



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER 20 – MARCH 2014

Claudia Holgate Presentation

We are anxious to get a handle on the numbers of people who wish to attend this talk. Seating is a little limited at BirdLife South Africa Centre and we are hoping for an excellent turnout for this special occasion. To this end we have drawn up a Booking List and ask that you let Brian Guerin know ASAP if you will be attending and the number in your party. Note there is a donation request of R20 per adult, scholars free. Brian's contact details are: Cell 083 415 6701, e-mail: bguerin@nelweb.co.za. Many thanks for your assistance.

Golden Mole Project by Chanel Rampartab

"My name is Chanel and I am a student of the University of Cape Town, working in partnership with the University of Pretoria, Endangered Wildlife Trust and Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency. I am currently working on the ecology and conservation of the endemic and threatened golden moles in the Highveld grasslands of Mpumalanga. I am heading towards Wakkerstroom on the 10th March 2014 till the 30th March and will be based at the BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Centre. I am looking for some volunteers to assist with field work. Most of the field work involves scouting for new sites of golden mole activity (subsurface foraging tunnels and small mole heaps) and contacting landowners for permission to set underground tunnel traps inside the active tunnels. The traps are left overnight (golden moles are primarily nocturnal), checked the following morning and reset if necessary. If possible, we will attempt to catch moles by hand/hoe while they are digging their subsurface foraging tunnels in the early hours of the morning. Volunteers are welcome to join at any time between 8-28th March (the more eyes, the better); however I would really appreciate if someone could help me out in the week between 10-17th March.

If you need any more info, let me know on this chanel.rampartab@gmail.com or alternatively give me a call/SMS on 083 565 8781."

Eastern Long-billed Lark by John McAllister

Long-billed larks belong to the genus *Certhilauda* which is a Southern African near endemic genus. This means that at least 95% of the genus is resident or breeds in the Southern African region south of the Kunene and Zambezi rivers. Until 1999 there were only two species in the genus – Long-billed Lark and Short-clawed Lark. Short-clawed Lark was (and still is) a monotypic species, i.e. there were no sub-species, while there were no fewer than 12 sub-species of Long-billed Lark.

Short-clawed Lark is found in a crescent-like swathe in suitable habitat (semi arid, open Acacia savanna) along the cusp of the far western and north-western parts of the South African Grassland Biome and the Arid Savanna or Bushveld Biome ranging from the Kimberley area of the Northern Cape Province through the far western Free State, North-west Province and eastern Botswana into Limpopo Province in the Polokwane area. Long-billed larks (note the lower case "l" in "larks" indicating a group of larks with long bills) are all found in more or less open areas ranging from the relatively moist highland grasslands of eastern South Africa, across the Great Karoo to the fynbos of the southern and western parts of the Western Cape Province and up into north-western Namibia and south-western Angola.

Within their relatively large range the 12 subspecies of Long-billed Lark (note the uppercase "L" in "Lark" indicating a single species of lark) *Certhilauda curvirostris* varied greatly in colour, size, length and shape of the bill and even to some extent in their vocalisations and mating displays. Perhaps the two subspecies that best illustrate the extremes of these differences were *C.c.curvirostris* (now a subspecies of Cape Long-billed Lark) of the Western Cape Fynbos and *C.c.transvaalensis* (now a subspecies of Eastern Long-billed Lark) of the eastern grasslands. The former was a huge bird (well for a lark anyway) weighing in at a massive 60g while the latter was far smaller with some having a body mass of as little as 30g. The western birds were generally darkish grey with heavily streaked underparts and a long (longer than the birds head), markedly decurved bill. The eastern birds were generally bright rufous with only lightly streaked underparts and a short (much shorter than the head), almost straight, bill.



Certhilauda curvirostris curvirostris (left) and *C. c. transvaalensis* (right) illustrating the extreme differences between the subspecies of the "old" Long-billed Lark (photographs courtesy of Robert Wienand and Niall Perrins)

These marked morphological differences, together with the different display flights and vocalisations of the subspecies strongly suggested that there may be a case for promoting at least some of the Long-billed Lark subspecies to full species status. In 1999 Peter Ryan of the University of Cape Town's Percy Fitzpatrick Institute and Paulette Bloomer of Pretoria University's Department of Genetics applied modern molecular techniques such as gene sequencing to birds collected in the various parts of Southern Africa where the subspecies were known to occur. To cut a long story short they ascertained that there was sufficient genetic evidence to split the 12 subspecies into five groups and to elevate these groups into five "new" species – Cape Long-billed Lark, Agulhas Long-billed Lark, Karoo Long-billed Lark, Eastern Long-billed Lark and Benguela Long-billed Lark. For those interested in the full details of their determinations you might like to read their articles published in 1999 in *Auk* (The Long-billed Lark complex: a species mosaic in south-western Africa) Volume 116 and *Bird Numbers* (A plethora of long-billed larks) Volume 8 Number 1. The map below shows the distribution of the various "new" species across Southern Africa.

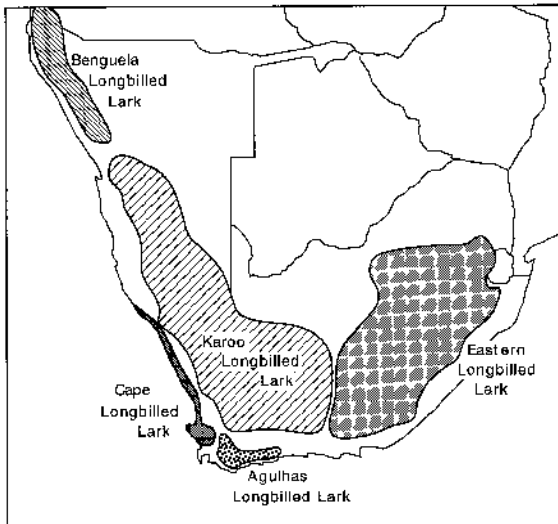


Fig. 1. Ranges of species in the long-billed lark complex (after Ryan & Bloomer 1999).

The species that we are particularly interested in is of course Eastern Long-billed Lark *Certhilauda semitorquata*, and its three subspecies, *C. s. semitorquata*, *C. s. transvaalensis* and *C. s. algida*. We are especially interested in *C. s. transvaalensis* which is the subspecies that occurs in the Wakkerstroom area. The distribution map in Roberts' VII (page 881) will give you some idea of where these subspecies can be found.

"Our" birds in the Wakkerstroom hills are very attractive pale rufous colour and are only lightly streaked and often appear to be virtually plain, i.e. not streaked at all. The subspecies does, however, become more obviously streaked as one moves westwards across their range. The other two subspecies, *semitorquata* and *algida* are found in the grasslands of western Kwa Zulu Natal and the Eastern Cape. *Algida* is the most heavily streaked of the species with *semitorquata* being intermediate between *algida* and *transvaalensis*.

These very attractive larks (pictures below) are best looked for on rocky hillsides. Apart from being the only really rufous-backed lark in our area – Eastern Clapper Lark is also a very washed out rufous colour I guess - with a beak to tail tip length of between 16 and 20 cm it is also the largest and stockiest species of lark to be found here. They also have a very distinctive song consisting of a loud, clear "peeeuuuu" which can often be heard ringing out across the hills in spring and summer. This call is often accompanied by the display flight where the male bird rises steeply off a favourite rock for 10-15 m, then stalls, whistles and falls vertically back to earth with closed wings. Just before reaching the ground the wings open and the bird flies off horizontally, often back to the rocky perch from which it started.

According to Roberts VII the birds are not considered threatened, mostly because of their preference for rocky hillsides which are not suitable for agriculture. BirdLife International (presumably working from data provided by South African ornithologists) ranks the species as being "Of Least Concern", but note that populations do seem to be in decline. My feeling is that while Eastern Long-

Long-billed Larks do have quite a large distributional range they are nowhere plentiful and they are endemic to South Africa's Grassland Biome which itself is under severe threat from agriculture, grazing pressure, afforestation, mining, human population expansion, etc. and for this reason alone we should avoid being too complacent about their future.

Photo Credits

Certhilauda curvirostris curvirostris (now Cape Long-billed Lark) – Robert Wienand of Outlook Lodge and Safaris, Website www.outlook.co.za.

Certhilauda curvirostris transvaalensis (now Eastern Long-billed Lark) – Niall Perrins. Website www.niall.co.za.

Eastern Long-billed Larks near Wakkerstroom and the Mountain Zebra National Park. Warwick Tarboton. Website www.warwicktarboton.co.za.

Eastern Long-billed Lark, subspecies *semitorquata* in KZN. Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopaedia. Website http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Long-billed_Lark.



A Long-billed Lark near Wakkerstroom photographed by Warwick Tarboton



Eastern Long-billed Lark ssp. *algida* at the Mountain Zebra National Park (left - by Warwick Tarboton) in & *semitorquata* near Franklin, KZN (right – from Wikipedia)

NewsFlash: Birding at its Best by Judy-Lynn Wheeler

Living on 4 hectares just 4kms from Wakkerstroom, we are so privileged to enjoy, not only magnificent views and blissful tranquility but also 94 bird species – during this Spring/Summer. 26 species are resident and breed, while visitors such as; Spotted Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Fork-tailed Drongo (bred this year) pop up unexpectedly. Interaction between species has always



Yellow-bellied Greenbul -
Wikipedia



Spotted Flycatcher in the Czech Republic -
Wikipedia

fascinated me and, with so many species about, there is often interesting behaviour between species.

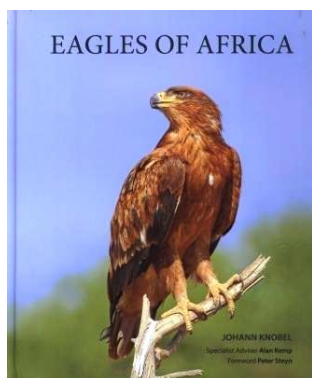
Two weeks ago, 2 Grey Crowned Crane roosted almost on top of a nesting Black-shouldered Kite. The female tucked her head in and sat tight while her mate gave an amazing performance. He screamed and bashed the Cranes on their heads. Much wing flapping and loud noises took place for 10 mins before the Cranes were forced to move off. The Black-shouldered Kite shook his feathers into position and took up his guard post next to the nest. The Cranes have found another tree to roost.

With all the rain there have been plenty flying ant lettings from our garden, small ones and mega fat ones. Amur Falcon, Swifts and Swallows performed aerial artistry while Hamerkop, Juv. Jackal Buzzard, Steppe Buzzard and Pied Starling have "strolled" together plucking the mega fats from my back lawn! Brilliant!!

Today (Saturday 8th), the Cape Crows alarmed as a mature African Harrier Hawk flew in. Free ranging Turkeys took to cover. Dark capped bulbuls bombed the raptor who continued sitting/snoozing seemingly unperturbed. Several hours have passed. The raptor still sits while other bird species forage silently alert.

Dawn and Dusk when the Black Sparrowhawk comes through a different behavior pattern takes place, more on this in another NewsFlash.

Annual General Meeting



What, you say already? No, not really – just some advance warning! Our AGM will, once again, be held at De Oude Stasie on Saturday, 19 July in the early afternoon, more details later. Our guest speaker will be Johann Knobel, co-author with Alan Kemp of the book "Eagles of Africa" and with a foreword by Peter Steyn. Make a note in your diaries, now!

Interesting Local Sightings:

Martial Eagle: By e-mail: On 23 February, +/- 4km from Wakkerstroom towards Volksrust we were privileged to see an adult Martial Eagle. We saw it flying overhead in the rain and turned the car around and sighted him perched in a bush, he was really huge, he actually looked almost as big as the bush. We just want to share our good fortune with the Club. (Photographs supplied.) Mike and Jenni Maxted-Smith, Newcastle.

Common Moorhen: An adult appeared to be showing its chick how to lift and turn leaves of water-based vegetation to find grubs, snails etc. This resulted in more dunking than dining for the chick because each time it lifted a leaf up the leaf pushed his head under the water! I couldn't stay to see how long it took him to get it right. A.C.

Kempenveldt Vulture Restaurant.

Brian Guerin is often asked to try to arrange another visit to Kempenveldt Vulture Restaurant near Dundee because our earlier visit had been so successful. I have tried on several occasions (including this week) with farm-owner Mynhardt Sadie but his problem remains the same – availability of carcasses. His original supplier, owner of a large feedlot in the area, no longer supplies him. The current supplier is a much smaller feedlot and cannot deliver carcasses on a regular basis.

Mynhardt says there are still many vultures in the area but has no answer at this stage on the question of reliable supply of carcasses. I will keep in contact with him.

Latest on the Iain Drummond Hide

In order to make it more user-friendly we have decided (and started on) removing the wooden window flaps and remounting them so that they open upwards. We have installed cup hooks and thin chains to hold them in the new position. We have also moved the 12 Norman Dennett/Sasol plaques upward as the window flaps in their new position would have partly covered them. The end aim of all this is to enable us to fit shelves all around the hide so birders have something to lean on as well as to put books, scopes and other paraphernalia.

We have, under the guidance of Stan Madden of Marievale, also sprayed a large area of *Phragmites Australis* to the left and right of the hide with Glyphogan 360 which appears to be very successful in killing this pest and will open up more water surface for better viewing. We are ready, dependent on personal commitments and weather, to commence burning this area and 3 others we have sprayed.

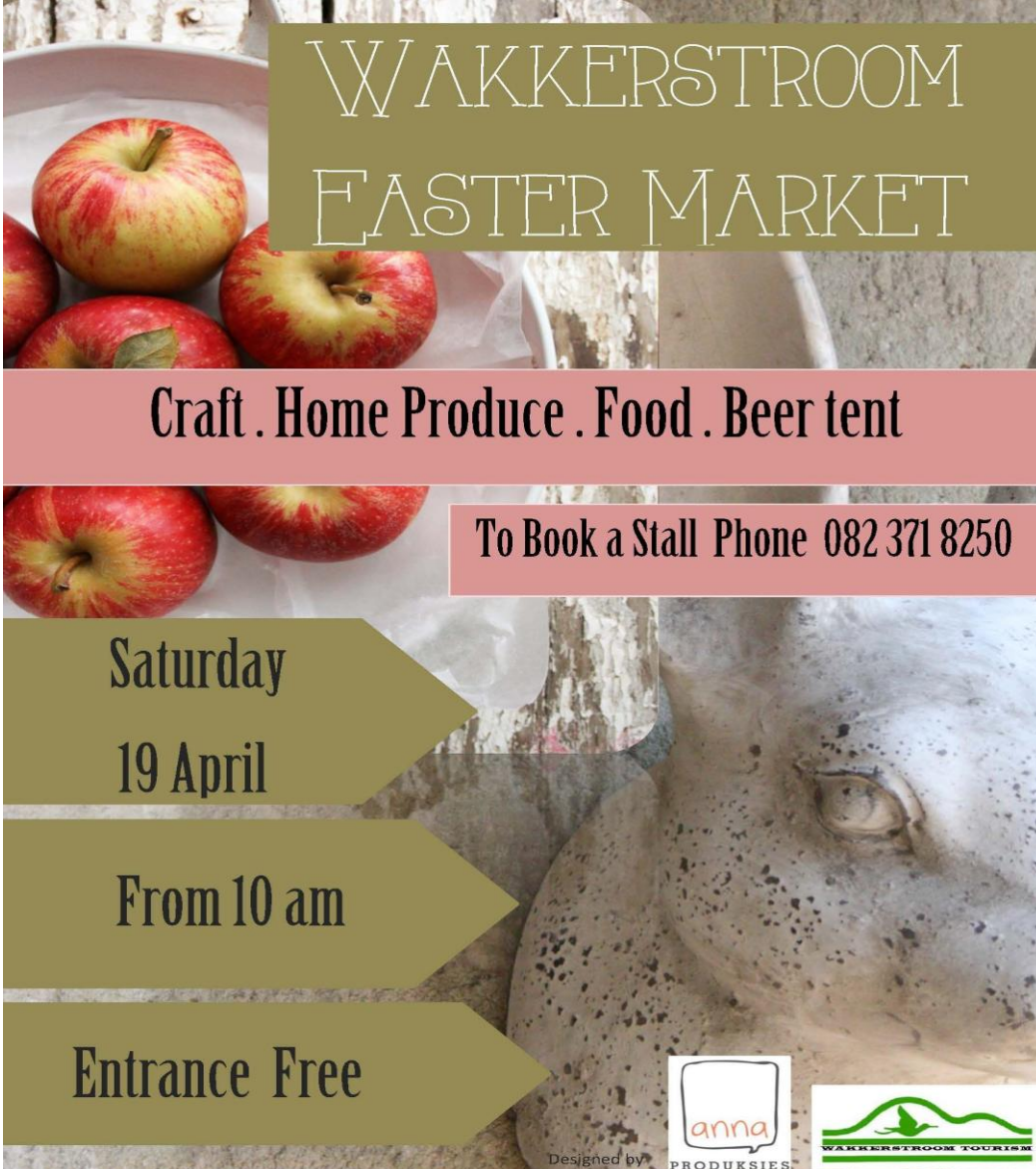
We plan to paint the hide in winter, hopefully inside and out, with Waxedsol which we have on hand.

The next step is a wheelchair-friendly ramp at the entrance but that is very much in the planning stages. The existing ramp is a challenge even for the fleet of foot!

Memberships

This month, we welcome Glenn Ramke to the Club. We wish her a long and happy association with the Club.

The Easter Market



WAKKERSTROOM
EASTER MARKET

Craft . Home Produce . Food . Beer tent

To Book a Stall Phone 082 371 8250

Saturday
19 April
From 10 am
Entrance Free

Designed by  

We had a successful stall at the Xmas Market last year and are having another one at the Easter Market to be held on 19 April 2014. - Come and support us! The money we make supports the Club!

Bird of Month: Blue Korhaan

Scientific Name/Meaning: *Eupodotis caerulescens* Eupodotis = Eu - beautiful; pod - a foot; otis – a bustard. Thus a bustard with beautiful feet, probably meaning a bustard that runs well.

Caerulescens – Latin – becoming or tending to blue.

General: Blue Korhaans are one of the more sociable of the bustards and are usually found in small groups, as many as six birds on occasion. Noisy birds, they start the day by calling loudly, led by the male with the rest of the group joining in. They are virtually Endemic to South Africa but also occur in the west of Lesotho where it is declining due to population pressures.

Description: Length 54-56cm and weighing +/- 1.3kg. Unmistakable, the only korhaan with a bright blue-grey front and neck. The male has a black-and-white face whereas the female's face is buff and black. Juveniles resemble females but are duller. Blue Korhaans are reluctant flyers, preferring to crouch on the ground if danger threatens. They don't have aerial courtship display flights like the Black-bellied Bustard and Red-crested Korhaan but an infrequent display flight probably linked to disturbance.

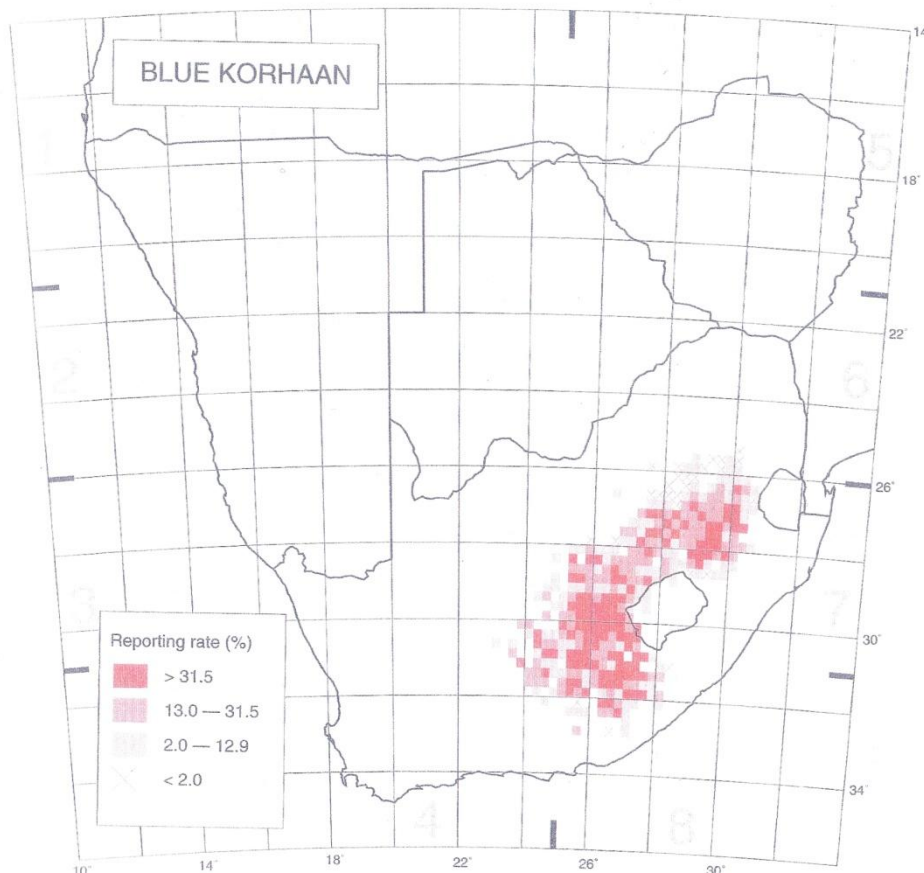
Status/Conservation: Considered Near Threatened in the Eskom Red Data Book of 2000 but loss of habitat is a threat to all of our Highveld grasslands and their birds. The new RDB will shed some light on its current status.

Food and Feeding Methods: Grasshoppers, beetles, small reptiles, grass seeds, flowers and leaves of some flowers. Forages in cultivated/irrigated lands and fallow fields. The group walks slowly, feeding on items on the ground.



Habitat: Highveld grassland, in Wakkerstroom they appear to be attracted to the altitude, flat topography and burnt grasslands. Burns are attractive to them in other areas.

Breeding: Extremely complex, sometimes monogamous, sometimes two males/one female or vice versa, in one instance five males consorted with one female. The breeding peak is normally October/November, Nests on bare ground in short, thick grass. One to three eggs, usually two, are laid, and are greenish, blotched with brown and olive. Incubation takes 24-28 days, probably shared by other females in the group. The fledging period is about 5 weeks.



Diary of Events:

N.B. We advise carrying a drink, snack, hat and insect repellent to all outings.

Our usual trip to the Vlei will be on Saturday, 5 April 2014. Us intrepid birders will gather by the bridge on the Amersfoort Road at 07h00 with our binoculars, telescopes etc.

There will be an outing on 8 April and a talk or DVD showing on 15 April. Details of both events will be circulated shortly.

Wakkerstroom Bird Feeding Station, Badenhorst Street

This attractive little Feeding Station has been a focal point for locals and visitors alike for some time. It is an enhancement to that side of the street and complements the work done by Linda Michelmores and others with the flowers and artefacts surrounding it. John Burchmore puts out food on a regular basis and asks for members and other interested parties to help in supplying mash and bird seed, both available from Miltec in town at a reasonable cost. Anybody prepared to help with this project should, for convenience, leave the seed at The Crow's Nest – with their name.

JOHN BARROW - EDITOR