



Wakkerstroom
Bird Club



Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa

Principal supporter of the Wakkerstroom Junior Bird Clubs

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Hello fellow Birders,

The **Bird of the Year for 2021** has just been announced by BirdLife South Africa, which I thought is a good excuse to pop into your Inbox It's the **Cape Rockjumper *Chaetops frenatus***. What a stunning little bird to see! The photograph below is by Adam Riley.



With red eyes and striking colouration, the Cape Rockjumper is one of South Africa's most recognisable bird species. As it is restricted to the Fynbos Biome of South Africa, it is a major economic asset to the country, with birdwatchers from all over the world travelling here to see it, as well as the other endemic species restricted to the Cape Floral Kingdom. Together with its sister species, the Drakensberg Rockjumper, this bird family is restricted to South Africa and Lesotho.

BirdLife South Africa chose this species as 'Bird of the Year' as it is an ambassador for the Fynbos biome: the unique plant kingdom found only in South Africa. There are seven other bird species found here and nowhere else on earth: Cape Sugarbird, Orange-breasted Sunbird, Protea Canary, Cape Siskin, Victorin's Warbler, Agulhas Long-billed Lark and Hottentot Buttonquail. The Fynbos extends from the northern Cederberg through the Cape Fold Mountains, to Port Elizabeth, with fragments as far as Makhanda/Grahamstown. The Fynbos is generally well protected within the Cape Nature reserves of the Western Cape, but there are major concerns regarding the spread of alien tree species like pines and wattles, as well as increased fire frequencies as a result of climate change.

Increased fire frequency creates habitat that is favourable to Cape Rockjumpers by opening up the habitat for this species, as it likes to forage by hopping around on the ground. This is a reason that it is mostly associated with high alpine areas and mountainous terrain within the Fynbos, where vegetation is naturally sparse and low. Ironically though, a range of studies have indicated that it is vulnerable to climate change rather than benefitting from it, with decreases in range and reporting rate according to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project.

This vulnerability appears to be due to a combination of factors. Firstly, they have a physiology that relies on water-loss to keep cool, an odd strategy given the bird lives in a region that experiences dry summers. Juveniles and chicks seem particularly vulnerable to heat stress, while adults simply stop foraging when it gets too warm. Range modelling indicates the species is restricted to cooler regions of the Fynbos (notably at higher altitude). Furthermore, there is evidence that the nests, made on the ground, are becoming especially vulnerable to predators such as the Boomslang.

The Cape Rockjumper is thus the first South African species to gain a threatened conservation status (Near Threatened according to the IUCN red list) due to the direct and indirect effects of climate change.

The Cape Rockjumper therefore also serves as an ambassador to a host of other animal species that are similarly restricted in where they occur because of what is known as a 'climate envelope'. While some birds can 'track' climate change by moving to where temperature suits them better, this cannot be done for species restricted to the highest altitudes as they can't move further up. There are a number of bird species that likely are in similar trouble such as the Cape Rockjumper: Ground Woodpecker, Sentinel Rock-thrush, as well as high altitude grassland specialists such as the Endangered Rudd's Lark and Botha's Lark and also the Drakensberg Rockjumper and others.

During 2021, BirdLife South Africa will create awareness about the Cape Rockjumper through the production of an informative poster, the development of learning resources for schools that are free to download from the BirdLife South Africa website (www.birdlife.org.za), articles in *African Birdlife* magazine, social media posts, presentations to interested groups, and the sale of merchandise.

BirdLife South Africa will also partner with international bird tour operator Rockjumper Birding Tours (www.rockjumper.com) during 2021 to raise awareness about the region's two rockjumper species.

The Hans Hoheisen Charitable Trust is the sponsor of Bird of the Year 2021.

Flufftail Monitoring Season Begins by Dr Kyle Lloyd, Rockjumper Fellow of White-Winged Conservation

This will be exciting for Wakkerstroom! Also, don't miss Kyle's talk this month ... details in the Diary section



Camera traps in dense wetland vegetation capture images of passing White-winged Flufftails and other animals, providing insight into their undisturbed behaviour and an estimate of population size. Credit Melissa Howes-Whitecross

Motion-detecting cameras are an essential tool when it comes to studying the behaviour of the elusive White-winged Flufftail, as they can provide a glimpse into the largely unknown lives of this Critically Endangered species. Since its discovery and formal description in 1877, there have been only a few scattered sightings of this flufftail in South Africa. Most sightings are chance events or are achieved only after many hours of walking through wetland in the hope of flushing the bird. They are becoming even rarer as suitable wetland habitat is degraded or destroyed as a result of various human activities. The small sample size of records accumulated over the past 140 years has resulted in a limited understanding of White-winged Flufftail biology and has restricted the ability of conservation managers to conserve the species effectively.



Caught on camera! A male White-winged Flufftail captured by a motion-detecting camera last season.

In 2016, a survey methodology was developed that greatly improved the detection of White-winged Flufftails in dense wetland vegetation. Dubbed the 'BirdLife South Africa Rallid Survey Method', it makes use of a metal frame and camouflaged shade cloth. A motion-detecting camera mounted on the frame captures images of birds walking through the structure. The use of the cameras not only yields high numbers of records compared to the traditional flushing method, but is also non-invasive, with minimal impact on the sensitive wetland environment. Since its inception, the Rallid Survey Method has been refined and deployed annually during the White-winged Flufftail's breeding season.

For the 2020–2021 season too, BirdLife South Africa staff have deployed monitoring equipment to observe the behaviour and abundance of White-winged Flufftails. The work was intensive, but the images we've already seen of the birds are our reward. In the largest effort yet, 51 cameras have been deployed at three sites and we hope they will show us a good breeding year, given that rains have already fallen early in the wet season. The knowledge obtained from the monitoring data will be used to help guide conservation managers and landowners to better manage wetlands for the flufftails. Every monitoring season improves our ability to protect the species and bring it back from the brink of extinction.

And since it's The Season and all that, some more good news for birds and other wildlife:

UK Overseas Territory becomes one of the world's biggest sanctuaries for wildlife by Martin Harper (RSPB)

Here is some excellent news to bring you cheer.

Today, the Government and people of Tristan da Cunha have announced a new 700,000 km² Marine Protection Zone which will be the biggest no-take area in the Atlantic. The Tristan islanders will become guardians of one of the world's most pristine marine environments where no fishing or extractive activities will be permitted.

It is a phenomenal achievement and builds on Tristan's long history of protecting its unique environment. It means that more than 4.3 million km² of some of the world's most precious marine environment – 1% of all the world's ocean - will be protected as part of the UK Government's Blue Belt Programme.

This latest success is the result of 20 years of hard work,

It began with the RSPB working with the Government of Tristan da Cunha to lay the conservation ground work and support Tristan's exemplary management of its sustainable lobster fishery. There was then a five-year programme of UK Government Blue Belt support, followed by an international coalition of partners who have generously supported the final phase. The RSPB along with National Geographic also partnered with the Blue Nature Alliance, Becht Family Charitable Trust together with Blue Marine Foundation, Wyss Foundation, Kaltroco and Don Quixote II Foundation to enable this large-scale declaration.

I have never been to Tristan and probably never will go. But from the films (for example see here) that I have seen and from the stories that know it well, the waters that surround Tristan are some of the richest in the world. Tens of millions of seabirds soar above the waves, penguins and seals cram onto the beaches, threatened sharks breed offshore and mysterious whales feed in the deep-water canyons.

And now, from today, we can say all of this is protected.

Commenting on this news, our Chief Executive Beccy Speight said *"In 2020 the importance of having nature in our lives has never been clearer. While Tristan da Cunha may be far away in distance it is still close to our hearts and protecting it is still the UK's responsibility. Closer to home, the crisis facing nature is also huge. So huge that our wellbeing, our economic future, and our very survival depend on the choices we make now about the natural world. We need politicians to emulate the leadership of this small community to help us build the world we all want to live*

in. We hope today's fantastic announcement is the first of many more that help revive our world."

And, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson has used this announcement to lay down a gauntlet to others by saying, *"I am now calling on other nations to join us in our ambition to protect 30 per cent of the world's ocean by 2030. We need collective global action if we are to bequeath a world that is every bit as wonderful and magnificent as the one we inherited."*

Private wildlife owners in Zululand launch campaign to protect vultures by Nkululeko Nene

This was written a couple of months ago, but is still important – vultures can always do with good news!

Private wildlife owners launched the Zululand vulture safety campaign which coincided with International Vulture Awareness Day on Saturday.



The conservationists revealed that vultures were facing extinction due to poison found on carcasses.

Linda van den Heever, vulture project manager from Birdlife South Africa, said the campaign was to protect nine vulture species including a decline in white-backed vulture which has been regarded as critically endangered.

She said vultures were performing one of nature's most important tasks.

She feared that with the extinction of vultures, diseases such as rabies and canine distemper could spread.

"Carcasses would be left to rot, attracting less specialised scavengers, such as jackals, rats and feral dogs.

Vultures gobble down unwanted food which hampers the ecosystem through its infectious bacteria," she said.

Van den Heever said that considering the impact of habitat loss, electrocutions, collisions with man-made structures and direct or indirect poisoning, the harvesting of vultures for traditional medicine has become a serious threat to the environment.

Clive Vivier, owner of the Leopard Mountain Lodge, also the founder of the Zululand Important Bird and Biodiversity

Area which stretches from Pongola to Isimangaliso Wetland Park in Mkhuze, said part of the campaign was also to persuade hunters to buy lead-free ammunition for hunting.

He said a mobile chat group was used to manage a feeding programme to ensure that carcasses and gut piles put out at so-called restaurants were lead and contaminant free.

“We ensure that water reservoirs are fitted with ‘escape’ ladders to prevent drownings and that lead-free ammunition is used for hunting and culling,” said Vivier.

Meiring Prinsloo, manager at Somkhanda Community Game Reserve, said it was important to ensure the safety of vultures to keep the flora and fauna beautiful. His reserve has been declared a vulture safe zone.

“The birds clean the area after poachers have killed an animal. To contribute to the environment we need to look after nature surrounding us,” said Prinsloo.

Piet du Plessis, a hunter and also a manufacturer of lead-free ammunition said his toxic-free bullets would not inflict harm on vultures when feeding.

“Vultures are subjected to a range of threats, of which poisoning is the most significant. As a result, many species are plummeting towards extinction but the recent innovation will ensure the bird’s safety,” he said.

Musa Mntambo, spokesperson of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, said Ezemvelo has just recently completed an aerial survey of tree-nesting vulture areas in the province.

He said African white-backed and lappet-faced vultures have become locally extinct, which could be attributed directly to the spate of poisonings during the latter part of last year.

Mntambo said the intent of these poisonings was for the harvesting of vulture parts for traditional medicine.

“Ezemvelo is very concerned regarding the plight of our various vulture species in the province. They face a myriad threats of which lead poisoning is but one. Ezemvelo is very supportive of the initiative to move towards lead-free ammunition and, in fact, is pursuing such for implementation within our reserves in key vulture areas,” said Mntambo.

WBC December Diary

Wednesday 2 December: Evening talk by Dr Kyle Lloyd (yes, he of the flufftail research!) 17h30 for 18h00 at the BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre. Kyle oversees the research and conservation of the critically endangered White-winged Flufftail at BirdLife South Africa. He studied for his PhD in Zoology at the University of Pretoria, specialising in population ecology, and he will be chatting about the flufftail project, as he will be spending several days here setting up trail cameras etc. He will also tell us about his 13-month stint on Marion Island, including the history, lifestyle, flora and fauna, and type of research conducted at the island.

Saturday 5 December: Our end-of-year function will start from 11h00/11h30, at Camp 49 just outside town. Please bring your own meat, drinks, crockery, cutlery and glasses. Braai fires, salads, rolls and puddings will be provided by the Club. All Covid 19 protocol will be observed – please help us do so. You should by now have RSVP’d on 083 415 6701 or 081 726 5282 for catering purposes ... if not, PLEASE do so as soon as possible. These gatherings are always great fun!

Fri. 11 to Sun. 13th December: The annual Wakkerstroom Bio-Bash takes place! Birding, frogging, herping, camera traps, butterflies – what else could you want!?! Contact Richard@thelionheart.co.za for enquiries, costing, and bookings. Wakkerstroom residents get a generous 50% discount!

Saturday 12 December: NOTE the change to the second Saturday due to the Christmas function. For the final time this year, we meet for our monthly get-together at the vlei. From 6am, we'll meet at the picnic spot next to Kruger Bridge. Tea and coffee will be available as always.

Saturday 19 December: The WBC will have a stand at the Christmas Market. Pop in and say hi!

Hope to see you at all the above! Let's show this rather testing 2020 that Wakkerstroom is still here!

Wishing you all a very happy Festive Season – if you are going away on holiday, travel safely, stay healthy, and come back refreshed.

Chris



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