. My research told me that in the last month there were 48 cards in this area and 49 species, I had seen 45 species in the last month on 10 cards with the highest total being 34 species on one card - based on this I set myself a target of 40 species for the day.



(i) The first route in Red I called my Woodland and Grassland route



This is a 6km circle through woods, parks and farmland, the netted me 26 species the highlights of which were Common Buzzard, Lesser Whitethroat and a Tree Sparrow (both lifers for me). (cont.)

Here are a few pictures (*all photographs to follow are © Mike Maxted – Ed.*)



Carrion Crow



Male Blackbird



Lesser Whitethroat



Tree Sparrow

(ii) The second route is my Reservoir Route, marked in **green** on the above map:



This is a 14km walk that targets the shorebirds and waders; as a reasonable body of water it is also good for ducks and geese. The route to the reservoir takes me through town and along a wooded cycle path - I got 47 species with highlights Northern Lapwing with 3 chicks, Eurasian Blackcap (lifer) and Common Whitethroat.



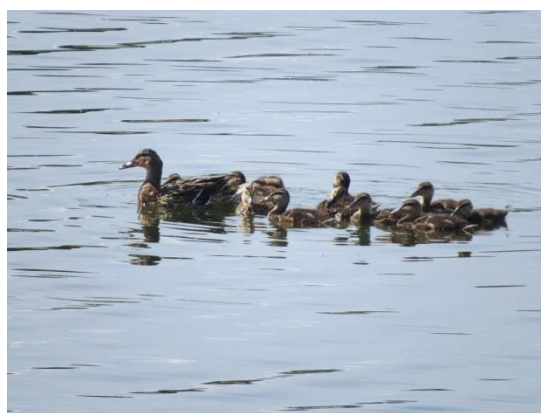
Eurasian Blackcap



Common Whitethroat



Great Crested Grebe



Manky Mallard with ducklings

(iii) The final route I call my Riverwalk, this is my usual walk, and is marked in blue on the above map



This walk is about 5km and is the best place to get the swallows, swifts and martins - they never stop so no photos but I did get 22 species.



Eurasian Wren



Song Thrush

A total of 25 km walked in the day that reached 28° C so when I got home I was pleasantly tired, had a large gin, shower and bed. I will finish with a few more pictures:



Willow Warbler



Common Buzzard



Grey Heron



European Robin



Northern Lapwing Chick



Goldfinch

Thanks for the comprehensive report, foreign correspondent Mike, and the gorgeous photos! My favourites are the Lesser Whitethroat peering out the bush, and the Lapwing chick with his untidy hairstyle (much like most of us at this stage!)

Vulture Crisis in Guinea-Bissau

Now for something rather less cheerful, in fact highly alarming ... please read this report by Linda van den Heever of BirdLife South Africa, and be sure to sign the petition in the link:

Since February, reports have been reaching BirdLife International's Africa Secretariat in Nairobi of vast numbers of Hooded Vultures being killed in Guinea-Bissau. Although the exact details are sketchy, it is believed that the birds are being targeted for illegal export to the neighbouring countries of Senegal and Guinea, where the demand for vultures in belief-based use has exploded. Guinea-Bissau holds 20% of the world's Hooded Vulture population, and estimates are that over 2000 birds (5% of the country's population) have been killed so far. Matters are complicated by the very unstable political situation in the country, and the fact that there is no BirdLife partner operational in the country. The NGO that is currently assisting with BirdLife's investigations are wetland specialists.

We are very concerned as a continued massacre on this scale will soon decimate vulture populations in the region. The best we can do now is to raise the profile of vulture killings as much as possible, until it reaches the same level of urgency as the save-the-rhino campaigns.

You can also find a description of the disaster at the petition site:

https://secure.avaaz.org/en/community_petitions/guineabissau_government_ecowas_au_and_the_internat_stop_the_mass_killing_of_critically_endangered_vultures_in_guineabissau/details/

Phenomenal Support for Bird Guides by BirdLife South Africa

The coronavirus pandemic is the biggest health crisis to face humankind in generations. No one is immune to the virus – or to the restrictions that have been put in place to reduce exposure, save lives and protect South Africa's health systems. The health crisis has precipitated an economic crisis and tourism in particular has been brought to a halt, with no inter-provincial travel currently allowed. BirdLife South Africa's community bird guides, previously disadvantaged individuals trained by the organisation to be professional bird and nature guides, have been stranded with no prospect of an income for months to come. Recognising this need, BirdLife South Africa proactively launched the Community Bird Guide Relief Fund, appealing to members and supporters to pitch in and help the guides. The response was nothing short of phenomenal and is testament to the high regard in which the guides are held. BirdLife South Africa and the guides can't emphasise our gratitude enough!



Wakkerstroom's own Lucky Ngwenya in action before the lockdown

The guides have flooded us with messages of gratitude and photographs of grocery-filled trolleys and happy children and spouses as evidence of the massive impact the support has had on their lives. Many of them are sole breadwinners for many dependents, so that impact should not be underestimated. The funds generated by our appeal have enabled us to commit to providing sustenance funding for more than 35 guides for the next few months. We may at some point need to make another appeal, as at present it seems that domestic tourism will begin again only towards the end of 2020. And who knows when international birders will come to our shores again? The situation is dire for vulnerable members of our society, but the relief fund has given the community guides a fighting chance they would otherwise not have had.

If you would still like to contribute to the Community Bird Guide Relief Fund, please go to www.birdlife.org.za/birdlife-guide-relief-fund/ or check last month's newsletter for instructions.

In the meantime, Michael Mills, himself a top African bird and nature guide, has offered his support through the sales of his books. Michael is the author of *The Birder's Guide to Africa* and *The Special Birds of Angola*. If you would like to purchase either of these, he is charging a discounted price of R400 and R200 respectively to birders, a significant portion of which will be donated to the Community Bird Guide Relief Fund. Please contact him directly at goawaybirding@gmail.com and indicate which book you would like to buy and whether you would like it couriered (estimated at R100 per delivery countrywide) or would prefer to collect it personally at Isdell House (this may involve a long delay, as Michael would need to travel to Johannesburg when travel restrictions ease).

ANDREW DE BLOCC, AVITOURISM PROJECT MANAGER

Conservation Conversations – BirdLife South Africa's Zoom Webinars

I mentioned these in last month's newsletters already, and they continue to cover really interesting topics and presenters. Every Tuesday evening at 7pm there is a free webinar ('a talk with slide show' to those of us who like to speak English and not TechWhatzitt), and you can attend either live via the Zoom app or on YouTube, or watch the recorded version at any time that suits you, also via YouTube. All very handy, as you don't have to go or drive anywhere to attend, you can watch in whatever clothes you happen to be wearing and have your dinner and a glass of wine while watching, it doesn't matter what your hair looks like because nobody can see you, and your budgie and cat can watch too. Oh and did I mention it's free! Except the data costs if you have no WIFI available.

In order to find out what talks are coming up, go to the BirdLife South Africa webpage <https://www.birdlife.org.za/blsa-conversations/> Here's what June will bring:

(cont.)

Ernst Retief - The SABAP2 website: a treasure trove of information! (2-June-20 at 19:00)

Ellané van Wyk - Tax is for the birds! (9-June-20 at 19:00)

BirdLife South Africa Panel - Youth Day Special: I want to be a conservationist (16-June-20 at 19:00)

Andrea Angel - The Albatross Task Force: a multifaceted approach to seabird conservation (23-June-20 at 19:00)

Andrew de Blocq - Avitourism in South Africa (30-June-20 at 19:00)

To access the talks, follow these easy steps (yes, I promise it really is easy!):

1. Visit <https://zoom.us/download> to download the free Zoom application to your computer or cellular device.
2. Click on the blue drop-down bar with the talk that you are interested in and then click the green 'Register for this talk' button.
3. Fill in your name and email address on the form and submit it.
4. You will receive the Zoom invitation link via email to access the talk in your inbox shortly thereafter.
5. Use that link on the assigned presentation date to access the Zoom meeting room and watch the webinar live. We recommend logging in 10 minutes before each webinar starts.

Wild Chats – Endangered Wildlife Trust

In the same vein, the EWT have conservation-orientated ZOOM webinars (those words again!) twice a week, on a Tuesday and a Thursday – so far they have been presented at 11am but are now moving to 3pm (15h00) ... if like me you're unable to watch during that timeslot, they are also recorded so you can catch up on the EWT's YouTube channel. Recent talks have covered Blue Cranes, vultures, and wild cheetahs etc. so you are guaranteed something of interest will pop up regularly for you. This week for example, the Tuesday talk will be on "Protecting the protected" by Wendy Collinson, and Thursday's is "Celebrating World Environment Day and biodiversity with the EWT". Go to the website for more information www.ewt.org.za, scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on WILD CHATS – fill out the form to receive their newsletters which will tell you what's coming up.

Grass Owl Surveys Put On *Words and photographs © R.Rachuene*



The African Grass-owl Project has recently done its first pre-season nest check survey in the Mpumalanga province. Amidst the coronavirus pandemic, the project field officer, Rebothile Rachuene, was well prepared and took all the precautions to perform this much-needed survey at this time – the species’ peak breeding period. He was joined by the Wildlife and Transport Programme field officer, Innocent Buthelezi, who helped to look for the active nests in the thick, tall and dense grasses around the wetlands/vleis/water streams. A total of four key known breeding sites were targeted and searched intensively, looking for the nests. After a few hours of searching in these dense grasses, the team discovered two nests from two different territories. The first active nest to be discovered was from the 1km-long grass site which had one freshly laid egg of about four days old. The second, 4-egg nest was discovered from a separate territory and was estimated to be about ten days old. This is a very good start for the project for this season, with most known breeding sites being in a suitable condition to support nesting requirements. Apart from these exciting results from the survey, the team also observed around 20 Marsh Owl individuals in total from all four Grass-owl breeding sites. These are indeed the most critical sites for these two ground nesting owl species within the fragmented landscape of Mpumalanga province.



For this season, the project is focusing on implementing its conservation measures which are driven by over a decade research data. Our main objective is to protect all the known breeding habitats against anthropogenic activities such as farming, mining and development. A number of strategies to achieve this are planned, such as fire break maintenance around these habitats, offering protection against the fires which are often destroying over 60% of them. We are also aiming to trial the restoration of the African Grass-owl habitats which were lost through the land changes caused by opencast mining in the Mpumalanga province. For us to achieve most of these objectives, we will be engaging with lots of partners and stakeholders such as landowners and communities around these areas. While we will be working towards achieving this goal, we are monitoring approximately ten key breeding sites which have been secured for nesting for the past 3-6 years for the owls. We will also continue to monitor the breeding pairs, ring the fledglings for a dispersal study, and educate the communities about the importance of protecting these habitats for the benefit of the ecosystem and human beings. However, the current global COVID-19 situation and national lockdown has put our fieldwork on hold at this time, when the owls are actively nesting.

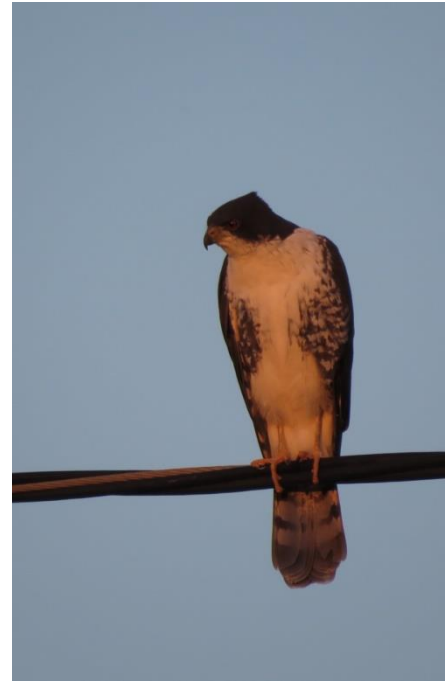
Rebothile Rachuene, African Grass-owl Project Field Officer, EWT Birds of Prey Programme. TselaneR@ewt.org.za

This work is made possible by the National Geographic Society and Mafube Coal Mine.

To finish the month's newsletter, I thought you would all appreciate these photos by © John and Penny Burchmore, taken in their garden and at the vlei over the last couple of months in addition to these, they also saw such gems as Bush Blackcap (last seen in their garden in 2014) and a juvenile Klaas's Cuckoo at home!



Black-chested Snake Eagle, juvenile



Black Sparrowhawk



Grey Crowned Cranes



Black-headed Oriole



Wood Sandpiper

Thanks so much, John and Penny, for letting me share these!

Something to keep the brain ticking over

Crossword Puzzle 1.

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ACROSS

- Swallows and _____
- Blue-billed, brown waterbird
- Dark birds favouring high buildings
- A bird's "clothes"
- Foot structure with 2 toes pointing forward, and 2 toes pointing backward
- South Africa's National bird
- Most have a love-hate relationship with this long-billed bird
- Bird of Prey
- Waterlily walker
- Giant, malachite and half-collared
- Uses bill pouch to catch fish
- 2020 bird of the year
- Mating system characterized by multiple partners
- Insect-eating summer visitor

DOWN

- One egg of this bird equals 24 chicken eggs
- Both Kingfishers and Sunbirds have this species
- Short-tailed eagle
- Iconic fynbos bird
- Largest heron in South Africa
- Gregarious birds with a loud, cackling call
- Characteristic headdress of bulbuls and turaco
- Secretive forest bird
- A birdwatcher whose main aim is to collect sightings of rare birds.
- Crested or helmeted spotted fowl
- Night birds

BIRD NERD
BIRDING FOR EVERYONE

Remember to print this out before you fill in the answers 😊😊😊

Chat next month, keep safe, keep healthy, keep patient – and remember, this too shall pass!

Chris