

# *The Lark*

Newsletter of Birdlife Polokwane

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 Birdlife  
Polokwane

In this issue		
Editors' chirps		2
NEWS		
Out to sea: my first pelagic	Jody de Bruyn	3
Tiny transmitters tracking birds and butterflies	Daniel Engelbrecht	5
Birding is good for you	Joe Grosel	6
An outing to the Sebayeng wetlands	Willem van der Merwe	7
Cordier Bewarea voëlopname (In Afrikaans)	Richter van Tonder	9
Birding from space – the story of Eleanora's Falcon	Derek Engelbrecht	10
Birding the Big Blue	Daniel Engelbrecht	12
BIRD OF THE MONTH		
Swallow-tailed Bee-eater	Daniel Engelbrecht	15
REGULARS		
<b>Bird briefs</b> Bill deformities in three passerine species; Termites in the diet of four raptor species.		16-20
<b>Something old, something new ...</b>		20
<b>Important environmental dates</b>		25
<b>Upcoming events</b>		25
<b>Birdlife Polokwane Committee members</b>		26
Editor's chirps		
<p>In keeping with the flavour of the month, our front cover and two of our articles feature seabirds. Some wonderful sightings have been made in the last 2 months and many exciting trips have been had. It is comforting to know that we should not feel guilty about our time spent birding, as it has now been proven that birding is, without doubt, good for our mental health! So pick up those binoculars and venture out as often as you can. We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this month's issue - please never hesitate to submit your trip reports or articles to us no matter how short they are: <a href="mailto:flufftail1@gmail.com">flufftail1@gmail.com</a>. Enjoy the newsletter!</p> <p>Happy Birding</p> <p>Daniel and Raelene</p>		

The opinions expressed by contributors in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the editors or the committee of Birdlife Polokwane.

**Cover page:** Shy Albatross © Jody de Bruyn

## NEWS

### Out to sea: my first pelagic

Jody de Bruyn (text and photos)

At 7am on 11 March 2017 we headed out of Simon's Town after being briefed on the safety protocols and procedures aboard the boat. Our route for the day would take us in a southerly direction passing by Cape Point, and from there travel another 40km's out to sea. Our guides, John Graham and Trevor Hardaker, made seabird identification look like a breeze, and they would eagerly explain key identification features of the birds we saw.



Pelagic birding off Cape Point, South Africa.



Great Shearwater.

Approaching Cape Point we passed by a group of African Penguins, effortlessly floating out at sea. We had very good views of Cape Gannets as they flew by, and every so often we would have a Kelp Gull passing by. As Cape Point became more distant, and our anticipation of seeing some awesome seabirds increased, Trevor called out the first one: 'PARASITIC JAEGER'! At once everyone looked through their binoculars in the direction Trevor was pointing at. A few

minutes later: 'SOOTY SHEARWATER'! For the next 10km's calls followed for Great Shearwater, Cory's Shearwater and an influx of White-chinned Petrels flying by in every other direction.



The beautiful Sabine's Gull.

Our first sighting of an albatross came in the form of an Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross. Just as quickly as it appeared for everyone to see, it glided by and disappeared behind the swell. The next species came in the form of a Sabine's Gull, a deep-sea gull, much smaller than the common Grey-headed Gull. They had the loveliest tri-coloured wings, black-grey-white. As we moved on, we encountered several more. The next albatross

came in the form of a Shy Albatross. This would also be the most commonly encountered albatross on our trip (thus not so shy after all), with the White-chinned Petrel the most commonly found seabird on the day.

A Brown (Subantarctic) Skua followed the boat, and came within meters to see if we had a fishy snack for it. Another call from Trevor: 'ATLANTIC YELLOW-NOSED ALBATROSS'! Whoohoo!!! This would become my 650th photographed bird species in South Africa. This was followed by a Black-browed Albatross and later a Pomarine Skua (Jaeger). As we reached the deep sea fishing waters, the skipper followed a few of the bigger fishing trawlers. There was a major influx of seabirds, some of them gliding low over the surf, while others formed small groups sitting on the sea waiting for some fishy snack to come their way.



White-chinned Petrel.

We now started seeing some of smaller seabirds such as the storm petrels, at first only a few individuals and later small groups. The species we encountered were European and Wilson's Storm Petrels. To the untrained eye they all looked the same, but after a while, knowing what to look out for, it became much easier to distinguish these two species from one another. They looked like little

ballerinas, with their legs hanging down, treading water every so often. Another call from Trevor: 'ARCTIC TERN', as he pointed in the direction of a single tern following a small group of Common Terns.



The skipper steered the boat, circling some of the fishing boats. Small groups of Shy Albatrosses, White-chinned Petrels, Great Shearwater, Sabine's Gulls and storm petrels surrounded us ever so often, with Indian Yellow-nosed and Black-browed Albatross using the wind to effortlessly glide by. Unfortunately, the time had come to head back, and slowly we started making our way back to Simon's Town. We would have



The majestic Shy Albatross.

a few more excellent sightings of some of these amazing seabirds as we approached Cape Point. As I got off the boat, I couldn't believe that time had gone by so quickly. This was my first ever pelagic trip, and it will surely not be my last.



## Tiny transmitters tracking birds and butterflies

**Daniel Engelbrecht**

Technology is always developing and moving science forward and now tiny tracking devices are being used to track the movements of birds and other animals. One of the projects is called the Motus Wildlife Tracking System and it is based in Ontario in Canada. The system is simple: a small satellite transmitter weighing less than 0.3 grams is fitted to a bird's body and as the bird is released the transmitter starts to send pulses that are received by a very high frequency receiver. The receiver then connects the dots and produces a map of the bird's movements.



A Prothonotary Warbler fitted with one of the locaters.

The transmitters have been used in a recent study to track the movement of migratory birds over the Gulf of Mexico from South America to North America. They have produced amazing results and have shed more light on the migratory routes of birds such as the

Prothonotary Warbler and Red Knot. A Swainson's Thrush, caught and fitted with a transmitter in Colombia, was tracked all the way to its destination at Canada's Chaplin Lake. This individual travelled an awe-inspiring 6000 kilometers in just 34 days!

The new technology from Motus also has a comparative advantage over geo-locators and ringing as the bird does not need to be re-captured in order to receive the data. The transmitters are also so small and lightweight that the bird doesn't even realize that it's there in the first place!



A Motus transmitter being fitted on a butterfly.

However, the most astounding innovation from Motus is by far the minute transmitters being used to track Monarch Butterflies on their migratory route from Mexico to southern Canada. These locaters are so small that they can be fitted onto the butterfly's abdomen without the butterfly falling from the sky! On average the transmitters cost approximately \$190 or R2360 (before we received junk status!) and can be fitted to almost any animal.

The Motus project is gaining popularity and there are now projects in Europe and Australia as well. All of these are helping us to improve our understanding of the amazing migration strategies and pathways of birds.



## **Birding is good for you**

**Joe Grosel**

It is now scientifically proven that birdwatching is good for your well-being! A recent study published in *Bioscience*, which involved a survey of 270 people of diverse background and ages, found people who spend more time indoors are more likely to report higher levels of anxiety or depression. The study reported improved mental health benefits if people were able to see birds, shrubs and trees, regardless of whether they lived in urban or leafier suburban neighbourhoods.

The study also found that birding (or the number of birds seen) in the afternoon was better for your well-being. More importantly, it was not so much the number of bird species seen, but rather the number of individual birds seen that was linked to mental health

quality. Since most participants in the study were unable to identify individual bird species, the researchers found that it is the interaction with birds that provide mental health benefits, rather than particular species or numbers of species seen.

So, to avoid going mad, get yourself a bird feeder and bird bath, take every afternoon off and reinvigorate your mental well-being.

For more information, visit <http://www.birdguides.com/webzine/article.asp?a=6231>.



## **An outing to the Sebayeng wetlands**

**Willem van der Merwe (text) and Julia Friskin (photos)**

These wetlands, close to the University of Limpopo in Mankweng, have been for some time a hot-spot for interesting sightings, and thus it was with high expectations that nine of us set off from town on the morning of 25 March 2017. Arriving around the break of dawn, we were greeted by Cattle Egrets flying overhead. Almost immediately, Jody recognized the distinctive call of a River Warbler! This species is considered a rare summer visitor, with sporadic records mainly from Zimbabwe and Limpopo. Its migratory movements are still poorly known but we know it breeds in Europe and Asia, and winters in Africa. In southern Africa, it calls mainly in March and April. We were extremely lucky just to hear it calling! It would have been a treat to see it but, unfortunately, this master skulker did not respond to our enticements.



The Sebayeng contingent celebrating their River Warbler.

We were also on the lookout for Thrush Nightingales, which are similarly enigmatic visitors, and which was spotted at Sebayeng earlier this year. Alas, this time they were absent, and we didn't even hear any calling! We *did* however hear another warbler not many people see - a Garden Warbler. Well, we didn't see it either - at least not well - as the bush was simply too rank following the recent good rains we had. The warbler actually seemed to be taunting us!

The best we could do was to catch some fleeting glimpses of it as it hopped around in the tangle of twigs.

Nevertheless, it was a good day for warblers and their ilk. In addition to the above, we also heard Cape Grassbirds, Burnt-necked Eremomelas, Little Rush Warblers, Chestnut-vented Tit-babblers, Long-billed Crombecs and Lesser Swamp Warblers, over and above the usual suspects such as Rattling Cisticolas and Tawny-flanked Prinias. We also heard and had good views of Sedge Warbler.

For me the treat of the day was the Great Reed Warbler! I first heard its harsh, churring song and Jody identified it for us. We were treated to good and unmistakable sightings, as it perched out in the open for all to see. I hadn't seen this species in many years.

The wetlands themselves were looking - though not smelling - quite good! It was squelchy going, especially to Saartjie, Annette and Schalk, who'd neglected to bring their gumboots! Grasses and reeds were dense and there was much open water. Perching close to the water were some lovely Wire-tailed Swallows, and we also saw Greater Striped and Barn Swallows in flight. The Cattle Egrets were all over the place, and there were some Sacred Ibises too. Mark got photographs of a Grey Heron. We also saw and heard Green-backed and Squacco Herons. But the one we were looking out for, the Rufous-bellied Heron, either wasn't there, or hid itself very well! Other wetland birds we got included quite a few African Wattled Lapwings, Blacksmith Lapwings, a Three-banded Plover, Wood Sandpipers, the ubiquitous Black Crakes, Red-knobbed Coots, Common Moorhens, Purple Gallinules (heard, but not seen), at least one Hamerkop, and some Hadedda Ibises flying overhead. Wildfowl included Egyptian Geese, Yellow-billed Ducks, Red-billed and Hottentot Teals, and a female Spur-winged Goose (another one I'd not seen for some time). White-winged Widowbirds were nesting in the reedbeds, Little Bee-eaters were perching prettily in the waterside trees, and European Bee-eaters were flying overhead. We also saw some Woodland Kingfishers, a not too common species on the Polokwane Plateau. Another treat were several Orange-breasted Waxbills flitting in and out of the long grasses and reeds. We were also happy to find a single, probably



The sought-after Cuckoo-finch.



female, Cuckoo-finch.

In the dense bush we were looking for a Gorgeous Bushshrike. On a previous outing, we were teased by one who was calling and skulking about, never allowing itself to be seen. Well, this time we didn't even hear it, though we were trying to lure it out by playing its call! Typical savannah and grassland species included Swainson's Spurfowl, Grey Go-away-bird, Acacia Pied Barbet, Red-eyed Dove, Rufous-naped Lark, Southern Fiscal, Lesser Grey and Red-Backed Shrikes, White-throated Robin-Chat, Blue Waxbill, Pin-tailed Whydah, Yellow-fronted Canary, White-browed Sparrow-weaver, Scaly-feathered Finch and Marico Sunbird. We also spotted a Jackal Buzzard perched on a pole.

All in all, we didn't see as much as we'd hoped for, but I certainly can't call it a bad day's birding. We were out and about in the bush, and had quite a few nifty sightings.



## **Cordier Bewarea voëlopname**

**Richter van Tonder (teks en foto)**

Birdlife Polokwane is deur Wian Haddad van ZZ2 se Cordier Bewarea versoek om 'n voëlopname namens hulle te doen. Die opname het Vrydagmiddag 31 Maart 2017 om 17:00 begin en het tot 11:00 Sondagoggend 2 April 2017 geduur. Al die voëls wat gesien en/of gehoor is was aangeteken. Alhoewel die opname aan die einde van die somerseisoen gedoen was en ons dus moontlik nie al die trekvoëls gesien het wat gewoonlik daar mag wees nie, het ons tog verskeie trekvoëls waargeneem. Die bewarea het twee SABAP2 pentads verteenwoordig, naamlik 2325\_3005 en 2330\_3005, en die verskeidenheid habitatte in die bewarea beteken dan ook dat daar heelwat verskillende voëlspesies teenwoordig is.

Die relatiewe klein area (in pentad 2325\_3005) waar ons kon beweeg rondom Sanga Lodge en die nabygeleë dam het 83 spesies opgelewer. Hier was veral heelwat van die migrerende sangers, waaronder die Europese Rietsanger (Marsh Warbler) en die gesogte Sprinkaansanger (River Warbler). Die dam met sy twee Water Dikkoppe (Water Thick-knee) was 'n besondere



Water Dikkop (Water Thick-knee).

interessante waarneming gewees aangesien hulle maar skaars in daardie geweste is. Twee ander hoogtepunte was Gryskapokvoëls (Grey Penduline Tit), een van die kleinste spesies in Suider-Afrika (weeg slegs 6.5 g,) en die Swartkatakoeroe (Black Cuckcooshrike).

Die res van die bewarea val binne die pentad 2330\_3005 en hier het ons 90 spesies opgeteken. Hier kon ons hoofsaaklik net op die paaie beweeg om voëls te soek aangesien meeste van die paaie of toegegroeï was of verspoel het. Besondere spesies was die Konkoit (Gorgeous Bushshrike) teen Tswale Kop, nog 'n groepie Gryskapokvoëls, Water Dikkop en 'n groepie Swarthelmlaksmannetjies (Retz's Helmetshrike) wat 'n trekpleister is vir baie voëlkykers. Ons het maar min roofvoëls gesien maar 'n Bruinslangarend (Brown Snake Eagle) en Grootjagarend (African Hawk-eagle) was hoogtepunte in die afdeling.

Ons totale lys vir die naweek was 125 spesies. Ietwat verbasend is dat ons geen koekoeke gesien of gehoor nie. Koekoeke is trekvoëls en roep hoofsaaklik van hulle aankoms tot so Desember/Januarie. Ek wil net graag vir Wian Haddad en die bestuur van ZZ2 se Cordier Bewarea bedank vir die geleentheid wat hulle ons gegee het om die voëlopname daar te kon doen.



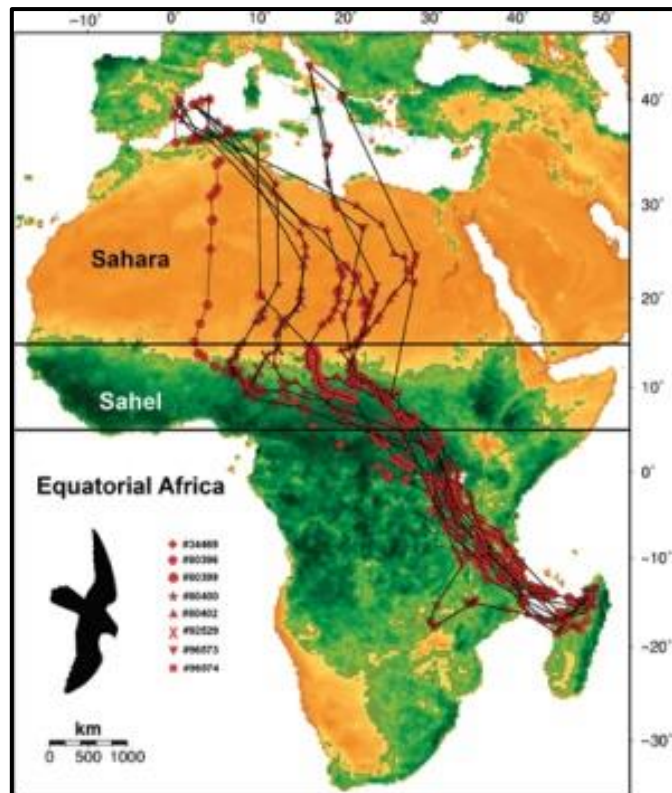
## **Birding from space– the story of Eleonora's Falcon**

**Derek Engelbrecht**

Eleonora's Falcon is a rare Palearctic migrant which breeds in the Mediterranean and winters in Madagascar. It is considered a rare vagrant in southern Africa but indications are that it may perhaps be more common on the coastal plains of southern and central Mozambique than generally thought. Although there are at least eight records from Zimbabwe dating as far back as 1987 and as recent as April 2013, all these records were either rejected or placed in the category of 'unconfirmed or rejected' records by the Zimbabwean Rarities Committee. Three of these records were from eastern Zimbabwe and accompanied by detailed descriptions but were, for various reasons, overlooked or rejected as Eleonora's Falcon can easily be confused with the more common Eurasian Hobbies, especially in poor light. However, data from satellite-tracked Eleonora's Falcons suggest that north-eastern Zimbabwe is within the migratory pathway of the species.

In November 2010, data from a satellite-tracked Eleonora's Falcon (# 96753) showed the bird was present in the Chinhoyi area and a couple of days later in the vicinity of Darwendale Village. It then exited Zimbabwe and headed towards southern Malawi, before heading east to cross the Mozambique Channel on its way to Madagascar. Data from

another bird showed it moved around central Mozambique for some time before flying across to Madagascar. Looking at these two records, it is possible that Eleonora's Falcons are present in central Mozambique in November before heading east to Madagascar, and it is therefore entirely feasible that at least some birds may stray into eastern Zimbabwe. According to Brian Marshall, the satellite record of Eleonora's Falcon (#96753) provides solid evidence of the species presence in Zimbabwe and suggests that the species can now confidently be added to the Zimbabwean bird list. This is an interesting example how space-age technology is applied in birdwatching and as satellite data starts to reveal some of the complex migration patterns of birds, it will undoubtedly lead to more such interesting cases.



Migratory pathway of satellite tracked Eleonora's Falcons.

Source: Mellon et al. (2013) *Journal of Avian Biology*.

For more information on this interesting story, the following two references are recommended:

Marshall B 2016. Eleonora's Falcon: a new species for Zimbabwe. *Honeyguide* 62(1): 12-14.

Mellone U, López-López P, Limiñana R, Piasevoli G and Urios V 2013. The trans-equatorial loop migration system of Eleonora's Falcon: differences in migration patterns between age classes, regions and seasons. *Journal of Avian Biology* 44: 417-426.

Copies of these articles can be obtained from me.

#### Did you know?

Eleonora's Falcon was named after Princess Eleonora d'Arborea (1350-1404). She was a ruler in Sardinia and during her reign introduced legislation which was very progressive at the time, including the preservation of property rights for women and laws to protect the environment. She loved birds and was the first person to provide legal protection for a bird. This bird is now known as *Falco eleonora* or Eleonora's Falcon.



## Birding the Big Blue

**Daniel Engelbrecht (text and photos)**

'Flock at Sea Again 2017' came and went. This was the largest ever congregation of birders on a cruise ship, the beautiful and majestic MSC Sinfonia. From the 24<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2017, nearly 2000 birders took to the sea in the hope of spotting some of the world's deep sea seabirds. For many, this was most certainly going to be the trip of a life(r) time! No fewer than 12 Birdlife Polokwane members were on board: Joe Grosel (as a guide), Lukas van der Walt, San3 de Wet, Simone Swiel, the four van Manens and the four Engelbrechts.



Manx Shearwater.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of April we arrived full of anticipation and excitement at the Duncan Docks in Cape Town Harbour, where we were greeted by large flocks of Swift Terns and Hartlaub's Gulls, both very common species for the area but indeed a start. Once on-board, we checked in with Birdlife South Africa and soon the ship started negotiating its way out of the docks and headed off into the deep sea of the Atlantic Ocean. On our way out of the harbour, we ticked off Cape Cormorant, Bank Cormorant and the sought-after Crowned Cormorant. Once in open water, the guides started calling off some of the oceanic species such as Cory's Shearwater, Shy Albatross, Sooty Shearwater and Manx Shearwater. The late start meant we passed Cape Point just before dark, putting an end to the first day's birding although, believe it or not, some people used torches to do some nocturnal pelagic birding! Tomorrow would be another day.

The next morning was an early one for all (or most) on board and it was immediately obvious that we were in deep waters. Where birding on land relies on

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Birding at the stern of the ship.





White-chinned Petrel.

targeting different habitat types, this is a bit trickier in a featureless ocean. Birding at sea relies on unseen clues such as water temperature, depth, currents, upwellings and knowledge of subsurface features such as slopes and mountains. The trip organizers got it spot-on as some of the first birds seen on day 2 were a Southern Royal Albatross and some Wandering Albatrosses, followed by many more Sooty Shearwaters, Black-browed

Albatross and White-chinned Petrels. The guide suddenly called Grey Petrel (a very rare vagrant to South African waters) and Black-bellied Storm Petrel at the same time and everyone went into a frenzy searching the waters for both birds. Fortunately, both birds glided by close to the boat to produce first-class sightings. These birds were followed shortly by many more, such as the rare White-headed Petrel, Antarctic Prion and Blue Petrel (the one that got away!). After much debate over the identification of one the larger albatross species, the general consensus reached was that it was a Tristan Albatross. The Sooty Albatrosses seen on this day would have satisfied most birders, but the undisputed tick of the trip was a single Light-mantled Albatross also seen on the now legendary day 2 of the cruise. This sighting was only the 15<sup>th</sup> record of this species in South African waters, making it a mega-tick for all who were lucky enough to see it. With such mega-ticks (and most of them even before breakfast!), it is understandable that expectations were high, but more was still to come... I will forever remember having breakfast and seeing several Wandering Albatrosses soaring just outside the window.

Day three saw us in the area of the Natal Seamount, an area of three, high subsurface mountains which is generally known as a good pelagic birding area. Unfortunately, the sea temperatures and currents conspired on the day so birding wasn't as exciting as on day 2, but the rough seas meant many birders were frantically looking for their motion sickness tablets rather than birds! Birds were generally few and far between on this day but the usual White-chinned Petrel, Great Shearwater and Wilson's Storm Petrel turned up. The highlight of the day for me was good sightings of both Southern and Northern Giant Petrels. Day three ended with a spectacular double rainbow across the vast open ocean with Shy Albatrosses banking through them, making for some master class shots.



Our last day on-board the ship, saw us cruising along the continental shelf, which meant we would see many more seabirds. Unfortunately, our chances of seeing the real deep sea specials and other rarities, would also be decreasing rapidly. Still, the day turned up good sightings of Brown Skua, Indian and Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, Parasitic Jaeger, Shy and Black-browed Albatrosses, Great; Cory's and Sooty Shearwater and European Storm Petrel, amongst many others. The highlight of day four was several sightings of the rare Little Shearwater and its close relative the Subantarctic Shearwater. These two species used to be called the Little Shearwater but was recently split into these two species.

Not only was the birding great on board the MSC Sinfonia, but Birdlife South Africa had also arranged several presentations by world class seabird experts such as Peter Harrison and Peter Ryan, to mention but a few. The presentations included talks on conservation on Marion and Gough Islands, birding in Antarctica, Malawi and Ethiopia, a lecture by Faansie Peacock on digital painting, a Birdlasser and photographic workshop, a seabird identification course and a talk about Birdlife South Africa's involvement in penguin conservation.

Overall the trip turned up a total of 36 species for me and, more importantly, 12 new lifers including many rare vagrants. 'Flock at Sea Again 2017' was an unforgettable experience for everyone on-board, producing some truly unforgettable birds and memorable sightings.



We had an outside chance of seeing Sooty Albatross and day two delivered the goods. ©San3 de Wet

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### Swallow-tailed Bee-eater *Merops hirundineus*

Although common throughout most of its range the Swallow-tailed Bee-eater remains a prized sighting in the Limpopo Province.

The species favours the drier areas of the country with its range covering western Limpopo, the North West Province and the Northern Cape. Identification is relatively easy



Swallow-tailed Bee-eater showing its deeply forked, sky-blue tail.

and it is distinguished from all other bee-eaters by its forked 'sky-blue' tail, green upperparts and bright blue collar. It is a medium-sized bee-eater, somewhat larger than a Little Bee-eater but smaller than the European Bee-eater.

As the name suggests the Swallow-tailed Bee-eater feeds mostly on honey-bees but flies, beetles, butterflies and other flying insects are also preyed upon. They hunt by scanning for prey from a perch and then swooping down in order to seize it. Unlike many other bee-eaters they do not migrate but are nomadic and often re-locate in search of prey. These bee-eaters live a social life and are often seen in small family groups of up to 10 individuals when not breeding, but pair off when breeding and pairs usually nest alone.

The nest is a typical bee-eater nest excavated on either flat ground, a roadside bank or an aardvark hole with the burrow being dug up to 1 meter into the ground. Very little is known about the development of the chicks but the clutch size varies between 2 and 4 eggs.

#### When and Where?

The Swallow-tailed Bee-eater remains a relatively uncommon bird in the Limpopo Province but can be seen throughout the year. The favoured habitat of these birds is dry woodland with Kalahari sands making Bloubaai Nature Reserve and the surrounding areas the best bet to find this beautiful bee-eater.



A Swallow-tailed 'Dragonfly-eater'.

## REGULARS

### Bird briefs

#### Bill deformities in three passerine species

Derek Engelbrecht

Bill deformities typically affect less than 0.5% of a population (Pomeroy 1962). This rarity may be due to lower survival prospects of the affected individual, but such occurrences are also seldom reported which makes it even more difficult to discern patterns in its occurrence. Reporting deformities is important, as changes in its prevalence might serve as an early warning of environmental problems, as shown by Handel and Van Hemert (2015). Bill deformities may result from a variety of causes such as damage/injury, bacterial or viral infection, heat stress, genetic defects and environmental contamination.

Whilst handling birds, one has the opportunity to see and photograph some of these deformities or injuries from close-up. Here, I report on bill deformities observed in three species.

i) Cape White-eye *Zosterops virens*

A bird was caught in a mist-net at Kurisa Moya Nature Lodge (23°48'S; 29° 56'E) on 2 June 2016. The bird had an elongated, decurved bill, resembling the bill of a Collared Sunbird.



Cape White-eye with a deformed, decurved bill (left) and the normal bill shape (right).



ii) Red-headed Finch *Amadina erythrocephala*

A female bird with a deformed, crossed bill was captured and ringed at a feeder in Welgelegen (23°53'S; 29°27'E), Polokwane, on 1 October 2016. Crossed bills are the most common bill deformity in birds and affected birds are usually capable of coping well with this deformity (Engelbrecht 2016). This individual has been seen on a number of occasions since she was ringed.



iii) Cape Long-billed Lark *Certhilauda curvirostris*

On 18 March 2017, I collected the Cape Long-billed Lark, below, on the Kleinsee Road (29°22S; 17°03'E) near Port Nolloth. Its bill was not only unusually long, but its mandible was greatly elongated and effectively prevented the bill from closing completely.



Cape Long-billed Lark with deformed bill (left) and the normal bill shape (right).

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- Handel CM and van Hemert 2015. Environmental contaminants and chromosomal damage associated with beak deformities in a resident North American passerine. *Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry* 34: 314-327.
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## Termites in the diet of four raptor species

**Daniel Engelbrecht and G Derek Engelbrecht**

Most of the larger birds of prey are usually associated with catching large prey items, such as mammals and other birds, using their talons. However, it is easy to forget that termites contain more protein, pound for pound, than beef! Therefore, these little invertebrates can provide an essential and irresistible source of food and energy for even the largest raptors. Here, we report on four cases of birds of prey, feeding on termites.

### i) African Harrier-hawk *Polyboroides typus*

On 4 April 2017, a juvenile African Harrier-hawk (Gymnogene) was seen flying over our house in Welgelegen, Polokwane. The bird was mobbed by, amongst others, some African Palm-swifts and took refuge in a Cape Ash (*Ekebergia capensis*) in the neighbour's garden. After a brief rest, the bird started showing a keen interest in one of the dead branches. It would stare at it intently before breaking bits off and then sweep its bill along the length of the exposed branch before repeating the action. It stayed about four minutes before it flew off. Upon closer inspection I realized the bird



The juvenile African-Harrier Hawk feeding on termites in a Cape Ash tree.



was in fact eating termites.

ii) Wahlberg's Eagle *Hieraaetus wahlbergi*

Two adult birds were seen feeding on emerging termite alates near Masorini Hill in the Kruger National Park, South Africa, on 24 November 2014. Their taste for the alates was so overwhelming that they would use their talons from time to time to break open the points of emergence.



Wahlberg's Eagle feeding on emerging termite alates.

iii) Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

A wake of 18 Common Buzzards were feeding on termites near the village of Haenertsburg on 9 January 2009. They are usually solitary birds and the area is heavily wooded, so it remains a mystery what cues the birds used to gather at this particular feast.

iv) African Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer*

In 2008, an adult bird was seen eating emerging termite alates in a manner similar to the Wahlberg's Eagle described above in a field adjacent to the Polokwane Bird Sanctuary. The bird was on the ground for at least half an hour, gorging itself on the termites.



A wake of Common Buzzards feeding on termites near the village of Haenertsburg, Limpopo Province.



## **SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW**

**Derek Engelbrecht**

This series features an old (40+ years) and a new (less than five years old) bird-related article.

### **Something old**

Following on our presentation about interspecific competition between cavity nesters at our monthly meeting in March, I thought this record published in *Custos* Volume 1 Issue 5 of April 1972 is worth sharing.



## UNUSUAL BEHAVIOUR OF LILAC-BREASTED ROLLERS



Gewone trouppante is bekend as aggressiewe voëls. Hier sien u een van die paartjie wat deur mnr. Halliday waargeneem is, besig om die Goudstert spegt dood te maak. Daarna het die trouppante die spegt se nes oorgeneem.

Lilac-breasted rollers are known to be aggressive. Here one of the pair seen by Mr. Ken Halliday is seen killing the Golden-tailed woodpecker, whose nest the rollers then took over.

## BUITENGEWONE GEDRAG VAN GEWONE TROUPANTE

**B**IRD watchers may be a continual target for jokes, but their subjects are a source of never-failing fascination to them. One should not forget that the feathered denizens of our National Parks are as much a part of the natural life as the well-known lions and elephants and other species of big game.

The Assistant Director (Nature Conservation) of the National Parks Board in the Kruger National Park recently received an interesting letter from Mr. Ken Halliday, a nature lover who visited the Kruger National Park during September, 1971. In his letter, Mr. Halliday reported an interesting incident involving a pair of Lilac-breasted rollers (*Coracias caudata*) and a Golden-tailed woodpecker (*Campethera abin-*

(Continued on page 41)

**D**AAR mag voortdurend grappig na voëlkenner verwys word, maar dit is 'n feit dat die voëls wat hulle bron van belangstelling is, 'n onuitputlike bron van bekoring vir hulle inhou. Daar moet nie vergeet word dat die geveerde bewoners van ons Nasionale Parke net so 'n deel van ons Park vorm as die leeu en die olifant en ander bekende groot wildsoorte.

Die Assistent-direkteur (Natuurbeewaring) van die Nasionale Parkeraad in die Krugerwildtuin het onlangs 'n interessante brief van mnr. Ken Halliday, 'n natuurleefhebber wat gedurende September 1971 die Krugerwildtuin besoek het, ontvang. In sy brief maak mnr. Halliday melding van 'n interessante voorval wat hy gedurende sy besoek waargeneem

(Vervolg op bladsy 41)

One of the rollers inspects its new nest. The rollers are among the most colourful birds occurring in the North-Eastern part of Southern Africa.



Een van die Troupante ondersoek sy nuwe tuiste. Hierdie trouppante is van die kleurvolste voëls wat in die Noord-oostelike deel van Suid-Afrika voorkom.

Custos/April 1972

39



goni vibrator) which he witnessed during his visit to the Park. The rollers pulled the woodpecker out of its nest in a hole of a tree and then proceeded to kill it. Thereafter, they apparently took over the nest.

As the rollers went in turn right into the hole, Mr. Halliday presumed that they had either decided to take over the nest or had found the woodpecker in their nest on returning from a foraging flight and decided to dispatch it forthwith.

Lilac-breasted rollers normally feed on a variety of insects such as locusts, beetles and caterpillars; arachnids such as scorpions; and even small birds and lizards. They are known to be aggressive, especially towards birds of prey. An incident was recorded on 4 August, 1961, at Tshokwane in which a fight between a Bearded woodpecker and a Lilac-breasted roller took place in the air. Although the woodpecker was apparently the aggressor, it nevertheless fared worst in the fight. The fact that the rollers seen by Mr. Halliday killed a woodpecker, is therefore not unprecedented, but for them to take over a nest is most unusual, if not unheard of.

The rollers are among the most colourful birds occurring in the North-Eastern part of Southern Africa. They are widely distributed in the Kruger National Park and show a preference for thornveld savannahs. The birds nest in holes in trees where the females lay two to three white eggs during the breeding season which lasts from September to December. No attempt is made to line the nest and the eggs usually lie on a little dust and dead leaves.

The name "roller" is derived from the various aerobatics which the birds carry out during courtship, rolling and twisting at great speeds. These display flights are accompanied by harsh, raucous screams designed to attract the attention of a mate.

The blue wings of the Lilac-breasted roller are particularly beautiful in flight, hence the popular name of "Blue Jay". They are, however, in no way related to this North American bird. Mosilikatze, king of the Matabele, reserved the feathers of this bird for his exclusive use and it is often known as "Mosilikatze's Roller".

Other members of the roller family which occur in Southern Africa are the European Roller (has a square tail and is greener about the head than the Lilac-breasted roller), the Racquet-tailed Roller (has a distinctive tail as the name implies, lilac cheeks and violet wing-coverts), the Mocambique Roller (larger and has a distinctive white eyebrow) and the Broad-billed Roller (has a bright yellow bill and greenish-blue breast). □

## OLIFANTE

(Vervolg van bladsy 37)

Ten spyte van die genoemde groot hoeveelhede hitte-energie wat deur die olifant geproduseer word en waarvan daar teen 'n wisselende tempo op verskillende maniere ontslae geraak moet word, slaag hierdie merkwaardige dier nogtans nie net daarin om sy liggaamstemperatuur op 'n merkwaardige wyse konstant te hou nie (die rektale temperatuur

het, 'n Paar Gewone troupane en 'n Goudstert spegt was hierby betrokke. Die troupane het die spegt uit sy nes in 'n gat van 'n boom uitgetrek en hom toe doodgemaak. Daarna het die troupane vermoedelik die nes oorgeneem.

Mnr. Halliday meen dat hulle óf besluit het om die nes oor te neem óf dat hulle die spegt in hulle nes gevind het nadat hulle van 'n strooptog teruggekeer het, en toe besluit het om sonder versuim van die vreemdeling ontslae te raak. Hy skryf dit toe aan die feit dat hulle een na die ander dadelik in die nes ingegaan het.

Gewone troupane vreet gewoonlik verskeie soorte insekte soos byvoorbeeld sprinkane, kewers, ruspers; spinagtiges soos skerpioene en selfs klein voëltjies en akkedisse. Hulle aggressiewe gedrag is bekend, veral teenoor vleisende voëls. 'n Geval van 'n geveg tussen 'n troupane en 'n spegt wat in die lug by Tshokwane plaasgevind het, is beskryf. Hoewel die spegt blykbaar die aanvaller was, het hy nogtans die slegste gevaar. Die feit dat die troupane wat mnr. Halliday gesien het, die spegt doodgemaak het, is dus nie ongehoord nie, maar dit was baie buitengewoon dat hulle 'n nes oorneem.

Die Gewone troupane is een van die kleurvolste voëls wat in die Noord-oostelike gedeelte van Suid-Afrika voorkom. Hulle is wydverspreid in die Nasionale Krugerwildtuin en word veral in die knoppiesdoringvelde gevind. Die voëls bou hulle neste in gate wat in bome voorkom en die wyfie lê dan twee tot drie wit eiers in die broeiseisoen tussen September en Desember. Geen poging word aangewend om die nes uit te voer nie en die eiers lê op 'n bietjie stof of dooie blare.

Die Engelse naam „roller" word afgelei van die verskillende toertjies wat voëls in die lug gedurende die paartyd uitvoer — dan rol hulle en draai hulle teen 'n geweldige spoed en uiter 'n hees geskreu wat alles net bedoel is om die aandag van 'n moontlike maat te trek.

Die blou vlerke van die Gewone troupane is besonder mooi, veral wanneer die voël vlieg — daarom die bekende naam van „Blue Jay", hoewel hulle glad nie aan die Noord-Amerikaanse voël verwant is nie. Mosilikatze, koning van die Matabele, het hom die vere van hierdie voël vir sy eksklusiewe gebruik toegeëien en die voël staan dus ook bekend as „Mosilikatze se troupane".

Ander lede van die troupanfamilie wat in Suid-Afrika voorkom is die Europese troupane (dié het 'n vierkantige stert en het meer groen om die kop as die gewone troupane), die Knopstert Troupane (dié het 'n onderskeidende stert, soos die naam aandui, ligpers wange en donkerpers dekkere), die Groot Troupane (hierdie voël is groter as die vorige en het 'n kenmerkende wit ooglid) en die Geelbek Troupane (dié het 'n helder geel snawel en 'n groenerige-blou bors). □

varieer byvoorbeeld selde met meer as 1°C) maar is sy gemiddelde liggaamstemperatuur ook nog effens laer as dié van die mens en heelwat laer as dié van bykans al die ander groot Suid-Afrikaanse landlewende soogdiersoorte.

Fisiologiese navorsingswerk op wilde diere in die Krugerwildtuin en van die ander Nasionale Parke word voortgesit en van die resultate wat met verdere ondersoek verkry mag word, sal waarskynlik ook mettertyd in latere uitgawes van Custos gepubliseer word. □

## Something new

Molecular studies of phylogenetic relationships of birds have revolutionised the taxonomy of many taxa and has revealed some surprising results. The paper highlighted below, investigated the phylogenetic relationships of the booted i.e. those with feathered tarsi. Of interest to us, is the recommendation that the term 'hawk-eagles' be reserved for small eagles in the New World genus *Spizaetus* and the Old World genus *Nisaetus*. Our two 'hawk-eagles' are now regarded as 'real' eagles and the authors suggest the names Ayer's Eagle for the former Ayer's Hawk-eagle and Bonaparte's Eagle for the former African Hawk-eagle.



Bonaparte's Eagle photographed in the Polokwane Nature Reserve © Derek Engelbrecht

Lerner H, Christidis I, Gamauf A *et al.* 2017. Phylogeny and new taxonomy of the Booted Eagles (Accipitriformes: Aquilinae). *Zootaxa* 4216(4): 301-320.

### Abstract

We present a phylogeny of all booted eagles (38 extant and one extinct species) based on analysis of published sequences from seven loci. We find molecular support for five major clades within the booted eagles: *Nisaetus* (10 species), *Spizaetus* (4 species), *Clanga* (3 species), *Hieraaetus* (6 species) and *Aquila* (11 species), requiring generic changes for 14 taxa. Additionally, we recommend that the Long-crested Eagle (*Lophaetus occipitalis*) and the Black Eagle (*Ictinaetus malaiensis*) remain in their monotypic genera, due to their



distinctive morphology. We apply the recently resurrected genus *Clanga* for the spotted eagles (previously *Aquila* spp.) to resolve the paraphyly of the genus *Aquila* such that the clade including the Booted Eagle (*H. pennatus*), Little Eagle (*H. morphnoides*), Pygmy Eagle (*H. weiskei*), Ayres's Eagle (*H. ayresii*) and Wahlberg's Eagle (*H. wahlbergi*) can remain in the genus *Hieraaetus*. The Rufous-bellied Eagle should be retained in the genus *Lophotriorchis*. For consistency in English names, we recommend that the term "hawk-eagles" be used only for the species in the genera *Nisaetus* and *Spizaetus*. We suggest following new or modified English names: Cassin's Eagle (*Aquila africana*), Bonaparte's Eagle (*A. spilogaster*), Ayres's Eagle (*Hieraaetus ayresii*), and Black-and-chestnut Hawk-Eagle (*Spizaetus isidori*).

The article is free and can be downloaded at:

<https://doi.org/10.11646/zootaxa.4216.4.1>



Temminck's Courser can be tricky to find but the dry winter months are a good time to track them down. They prefer areas with short grass, fallow fields and are particularly fond of recently burnt



## IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENTAL DATES: MAY/JUNE 2017

Month	Date	Event
May	13 <sup>th</sup>	World Migratory Bird Day
	20 <sup>th</sup>	Endangered Species Day
	22 <sup>nd</sup>	World Biodiversity Day
June	5 <sup>th</sup>	World Environment Day
	8 <sup>th</sup>	World Oceans Day



## UPCOMING CLUB EVENTS

Date	Event
13 May 2017	Day outing to Kalkfontein Farm near Dendron with a bring and braai for lunch (RvT)
6 June 2017	Monthly meeting at the Golf Club (LG)
10 June 2017	Half-day bird course for Birdlife Polokwane members (Identifying the large brown raptors of the Limpopo Province) (LG)
15-18 June 2017	Long weekend birding and bird photography outing to Mabula Game Reserve (LG)
24 June 2017	Day outing along the Percy Fyfe and Witvinger route near Mokopane (RvT)
4 July 2017	Monthly bird club meeting
8 July 2017	Day outing to Mockford Farms and vulture restaurant (RvT) (Limited to 12 pax)
RvT (Richter van Tonder)	0822138276
LG (Lisa Grosel)	0833802322

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<b>2017 Committee</b>	
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Deputy chairperson	Mark Friskin
Secretary	Marcia van Tonder
Treasurers	Nick Baglow and Julia Friskin
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