THE LARK

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Newsletter of Birdlife Polokwane

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BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings

The Lark is the newsletter of Birdlife Polokwane and is published bimonthly. It publishes reports of club activities, trip reports, photographic contributions and any natural history notes of birds or events involving birds. Contributions are accepted in English or Afrikaans and are accepted at the discretion of the editors. Non-members are also welcome to contribute, especially if it is of relevance to birds or birding in the Limpopo Province. When submitting images, please submit high resolution images without any borders or frames.

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DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

15 December 2019

Cover *European Honey Buzzard*
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Contents

Regulars

This newsletter is best read in a 'two page view' format.

Club News, Trip Reports and Members' contributions

Going, going, Gurney's

Birding at Randfontein

Willem Van der Merwe

Rust De Winter Dam

Jody De Bruyn

He koma swenonyana 2019

Derek Engelbrecht

Specials galore at Club Ranch Safaris

Jody De bruyn

Editor's chirps

Spring has sprung and the Willow Warbler has sung! Quite a number of migratory species have arrived, and over the next couple of weeks the last remaining 'outstanding' migrants will boost our trip tallies. This issue once again highlights what a birding hotspot the Limpopo Province, and specifically the Greater Polokwane region, is: Gurney's Sugarbird, Red-throated Wryneck, Pel's Fishing Owl, White-backed Night Heron, African Skimmer, African Finfoot, and Half-collared Kingfisher all feature in this issue. We are the envy of many people from all corners of the world, and we should promote our region and the local guides. And what better medium to promote our region than The Lark. Please send us your trip reports: it not only makes for good reading, but it is also a valuable reference source for birders planning to visit our region. We also want to congratulate Jody with his haul of Limpopo specials on a morning outing to Rust De Winter (read his report in this issue).
We hope you enjoy reading this issue and we are eagerly awaiting your interesting contributions.
Raelene and Daniel

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Going ... going ... Gurney's

In search of South Africa's northernmost sugarbirds

Dawie De Swardt

As part of an ongoing project on various aspects of the natural history of isolated populations of Gurney's Sugarbird in the Limpopo Province, I got the opportunity to ring sugarbirds at the Lajuma Research Centre, in the Soutpansberg, Limpopo Province. The Gurney's Sugarbirds of the Soutpansberg are isolated from other populations and they also represent the northernmost population of the species in South Africa. One of the objectives of the study is to obtain blood

Above The Silver Proteas favoured by Gurney's Sugarbird are restricted to the highest elevations in the Soutpansberg.

samples for DNA analysis for Evan Haworth, a Master of Science candidate at the University of Pretoria. Evan is doing a study on sugarbird genetics and is investigating connectivity between populations of Gurney's Sugarbird. We also collect demographic data (by obtaining recaptures when revisiting the sites) and a host of other biological data, primarily related to their breeding strategies.

The sugarbirds occur in association with *Protea roupelliae* (Silver Protea) on the plateaus of mountain ranges, usually above 1700 masl. In 2018, I targeted Schnellkop and Hwiti Mountain near Haenertsburg (see De Swardt and Engelbrecht 2019). After Ryan Van Huyssteen invited me to visit Lajuma Research Centre to ring Gurney's Sugarbird there, I planned a field excursion for August 2019.

Lajuma Research Centre is situated in the western Soutpansberg in the Limpopo Province, between Louis Trichardt (Makhado) and Vivo. This area is also a recognized centre of floristic diversity and endemism, a diversity of vegetation types ranging from grassland to forests, breathtaking mountain scenery, clear mountain streams and waterfalls, interesting archaeological sites, and a pristine wilderness character. It is a popular destination for eco-tourists, scientists and students for a variety of projects. Lajuma is also declared as a Natural Heritage Site and forms part of the Luvhondo Nature Reserve within the UNESCO Vhembe Biosphere Reserve.

Samuel Peta (a SANBI intern based at the University of Limpopo) and I arrived at Lajuma at about 12:00 on the 13th August 2019 where we were met by Ryan Van Huyssteen. To reach the sugarbird site on Lajuma peak, the highest point in the Soutpansberg at approximately 1700 masl, involves a 40 minute hike. However, as we had to carry all our ringing equipment (net poles for eight 12 m nets, rucksack with nets and their equipment, a ringing box with rings, etc.) it took us considerably longer to reach the site - more than an hour! After we 'summited', I scouted for possible sites amongst the proteas to erect the mist nets. Site selection was a little complicated as the proteas were scattered rather far apart and in small clumps. We were fortunate to have met up with a few visiting students descending from Lajuma peak and they helped us lug the heavy equipment to the top, and also assisted us with setting up the first of two nets at a large, flowering Silver Protea. We

were getting our equipment ready to move to the next site when we saw a sugarbird male fly into the net. I cannot begin to express how excited we were to have caught our first sugarbird at Lajuma. It certainly wasn't the first sugarbird I caught within minutes of raising a mist net, but it was a very good start to the research trip and an immense relief! The sugarbird was ringed, measurements recorded and a blood sample was taken for genetic studies. I also took the opportunity to explain to the others how to sex a male Gurney's Sugarbird based on its wing and tail length, and the bulged primary feather. Once we had processed our first catch, we made our way to the lower site to erect some more nets. Following this, we descended and finally arrived at the cottage just after 5 pm.

Above Lugging the heavy ringing equipment up to Lajuma peak is no mean feat - but Ryan did it with a smile!

The next day, 14th August, was a solo trip for me to Lajuma peak as Sam had to do his own fieldwork and Ryan had other commitments. Upon reaching the netting sites, I opened the nets and prepared my ringing station amongst the boulders at the lower of the two sites. I managed to catch two Lazy Cisticolas and two Bar-throated Apalises, but there were no signs of sugarbird activity and I was getting a bit concerned. Most of the morning was

Above Extracting the first ever Gurney's Sugarbird caught in the Soutpansberg © Ryan Van Huyssteen.

Left What a beauty! Note the long tail of male Gurney's Sugarbirds © Ryan Van Huyssteen.

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spent walking around looking for alternative sites for mist netting, but there were no other protea bushes around. At about 10:00, I went to check on the top net and, surprise-surprise, there was another sugarbird in the net waiting for me. My first thought was that

Above Bar-throated Apalis caught and ringed on Lajuma peak.

Right Number 2! Note the yellow pollen (possibly from the endemic Aloe *flowering at the time) on the chin of the sugarbird.*

it was a recapture of the previous day, but I was very delighted when I took the bird out of the net and saw that it was a different, unringed individual! The bird was taken to my ringing station amongst the boulders where I recorded the measurements, collected blood for DNA analysis and ringed the bird before releasing it again. The rest of the day was very quiet at the nets and later that afternoon I closed the nets and started my descent back to the cottage. I decided that 3 days targeting sugarbirds on Lajuma peak would be sufficient, and that I would take down the nets at the end of the next day.

Little did I know - although I should have known as I was in the mountains after all - that the Thursday would be a misty day with strong winds. Sam offered to join me (as the plan was to take down the nets), but our day started with a flat tyre. After fixing the puncture, we walked in misty conditions to the top where the wind was really howling. We decided to

take the nets down and head back - the nets were also wet as a result of the misty conditions. Later that day, I decided to put up some nets in a bushy area near the vlei to catch some other bird species. This proved to be a good decision as I was rewarded with several species within just a couple of hours: Southern and Greater Double-collared Sunbirds. Cape Batis, Terrestrial Brownbul, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, and an Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, amongst others.

The Soutpansberg Gurney's Sugarbird population was the first to be studied and ringed by me. This population is isolated from the escarpment population (where a project in Lydenburg is still ongoing after 30 years!) and those in the Wolkberg and Bewaarkloof regions in the Limpopo Province. Follow-up visits to the Lajuma sites (there is another site not too far from Lajuma) will be done in February 2020, and the following years when the proteas will be more abundant than during the winter months. My study of Gurney's Sugarbirds in Lydenburg showed Gurney's Sugarbirds exhibit site fidelity to protea stands, so it would be interesting to obtain recaptures on follow-up visits and to determine their population densities in the Soutpansberg and other sites in the Limpopo Province.

References

De Swardt DH, Engelbrecht GD 2019. Gurney's Sugarbird. Ringing in the Hwiti Mountain area. The Lark 21: 26-31.

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Above Bully Canary © Richter Van Tonder

Birding at Randfontein

Willem Van der Merwe

Our August club outing was to Schalk and Annette Van Schalkwyk's farm at Randfontein in the Wolkberg mountains. The farm is situated only a few kilometres from Haenertsburg, but has quite a different, much drier climate, seeing as it lies in the rain shadow of the high peaks of the Wolkberg moun-

Above The hilly terrain at Randfontein with the Bewaarkloof mountains in the background © Derek Engelbrecht.

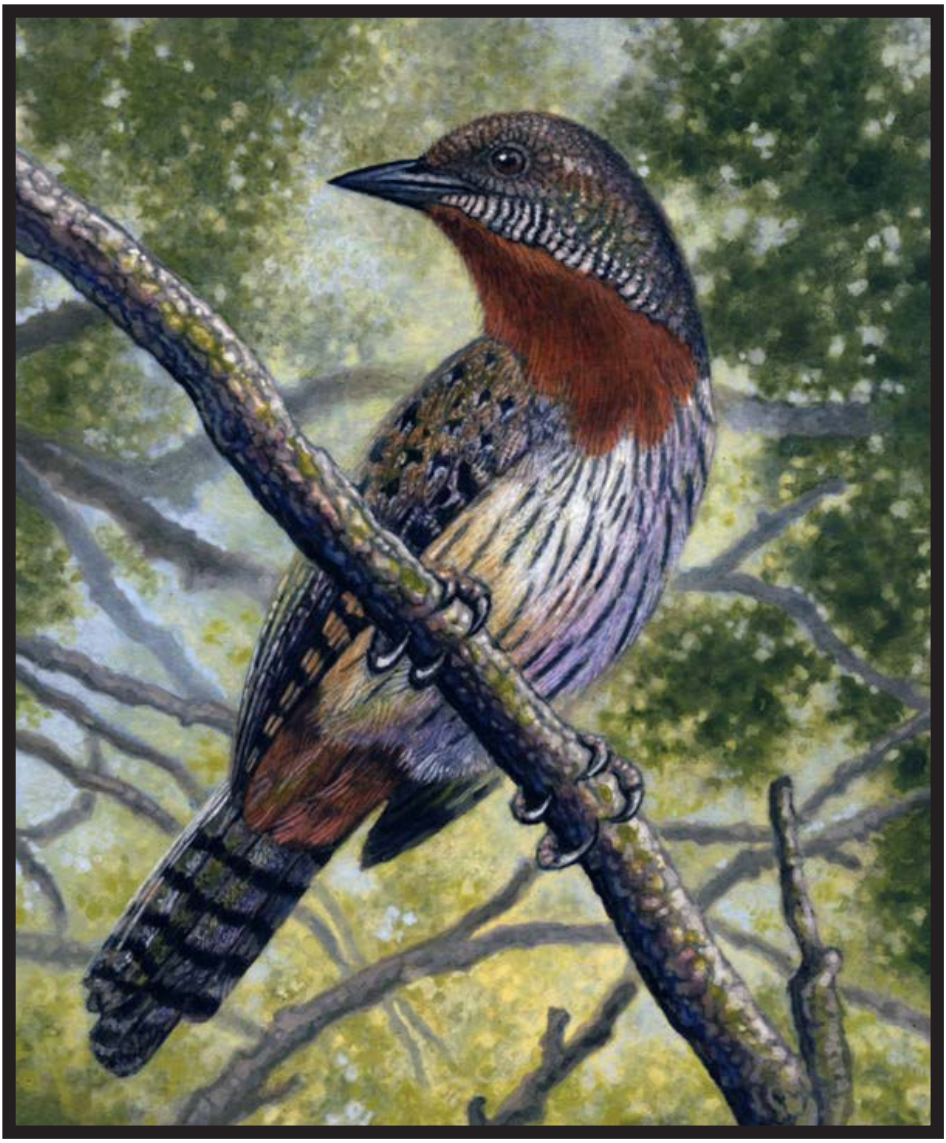
tains. The farm itself is hilly rather than mountainous, and not too difficult to traverse. Richter, Leonie, and I met Schalk and Annette at the farm's entrance. Since Leonie has a bit of difficulty walking, she stayed mostly at the farmhouse. But she didn't have a bad deal! Right outside Schalk and Annette's living room, the birds come to drink water and to feed, and just sitting there and looking out of the window, Leonie (and later the rest of us also) were able to enjoy wonderful sightings.

Schalk took Richter and I around the farm a little bit. The environment is dry bushveld, with a good diversity of trees and other plants. I've been there before, mainly for plant surveys, so it was interesting to be on the lookout for birds this time. And I was not disappointed! The farm yielded over 70 bird species within quite a short distance of walking. Many of the species we recorded were only heard, such as for instance Purple-crested Turaco calling from the forested gorges on the farm. The birds we saw, however, included some brilliant sightings. It is always pleas-

ing to see Golden-breasted Buntings, Grey-backed Camaropteras, Familiar Chats, White-throated Robin-Chats, and both Kalahari and White-browed Scrub Robins. We had especially fine sightings of Brimstone Canaries - a large group of them, almost a flock, perched on trees, out in the open and in good light. This is the most of them I've ever seen together, and we had ex-

Below White-browed Scrub Robin © Richter Van Tonder

Bottom Golden-breasted Buntings were plentiful in the garden © Richter Van Tonder.



Above The Red-throated Wryneck we saw at Randfontein was the inspiration behind this drawing © Willem Van der Merwe

Opposite, top to bottom, left to right White-throated Robin-Chat, Lazy Cisticola, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, Crested Barbet, Jameson's Firefinch, and Yellow-bellied Greenbul © Richter Van Tonder.

cellent views, allowing us to see how they differed from the smaller, more familiar Yellow-fronted Canaries. Another special of the day was a Red-throated Wryneck, who was giving its unmistakable

'kwee-kwee-kwee' call. As it goes, we heard the call first, and then had to search around for a while until we spotted it. The wryneck again gave us some wonderful views and for Richter some excellent photos! It was interesting to hear it call in the winter, but the wrynecks were likely already starting to gear up for spring and the breeding season. Wrynecks are very unusual woodpecker relatives, without the specific wood-pecking adaptations. I don't see them often and this encounter was enough to inspire me to produce a wryneck painting.

Back at the farmhouse, we joined Leonie and Annette to watch the garden visitors. These were of a greater diversity than I had ever expected! In the bird baths, lots of different species mingled and splashed and took care of their feathers. These included a wealth of waxbills, including beauties such as Green-winged Pytilia, Violet-eared Waxbill, and both Jameson's and

Below Team Randfontein 2019.

African Firefinches - and of course the ubiquitous Blue Waxbills. I saw Jameson's Firefinch better than ever before, and could directly compare it with the African Firefinch, a possible source of confusion. Elsewhere on the farm we also saw Red-billed Firefinches, making it a clean sweep of the local firefinches on Schalk and Annette's farm. For me a treat was the Yellow-bellied Greenbul who also came for a splash, and I also enjoyed seeing the Emerald-spotted Wood Doves. On the lawn and amidst the garden plants there hopped an interesting selection of warbler-like species. These included the Lazy Cisticola (one of the targets of the day), Neddicky, and Tawny-flanked Prinia - and it was amazing and educational to see all three together, since the three of them are species that can be confused for each other in the bush. We could note how the Lazy Cisticola was somewhat bigger and darker than the prinia, and longer tailed than the Neddicky. It was exceptional to see these birds up close and for quite a long time as they hopped around undisturbed. We also managed to add another target, Southern Black Tit. Other species we got that are not very often seen closer to Polokwane, included Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Yellow-breasted Apalis, and Sombre Greenbul.

After our time on the farm, Richter and I drove around a bit more, getting closer to Haenertsburg, to see if we could get some additional birds for the pentad. And we did! These included typical grassland bird species of the region such as African Stonechat, Levaillant's Cisticola, Red-collared Widowbird, Cape Canary, and Drakensberg Prinia. A small pond yielded the Egyptian Goose. Raptors of the day included a Rock Kestrel and a soaring African Hawk-Eagle.

All in all it was a pleasant and fruitful day of birding - and I give a big thank you to Richter, Schalk, Annette and Leonie!

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He Koma Swenonyana 2019

Derek Engelbrecht

One of the highlights of my second year Zoology module at the University of Limpopo is the bird ringing demonstration. We dubbed this practical 'He koma swenonyana' which translates to 'We catch birds'. The aim of the practical, which forms part of the second year Zoology undergraduate course, is to highlight various morphological features of birds, to show the students how to perform selected measurements, and to tell them about the hows, whys, and value of bird ringing. There is always great excitement with this practical as the students are eager

to get a closer look at our feathered friends.

This year's bird practical was on the 29th August 2019. Fellow ringer, Billy Attard, and two trainee ringers, Marianne McKenzie and Leonie Kellerman, made up this year's ringing team. We divided the class into groups: I was responsible for the 'networking' demonstration and the whys of bird ringing, while Billy showed the students how to perform selected measurements and how to ring a bird. Whilst listening to Billy explaining the hows of bird ringing to the students, his love and passion for birds was clearly evident.

Despite a fairly strong wind at times (the mist nets move which makes it easier for birds to see), we had a successful day and managed to get Marianne within 20 species of the 500 species mark required for trainee ringers. At the close of nets, we had ringed 50 birds representing 19 species. Laughing Doves topped the numbers table with 11

Opposite The next generation of ornithologists.

Below Billy Attard demonstrating the ringing process to second year Zoology students.

Above, top to bottom, left to right Fiscal Flycatcher, White-browed Scrub Robin, Speckled Mousebird, Kalahari Scrub Robin, a feisty Acacia Pied Barbet showing the toothed bill on Billy's fingers, Namaqua Dove.

individuals ringed, followed by Southern Grey-headed Sparrow and Southern Masked Weaver (six individuals each) sharing second place, and Scaly-feathered Finch and Blue Waxbill completing the rostrum with four individuals each in third place.

There were four retraps representing four species. Details of the retraps follow:

Blue Waxbill AR97813

First ringed as an adult on 2018-08-20 at the same locality on the campus of the University of Limpopo by Billy Attard.

Distance between initial ring-

SZOA022
Class of 2019

RINGING REPORT SUMMARY 29 AUGUST 2019					
Ringing site	University of Limpopo				
GPS	23°56'30.97"S; 29°27'45.70"E; 1300 masl				
Name of outing leader	Derek Engelbrecht (#1245)				
Other registered ringers	Billy Attard (#1402)				
	Marianne McKenzie (trainee), Leonie Kellerman (Trainee)				
Habitat types targeted	Acacia thornveld				
Weather conditions	Fine, with moderate breeze.				
Total number of nets erected	9	Total length (m)	98		
Nets open	05:45 - 15:50				
Height of bottom shelf	1 m				
Other traps used	Flap traps				

Birds ringed				Birds retrapped	
Species	Number	Species	Number	Species	Number
Dove, Laughing	11			Finch, Scaly-feathered	1
Barbet, Acacia Pied	1			Flycatcher, Fiscal	1
Bulbul, Dark-capped	1			Sunbird, Scarlet-chested	1
Dove, Namaqua	3			Waxbill, Blue	1
Finch, Scaly-feathered	4				
Fiscal, Southern	1				
Flycatcher, Fiscal	1				
Mousebird, Speckled	1				
Prinia, Tawny-flanked	1				
Pytilia, Green-winged	1				
Quelea, Red-billed	2				
Robin, Kalahari Scrub	2				
Robin, White-browed Scrub	1				
Sparrow, Southern Grey-headed	6				
Sunbird, White-bellied	2				
Waxbill, Black-faced	1				
Waxbill, Blue	4				
Weaver, Southern Masked	6				
Woodpecker, Cardinal	1				
Number of species ringed			18	Number of species retrapped	4
Number of birds ringed			50	Number of birds retrapped	4
Total number of species processed (ringed + retrapped)					**20**
Total number of birds processed (ringed + retrapped)					**54**

ing site and retrap site: 0 km. Days elapsed: 375 days (1yr, 0m, 10d).

Fiscal Flycatcher AR97684

First ringed as an adult male on 2017-08-31 at VC Lane on the campus of the University of Limpopo by Derek Engelbrecht.

Distance between initial ring-

ing site and retrap site: 0 km. Days elapsed: 729 days (1yr, 11m, 30d).

Scaly-feathered Finch AR97510

First ringed as an adult on 2018-09-05 at the same locality on the campus of the University of Limpopo by Derek Engelbrecht.

Distance between initial ring-

ing site and retrap site: 0 km.
Days elapsed: 359 days (0yr, 11m, 25d).

Scarlet-chested Sunbird AR97827

First ringed as an immature male on 2018-08-20 at the same locality on the campus of the University of Limpopo by Billy Attard.

Distance between initial ringing site and retrap site: 0 km.
Days elapsed: 375 days (1yr, 0m, 10d).

Catch of the day? There were a few contenders: Namaqua Dove, Acacia Pied Barbet and a Black-faced Waxbill, but the Cardinal Woodpecker took this year's honours.

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Above Scarlet-chested Sunbird.

Catching up with rare Limpopo visitors at

Rust De Winter Dam

Jody De Bruyn

Rust de Winter Dam is situated on the southern border of the Limpopo Province about 20 km's east of Pienaarsrivier. There has been an influx of rare birds to this dam over the past few months. With the ever-popular birding destination of the neighbouring Mkhombo Dam's water levels being very low at present, Rust de Winter Dam came under the spotlight of birders'

Above Greater Sand Plover.

eyes. The dam has an impressive shoreline, and this is most certainly an attraction for many migratory waders.

On Saturday the 14th September, I left Polokwane at 4 am and arrived at the dam just after 6 am. News filtered through of a Greater Sand Plover that was found at the dam, and with best intentions of finding the bird, I set out for a long walk along the shoreline. On a previous visit to the dam, I managed to find two Caspian Terns, again an indication that birds were on the move. They are usually found at Mkhombo Dam. Who knows what else could be found?

The shallow waters were packed with waterfowl; Red-billed Teal, Cape Teal, White-faced Whistling Duck, Fulvous Duck, Cape Shoveler, Southern Pochard, and Spur-winged Goose all making it onto my list. African Pygmy Goose have been recorded at the dam previously, but today they were missing. There were a few small flocks of African Spoonbill, and a few Little Egrets, Great Egrets and Grey Herons wading in the shallows.

The most common birds found at the dam were African Jacana, Egyptian Goose and Kittlitz's Plover. They were commonly found while I was walking and scanning the shoreline. I had sightings of a single Grey-headed Gull and a few White-winged Terns that were foraging in the shallows. After close to an hour's walk along the shoreline, I finally found the Greater Sand Plover. I managed to slowly creep closer, but I could see the bird was quite restless, and I kept my distance at

about 40 m away. The slightly larger plover with its striking non-breeding plumage with white breast and belly made it stick out from the rest of the ever present Kittlitz's Plovers.

After numerous photos taken, I left the Greater Sand Plover and continued along the dam's shoreline. I added Black-winged Stilt and Pied Avocet to my list before I got sightings of a Grey Plover. It took flight and moved along the shore-

Above Caspian Tern is a rarity in the Limpopo Province and it was great to add it to this year's provincial bird tally..

line with a flock of Ruff. Some of the other waders I managed to list included Wood Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, and Three-banded Plover. As I neared the end of my walk, I spotted a bird

Above This Grey Plover was an unexpected surprise.

that had a very long curved bill. I could hardly believe it, but it was a very skittish Whimbrel, and I could only manage a distant photo of it.

On my walk back I managed to get a sighting of Great Crested Grebes in the deeper water - another bird that has been difficult to find in the Limpopo Province. Black-necked Grebe has also previously been recorded at the dam. Fish Eagles can be seen around the dam, and every now and then you will hear their iconic call.

After a long walk, I was back at my car and enjoyed some refreshments. Very happy to have been able to connect with all the lovely birds that Rust de Winter Dam has to offer. I suspect that I will be returning to this magical shoreline, searching for some more specials in the not so distant future.

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Above These Great Crested Grebe and Top Whimbrel topped off a brilliant morning's birding.

Specials Galore @ Club Ranch Safaris

Jody De Bruyn

Our convoy of three cars arrived at Club Ranch Safaris just after 6:30 am on the 21st September 2019. For the eight of us that joined the day-outing, there was lots of nervous anticipation as to whether we would get sightings of the main birding goal for the day - the Pel's Fishing Owl. Club Ranch Safaris is situated on the Limpopo River, and nearing our destination we started listing some birds which included; Namaqua Dove, Meve's Starling, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Grey Tit-Flycatcher, White-crested Helmetshrike, African Fish Eagle, African Spoonbill, and Marabou Stork.

After a quick coffee break, we headed out in search of 'the owl'. The clumps of massive trees were the ideal hideaway spots for this elusive species. Our eyes and ears were on alert, slowing moving and scanning the trees, but we were the one's that were spotted first. Suddenly, from the canopy, an orange-brown owl flew out. Success! Pel's Fishing Owl (a lifer for six in the party). It perched in a tree a little further along and gave everyone good views. In total we got to see

Opposite What an amazing bird! Pel's Fishing Owl © Richter Vam Tonder.

Below Everyone savouring the great views we had of the Pel's Fishing Owl © Richter Van Tonder.

Above Wire-tailed Swallow.

Top White-crowned Lapwing in the Limpopo River.

three owls (two adults and a juvenile).

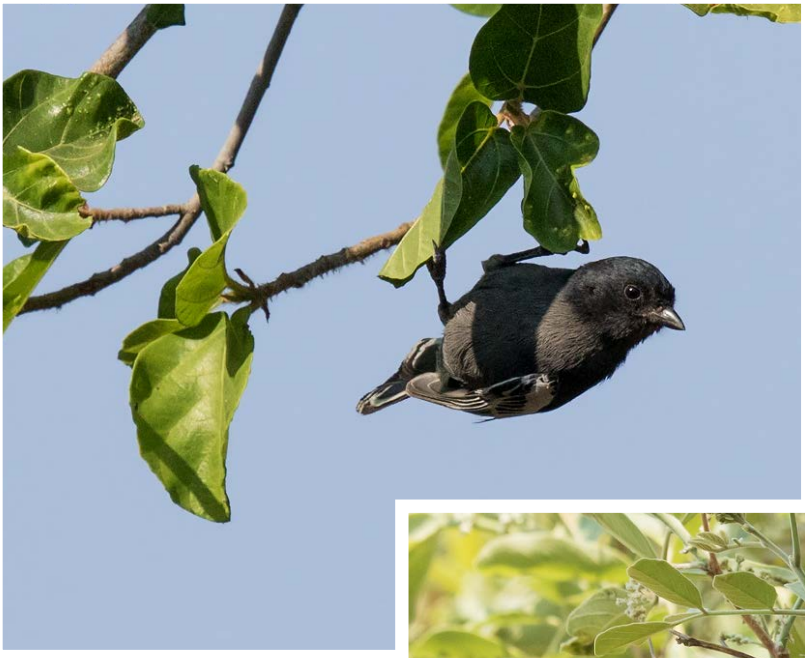
We continued birding the area next to the river and added the following species to our list: Cardinal Woodpecker, Brubru, African Pied Wagtail, Red-headed Weaver, Grey-headed Bushshrike, Hamerkop, Three-banded Plover, White-crowned Lapwing, Wire-tailed Swallow, Wood Sandpiper, African Palm Swift, Grey Heron, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, and Ashy Flycatcher.

Above The secretive and sought after White-backed Night Heron was an unexpected bonus for the day.

We scanned the river to see what else we could add to our trip list when, suddenly, a bird came bursting out of the low hanging branches on the river. Were my eyes deceiving me or did I just see what I thought I did? I lifted my binoculars as the bird landed on a branch in the open. White-backed Night Heron!! What a special bird to see. It moved stealthily through the branches, appearing and disappearing behind the leaves. Another bird appeared - now there were two! We watched as the birds moved along the trees, and seemed to settle towards the back of a thick bush.

We continued adding birds such as Burchell's Coucal, Water Thick-knee, Striated Heron, Common Scimitarbill, Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow, Southern Black Tit, African Darter, Tawny-flanked Prinia, and a lovely female Bennett's Woodpecker. We made our way back to the camp where we all enjoyed some refreshments.

After the morning's success



Above Yellow-bellied Greenbul.

Opposite, top Southern Black Tit.

Opposite, middle Bennett's Woodpecker.

Opposite, bottom Meyer's Parrot © Richter Van Tonder.

we moved around the camp site, to see what else we could round up. White-browed Robin-Chat, Collared Sunbird, Little Sparrowhawk, Lesser Honeyguide and Meyer's Parrot made it onto our list. A Yellow-bellied Greenbul gave us great views, while Black-collared Barbet, Crested Barbet, Black-backed Puffback, and Tropical Boubou were all heard calling. Three hornbill species were listed: African Grey, Red-billed, and Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill. Marabou Stork soared above us, and was soon joined by Yellow-billed Stork, White-backed Vulture, and an African Harrier-Hawk.

Extremely satisfied with the morning's successes, we left the camp site and headed home. On our way out, Brown Snake Eagle, Goliath Heron, Wahlberg's Eagle, Marico Flycatcher, and Sabota Lark were added to our list. We ended with a total of 111 species for the pentad. Thanks goes out to everyone who joined the trip.

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REGULARS

Birds in Art

African Oystercatcher

Text and Artwork **Willem Van der Merwe**

The African Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* is a sturdy shorebird with a stout and powerful bill that it uses expertly to capture and ingest its mollusc prey. In overall length, it reaches 40-45 cm with a bill measuring up to 9 cm. Unusually for birds, the females are slightly larger than the males. This is a fairly rare species, with only about 6 000 adult birds estimated to exist. It lives all around the shoreline of South Africa and Namibia, rarely straying further north to Angola and Mozambique. No other shorebird looks like it. It often betrays its presence by its resounding '*klee-eep … klee-eep*' calls as it flies low over the beach. The scientific name means 'Moquin's blood-foot' and commemorates its discoverer, Alfred Moquin-Tandon, as well as referring to the red legs and feet of the species.

A bill the bane of bivalves

Bivalves are the molluscs that have a pair of shells fitting tightly together, like oysters and mussels. The oystercatcher deftly deals with these. It pries a mussel out of its bed, turns it over, and pecks a hole in the softer bottom of the shell.

African Oystercatcher

© Willem Van der Merwe

Then it inserts its bill in the hole, and bites the adductor muscle in half, the one that the mussel uses to keep its shells tightly closed. Then it is easy to peck out and swallow the soft body of the mollusc. In other cases, the oystercatcher will insert its bill into the gap between the shells, if the mollusc opens up, and sever the muscle in the same way. It also chisels limpets off the rocks on which they fasten themselves,

or hammers directly through their shells to get at the flesh. Apart from molluscs, oystercatchers will also feed on other small critters of the shores: worms, crustaceans, insects, and even fish if they can catch them.

In the closely related Eurasian Oystercatcher, feeding behaviour has been found to significantly change the outward form of the bird's bill. Some oystercatchers actually don't feed on oysters much, instead probing into the beach sand for worms and other digging critters. These oystercatchers have finely pointed bills, which afford a delicate grasp. Those oystercatchers that feed more on molluscs and other bivalves, have broader-tipped beaks that are more powerful chiseling tools. It is the foraging strategy in itself that causes the change in the beak. The horny material of which the beak is made, called keratin (the same as fingernails), grows very rapidly, and the wear and tear on it fashions it into shape. Birds usually learn a specific foraging strategy from their parents, and it stays in the family, but individual birds can actually adopt a new method and in response their bills will change.

That's for the Eurasian Oystercatcher; it's not yet known if something similar goes on with the African species. The two species co-occur occasionally in South Africa. The Eurasian Oystercatcher is a rare visitor to our southern shores. It can easily be told from the African Oystercatcher because it has a white belly and white wing and tail feathers. It also prefers subtly different coastal areas. While African Oystercatchers mostly roam the rocky places, the Eurasian birds prefer sandy or muddy parts.

In South Africa, African Oystercatchers live and breed mainly in the south and southwest. Like other seabirds, they make use of small off-shore islands for breeding and feeding, since they're safer there from predators and disturbance. It is the limited presence of these islands that chiefly constrains the numbers of breeding oystercatchers in South Africa.

The breeding season for oystercatchers is from October to March. Oystercatchers are monogamous; there is not much display between the mated birds, but they chase each other, sometimes with a butterfly-like fluttering flight. They nest in sandy or pebbly places. A pair will stick to the same nest year after year. The nest is just a small hollow scraped out with the feet. Often, African Oystercatchers situate these nests close to tangles of dried-out, black seaweed, so that

the bird sitting on the nest is hidden or camouflaged. Normally the female lays two eggs, but sometimes one or three. The spotted eggs look just like beach pebbles. Male and female both incubate. In the sweltering summer heat these birds so often breed in, it's more important to keep the eggs cool than keeping them warm, and on hot days, instead of sitting on the eggs, the female will stand with her body above them, shading them. Sometimes she will soak her belly feathers in the seawater prior to sitting on the eggs. She will distract people and predators away from the nest with noisy and injury-faking displays. The chicks emerge after 32 days or so. They have soft, dense down covering their bodies and hatch with open eyes; they soon are able to walk, and can also swim if necessary. If a chick fears danger, it crouches down among tangles of seaweed or other beach detritus, where its spotted down camouflages it well. It walks along the beach with its parents, but can't yet feed itself. They will extract the edible parts from shellfish for it. Only when it is adult and its bill is full-size, will it be able to open oysters, mussels, limpets and other shelled molluscs for itself.

Many chicks die, but oystercatchers that survive their youth can live for 35 years, breeding for 25 of those years. Oystercatchers face several threats. Sometimes a nest is washed away by a high spring tide; the eggs are sometimes eaten by Kelp Gulls or by mongooses. A natural risk is the occasional 'red tides' or algal blooms that release toxins in the water, poisoning the shellfish the birds feed on. Mostly the birds suffer from humans. South Africa's beaches are quite popular with people, and these disturb nesting birds, or trample their eggs. Some people think it's fun to drive along unspoilt coastlines with their four-wheeled drive vehicles, and again many nests and eggs get crushed.

Fortunately, at present oystercatchers benefit from the protection of many of their nesting beaches, and communities are also more informed of their needs. There are projects afoot to ring birds and track their movements. The population, though small, is currently stable, and the African Oystercatcher is not considered endangered. Worldwide, on all continents except Antarctica, 11 species of oystercatcher occur, and another one, that lived on the Canary Islands, recently became extinct. It was the closest relative of the African Oystercatcher.

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Bird Briefs

Big Bite Birds: bite force and head morphology in birds

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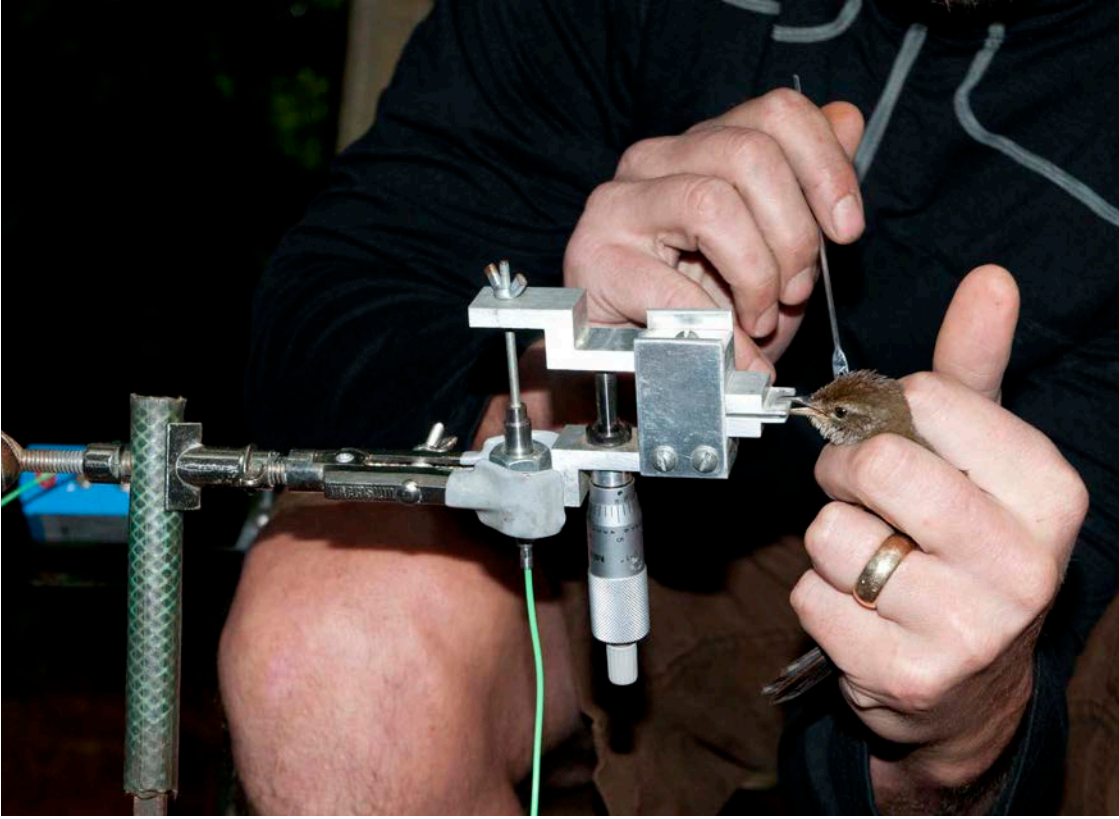
Even with a short trip to eastern South Africa, one would be impressed by the biodiversity, particularly to someone from the United States (CEC). The habitat and biological diversity, including avian diversity, rivals that of western North America. Hence this is a perfect place to gather performance data on birds from a wide variety of ecological, behavioural, and historical backgrounds.

Performance data on birds comes in a wide variety of formats such as foraging speed (the number of attempts at capturing prey over time), bill-closing velocity (how fast a bird can close its mouth around a prey item), and bite force (the force a bird can apply to a prey item). These important yet often ignored data are important to collect because they serve as a mediating link between form and function. Some birds may not be able to forage fast enough on certain prey items to offset energetic demands of breeding. Or, possibly, a bird may be good at capturing flying insects because they have the capacity to close their mouth quickly. On the other hand, because that bird has the ability (and the morphology) to close its mouth quickly, it may not be able to do it forcefully enough to crush the exoskeleton of a beetle or a seed. Collecting performance data is important in studies of the functional ecology of animals. For example, Large Ground Finch of the Galapagos has a massive bill and it eats large, durable seeds. This has been noted by many naturalists, including Charles Darwin in the mid 1800s. However, how hard this species can bite, relative to other Galapagos finches with different bill shapes, was not actually recorded until recently (Herrel et al 2005). Interestingly, that crushing ability comes at a trade-off of closing speed.

Above Clay Corbin (right) and David Pretorius (left) collecting bite-force data from a Cape Vulture in the Blouberg Nature Reserve.

Performance measurements of foraging behaviour (i.e. bite force) may seem fairly crude, especially when considering the intricacies of actual foraging behaviour (think of a Brown-hooded Kingfisher handling a scorpion), but they potentially may explain a lot about how a bird is shaped the way it is. What we do not know is if behaviour and performance can be predicted across a large sample of birds from a wide variety of habitat, dietary, and historical backgrounds.

Hence, early in 2014, we set out to catch a large variety of birds from various habitats and measure bite-forces and bill shapes. We used mist nets to capture the birds and used callipers and rulers to measure morphological features such as bill length, width, and depth. For bite force, we used a force transducer mounted on a pair of plates. Most birds are motivated to bite their captors. So, the idea is to position the plates between the tip of the upper and lower bill of the bird and the bird bites down. The transducer transfers



Above Collecting bite-force data from a Barratt's Warbler in Woodbush Forest Reserve.

that force to an amplifier with a readout. However, in reality, and unlike lizards (CEC pers. obs.), birds can tell the difference between fingers and a pair of metal plates! This can be a problem with a barbet in hand! Hence an 80 mm thin rectangular plastic stick was gently inserted between the upper and lower bill, rotated to open the bill and then the bill was placed over the plates. In most cases, the birds will bite down with alacrity. If not, a finger placed on either side of the bill will get them to close down with force.

Our first efforts were 14 nets set at De Loskop. We were joined by Sello Matjee and Lucy Mashao, two students from the University of Limpopo. We captured over 60 birds from 30 different species. Some of these birds either did not bite hard enough to register on the amplifier, were not motivated to bite or had morphology not conducive to collecting data with our force set-up (e.g. sunbirds, doves, Common Scimitarbill). Most birds bit vol-

untarily. The highlights of the effort were first measurements of bite force on hard-biting Crested Barbet with a force around 13 N and Crimson-breasted Shrike at around 9 N. These numbers may not seem high, but consider the width of the keratin at the bill's edge is only a few tenths of a millimetre wide, and shrikes having most of this force transmitted through a hook on the end of their bill, thus significantly increasing the effectiveness of the force. Other birds captured, ringed, and measured included Rattling Cisticola, Barn Swallow, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Long-billed Crombec, Red-faced Mousebird (which provided CEC with a first-time view of missing apteria), Sabota Lark, Chinspot Batis, White-browed Scrub Robin, Marico Flycatcher, and Southern Pied Babbler.

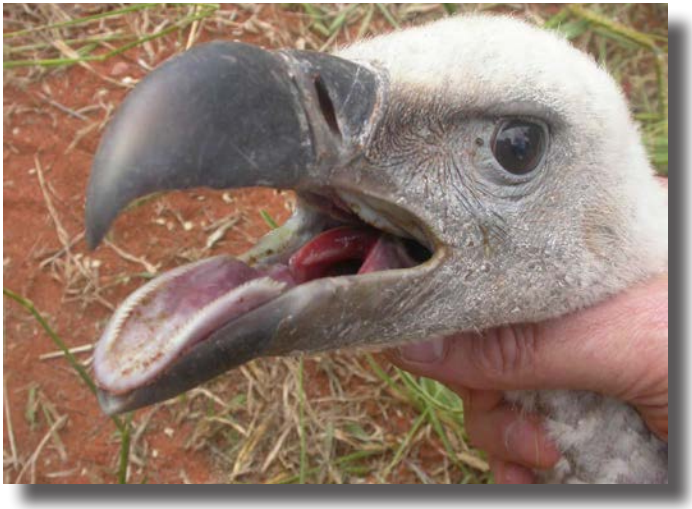

Crested Barbet


Crimson-breasted Shrike

After De Loskop, we travelled to Blouberg Nature Reserve where we spent three days collecting data on birds from an extremely diverse community. We were joined by Johan Van Wyk, reserve manager of Blouberg Nature Reserve. We were also joined by a troop of baboons which, left to their own devices, may wreak havoc in ringing operations. Luckily, they kept their distance from us and the nets. The birds captured and measured included Spotted Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, two kingfisher species (African Pygmy and Brown-hooded), and Grey-backed Camaroptera. At the Fig Forest, we added Dark-capped Bulbul, Terrestrial Brownbul, a few species of estrildid finches, Black-backed Puffback, and Orange-breasted Bushshrike. At our last site, we were not really targeting different species, but a species which has achieved notoriety as one of the Big Biters in ringing circles. We were able to wran-

gle 12 hard-biting White-browed Sparrow-Weavers into our nets.

While we were at Blouberg, we took the opportunity to visit the facilities of the Cape Vulture Conservation programme where David Pretorius and team were busy measuring four vultures prior to their release back into the wild. We jumped at the chance to attempt to measure bite-force



Above A close-up view of the sharp end of a Cape Vulture.

Top No study on bite-forces of birds would be complete without data from the hard-biting White-browed Sparrow-Weaver.

Above Our field station in the Blouberg Nature Reserve.

on these individuals! The plates were inadequately small but we managed to at least get a hint of the force generated by these large headed birds. With body masses between 5.6 and 7 kg, bites ranged from 45-67 N! These were our highest readings, yet we suspect with proper equipment, these birds can bite much harder. More study is needed measuring performance and capacity in these ecologically important birds.

Satisfied with our efforts at Blouberg Nature Reserve, our third locale was in Woodbush Forest Reserve near Magoebaskloof. Unlike at Blouberg Nature Reserve, we did not catch a lot of individuals from any one species, but we did capture a group of interesting species. These included Chorister Robin-Chat, Barratt's Warbler, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, White-starred Robin, Bar-throated Apalis, and a Brown Scrub Robin. We captured a Lemon Dove that had little motivation to bite (a characteristic observed in other Columbiform species in North America, the Caribbean, and southern Africa (CEC pers.

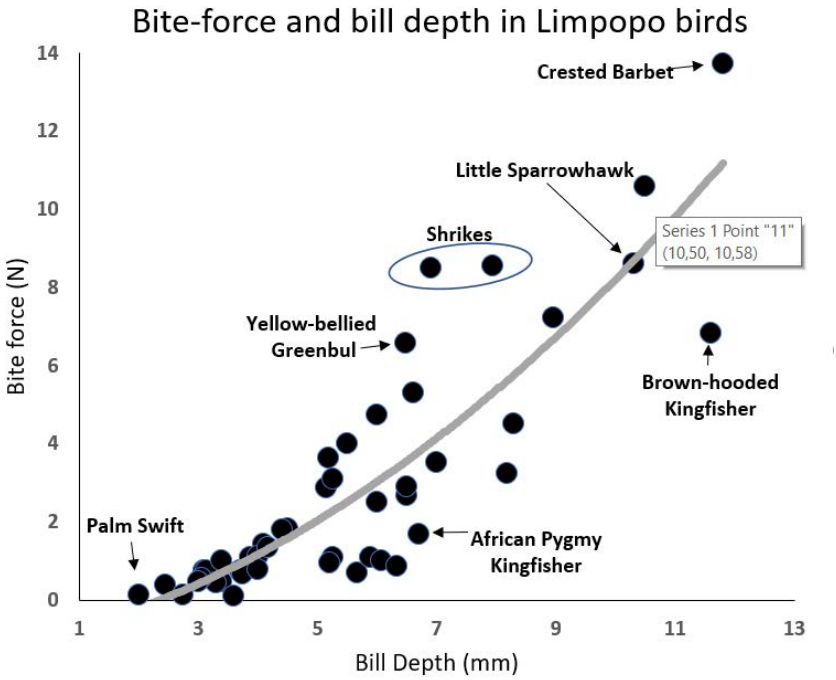


Fig. 1. Average maximum bite force (N) and Bill depth (mm) in bird species of Limpopo. We added a trend line to the data and the scores of some notable species.

obs.)).

We succeeded in our endeavour to get bite-force data from a diverse assemblage of avian species: we captured over 130 individual birds across more than 40 species! These species varied in ecology (e.g. aerial insectivores to scavengers) and morphology (e.g. large conical billed barbets to long decurved billed sunbirds). The main sites where we sampled birds had very little overlap in species composition. For example, the only overlap in species captured between De Loskop and Blouberg Nature Reserve were Blue Waxbill, Green-winged Pytilia, and White-browed Scrub Robin. Even within the Blouberg Nature Reserve, habitat differences produced very different species; only four of the 18 (22%) species captured were common to more than one site: two estrildids, African Pygmy Kingfisher, and Yellow-bellied Greenbul.

Morphology seems to predict how hard a bird can bite across all of this ecological and behavioural diversity. To show this, we plotted the bite force against

a commonly believed predictor of mechanical advantage, namely bill depth (mm)) (Fig. 1). In this plot, the maximum bite force (N) for each bird within a species was averaged. As bill depth increases, bite force increases. This is not surprising and many species score above and below a best-fit line through the data. That line represents what one would expect a bite force to be for a bill of a given depth. For example, the Little Sparrowhawk has a bite-force essentially equal to what one would predict based on its bill depth. On the other hand, some birds bite harder that one would expect. The two shrike species (Crimson-breasted and Red-backed) have a bite force roughly equal to that of the sparrowhawk but with much smaller bills. Muscular and biomechanical differences in these bird's heads may help to explain these patterns. The two kingfisher species have bite forces lower than what one would predict based on their bill dimensions. This makes sense given the bill is used in ecologically different ways than most of the other species in the graph. Biomechanical advantage may not be that important to a fishing or pouncing bird but having a large, spear-like bill would.

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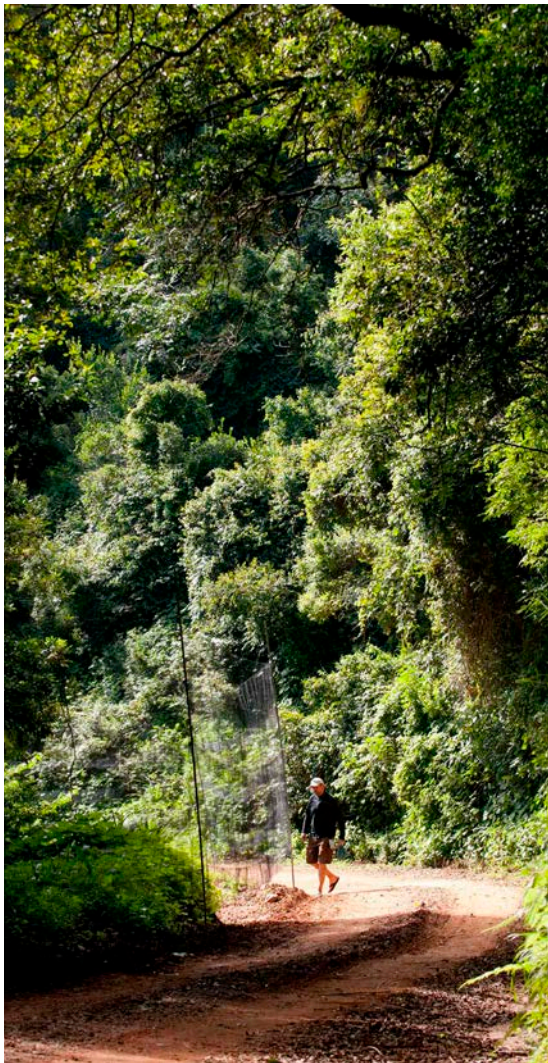

Right Catching forest birds in Woodbush Forest Reserve.

Bird instinct

Hugh Chittenden
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Much of bird behaviour is moulded upon instinct or innate behaviour. Birds have a high degree of instinct and a lower level of intelligence, as opposed to humans, who have a high degree of intelligence and a lower level of instinct.

To understand the following example of instinct better, place yourself in the position of a young Double-banded Courser that is about to lay its first egg. You won't know what the colour of that egg will be, but you would want to make sure it is placed in a position where it'll be camouflaged and safe. So, if this is your first laying attempt, and you have never seen the colour of the eggs you lay, what nest site, or colour substrate would you choose to lay it on so that it is well camouflaged? Once it's been laid, it cannot be moved!

The 'nest' below was located in early February 2019 near Gariep Dam in the southern Free State. The grey-scrolled egg was perfectly placed on a greyish gravel substrate in the middle of the road!

The soil type (especially colour) immediately surrounding the selected nest area would not have matched the egg colour and would thus have rendered it less camouflaged, so the chosen site was ideal!

Below The Double-banded Courser nest and egg found near Gariep Dam.

Above The nest and egg of a Double-banded Courser on sandy, Kalahari-type soils in the Soetdoring Nature Reserve.

Below A closer view of the Gariep Dam egg on the left that matches the substrate gravel colour, and the browner, Soetdoring egg on the right, that matches the surrounding ground colour - both laid by the same bird species.

The following Double-banded Courser nest/egg was photographed at Soetdoring Nature Reserve near Bloemfontein. Here, the same bird species lays an egg that is a distinctly browner colour, and is a close match to the Kalahari-type sandy soils of that region. This time a few antelope and rabbit droppings help to camouflage the egg.

Sticking with coursers, but moving away from Double-banded, I was once fortunate to find the nest of a Three-banded Courser in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. Within the courser family, they are unique in that they bury, or partially bury, their eggs in a nest scrape, (below) and surround the egg with small pebbles or debris.

All Three-banded Coursers partially bury their eggs, this is not something that they learn to do, it's just another fascinating example of instinctive behaviour. One can only marvel at instinct or the innate behaviour of birds.

Acknowledgments - I would like to thank Ingrid Weiersbye for allowing me to use her Double-banded Courser nest photograph.

Below Three-banded Courser at its nest in the Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. Note the partially buried egg.

Coats of Wings

Derek Engelbrecht
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There is something about the stately appearance of Coats of Arms (CoA) which never ceases to amaze. Just looking at municipal CoA, you can glean a great deal about the character of an area from it. For example, it is possible to see what kind of industry or agriculture forms the backbone of the area, which famous person comes from the area, and the biodiversity of the area, e.g. plants or animals. It is quite astonishing how often biodiversity features in South African municipal CoA. In terms of plants, it is clear that aloes, particularly *Aloe ferox* and *Aloe marlothii,* are important plants in a South African context.

But we are here to talk birds. I was interested to see which bird species are featured in South African municipal, provincial and the national CoA. The results presented here are based on an internet search concluded on the 26th May 2019.

Our national CoA feature the Secretarybird - and rightfully so. It is such a stately and regal bird that I can think of no other suitable bird except perhaps a Cape Long-billed Lark. Interestingly, none of the provincial CoA feature birds. Of the eight metropolitan, 44 district, and 226 local municipalities, birds feature in some way or another in 63 (23%) of these. Sadly, some municipalities have decided to forego their stately (and informative) CoA for something which, although it may be artistically pleasing, tells us nothing about the character of the place.

Which province tops the birds in CoA list?

KwaZulu-Natal comfortably heads the list with 15, followed by the Limpopo Province with eight, and the Northern and Western Cape provinces coming in third with six species each (Fig. 1). Interestingly, or rather sadly, Gauteng has no birds featuring in any of their municipal CoA. Come on Gauteng!

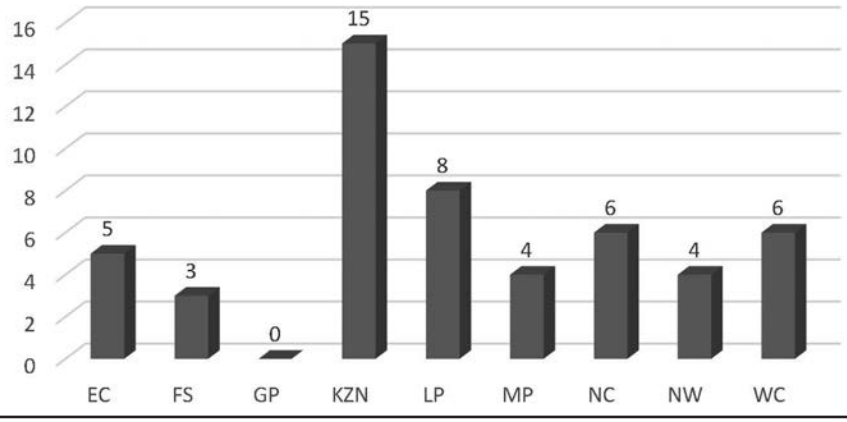
How many bird species feature in municipal CoA?

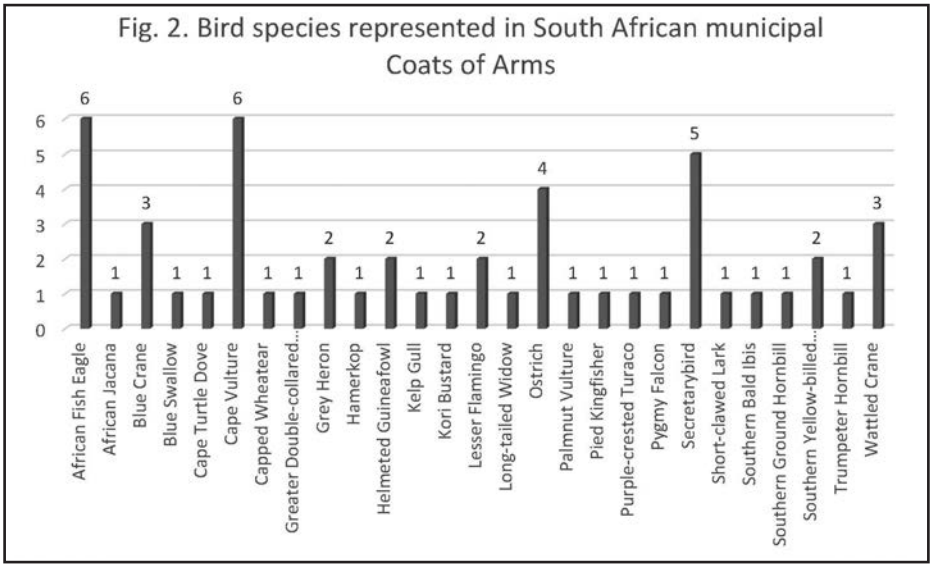
Thirteen municipalities feature symbolic birds, mainly Phoenix-like or mythical eagles, in their CoA. A few included unidentifiable birds (Impendle LM and Matatiele LM (waterfowl)), whereas Thembelihle LM has feathers in its CoA which cannot be identified to a specific species. Two municipalities (Greater Kokstad and Makhudu-thamaga) have domestic chickens in their CoA. These unidentifiable species and domestic chickens aside, 27 bird species are honoured on South African municipal CoA (Fig. 2).

Are some species favoured on CoA?

South Africa's favourite birds, as judged by the number of CoA featuring the species, are the iconic African Fish Eagle and the majestic Cape Vulture. Our love for the Secretarybird (Birdlife South Africa's Bird of the Year 2019) is also evident, featuring in four municipal CoA as well as the national CoA. Surprisingly, the Ostrich (or parts thereof, e.g. feathers), feature in

Fig. 1. South African Coats of Arms featuring birds (per province)





four CoA, while South Africa's national bird, the Blue Crane, features in only three CoA.

Are there any surprises on the list of birds in CoA?

The lack of passerines on the list (only five species) is a bit of a surprise, but they are competing with some real iconic birds, e.g. Kori Bustard, Southern Ground Hornbill, Secretarybird, Cape and Palmnut Vulture, Blue and Wattled Crane, and Southern Bald Ibis to name but a few.

Some interesting records on this elite list of bird species include Blue Swallow, (Harry Gwala DM), Greater Double-collared Sunbird (Waterberg DM), Long-tailed Widow (Umlalazi DM), Pygmy Falcon (Namaqua DM), Short-clawed Lark (Polokwane LM - although they seem to prefer three lines and a star lately), and Trumpeter Hornbill (Zululand DM).

In conclusion, there is an interesting diversity of birds to be found on municipal CoA. As mentioned above, these birds represent the community and tell us something about the character of the area. It is therefore with a bit of trepidation that I see many municipalities opt for a more modern logo, which in many instances tells us absolutely nothing about the area - apologies Ekhuruleni MM. As for our hometown, Polokwane, I'm sorry, but three lines and a star just doesn't do it for me.

Theewaterskloof
Municipality

ENDUMENI

MATATIELE
LOCAL MUNICIPALITY


MBHASHE MUNICIPALITY
Ilifa lethu elixabisekileyo liyinkqubela
TOLERANCE, TRUST, TENACITY
HARRY GWALA DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY
WESKUS DM WEST COAST
UMELA
SPECTAMUR AGENDO
IGAROSO
DECUS NOSTRUM
FOR PROSPERITY AND STABILITY
BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE
RE DIRELA SETŠHABA
QUALITY IN SERVICE
UNITY - EQUITY - PROSPERITY
POLOKWANE MUNICIPALITY
COOPERATIO PROGRESSUM EFFICIT
QUALITY SERVICES TO ALL COMMUNITIES
TOGETHER IN UNITY
INKWANCA MUNICIPALITY
Together Advancing in Development
UNITY UNDERSTANDING AND SUCCESS

African Finfoot - crab diet

Hugh Chittenden
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The diet of African Finfoot is insects (that they glean from the water's edge), crabs, snails, frogs, and molluscs. In other words, virtually anything that moves on the margins of quiet waterways. A male was monitored just after 08:00 at Mtunzini Lagoon for approximately an hour on the morning of 10th August 2019.

Above The male African Finfoot that was observed feeding in the Mtunzini Lagoon.

Below The male moved along a canal catching crabs on the exposed banks.

Above Once close to the prey, the bird would lunge at rapid speed, catching the prey before they had a chance to disappear down their burrows!

Below About two-thirds of the 'out-of-water' attacks were successful.

This male moved slowly up a canal feeding as it moved away. During this feeding session, lasting just over 14 minutes, the bird caught and ate five small crabs. Apologies for the quality of the images - the bird was quite some distance away, and mostly in poor light during this feeding session.

Top and middle *On seeing prey, mode of attack was rapid stealth approach till it was close enough to exit the water, and lunge. The mud crab is arrowed.*

Right *All the crabs were bashed against the mud-line before being swallowed. Who'd want to be a mud crab?*

Short-clawed Lark range extension

Derek Engelbrecht and Joe Grosel
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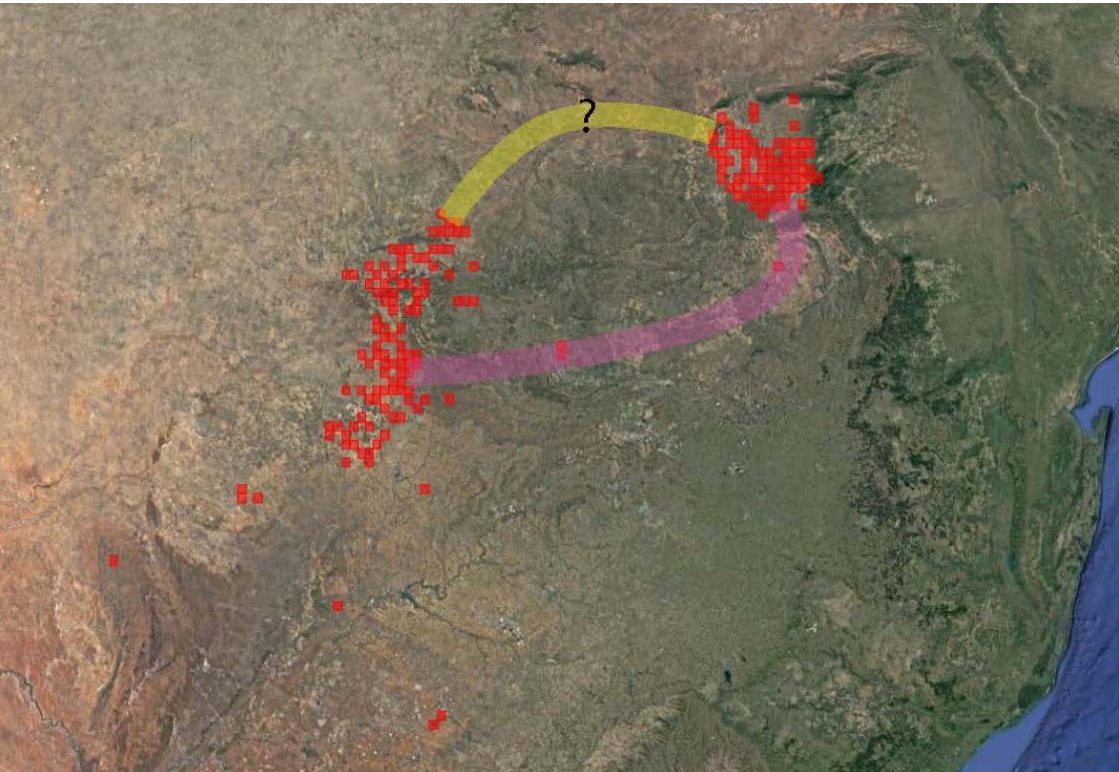
What do Francisco de Ulloa, Martin Frobisher, John Davis, Henry Hudson, Joe Grosel and Derek Engelbrecht have in common? They all looked for a Northwest Passage. However, whereas the first four looked for a sea passage connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, the last two looked for a link between the western and isolated eastern population of the Short-clawed Lark.

Joe's MSc study on Short-clawed Larks found virtually no genetic, biometric, or vocal differences between the eastern and western populations, suggesting either a 'recent' separation of the two populations, occasional con-



Below Distribution of the Short-clawed Lark, showing the larger western population in south-eastern Botswana, the North West, and Northern Cape Provinces, and the isolated eastern population centred largely on the Polokwane Plateau. The question mark refers to the historic records from the Steenbokpan-Stockpoort population. The yellow band represents our hypothesized 'Northwest Passage', while the mauve band represents a possible 'Southwest Passage' linking the two populations.

tact enabling gene flow, or perhaps a single sympatric population with a narrow contact zone between the eastern and western parts of its range. The latter option seemed feasible as there are historical records of Short-clawed Lark from the Steenbokpan-Stockpoort region in the far western Limpopo Province, but no records since 2009. The Steenbokpan-Stockpoort population would belong to the western population of the species and would be a mere 150 km from the westernmost range of the eastern population centred largely on the Polokwane Plateau. Thus, we focused our efforts on a 'Northwest Passage' linking the westernmost birds of the eastern population with the easternmost birds of the wester population. One problem though: the 'gap' is characterized by unsuitable sandveld, broad-leaved bushveld, and the northern and southern edges of the Waterberg and Makgabeng Mountain ranges respectively. If Short-clawed Larks occupy the Northwest Passage, they will have to rely on patches of suitable 'island habitats' in what would be mostly unsuitable habitat for Short-clawed Lark. To date, we have not succeeded in finding this so-called Northwest Passage. But were we looking in the wrong area?

Below Short-clawed Lark from the Bojanala region southeast of Pilanesberg National Park in the North West Province.

There are two known records of eastern population Short-clawed Lark south of the Polokwane Plateau. Both records were from rural, communal farmland in the Sekhukhune and Marble Hall areas. Short-clawed Larks preferred habitat is rural, communal farmland.

We were therefore very excited when we heard about the 'discovery' of an isolated population of western Short-clawed Lark in rural, communal farmland southeast of Pilanesberg National Park in January 2019 by Paul Da Cruz. This, and subsequent records in the general area, represent an approximately 90 km eastward extension of the western population's range. Well done to those intrepid atlasers who went off the beaten track to explore the lesser known regions!

No sooner had Etienne Marais notified us of this discovery, and we went onto Google Earth, zooming in to have a look at the habitat where the 'new population' was discovered. It seemed typical habitat of the species, and photos sent to us by Etienne confirmed this. Scrolling on Google Earth, it became clear that there is an entire 'belt' of suitable habitat, i.e. mainly rural, communal farmland, from the Bojanala region (easternmost of the western population) to Lebowakgomo (southernmost of the eastern population) of the species. Come on atlasers, let's see if we can find the Southwest Passage!

Left Does this look familiar? You would be excused for thinking you are somewhere on the Polokwane Plateau, but this is a photo of the habitat at Bojanala where the 'new' population was discovered © Etienne Marais

Overwintering African Pygmy Kingfisher

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We had a juvenile African Pygmy Kingfisher who frequented our garden in Broederstroomdrift east of Tzaneen in August and September this year.

It had a favourite perch in an *Acacia/Vachellia sieberiana* just in front of our patio, and enjoyed a dip in the swimming pool on hot days.

I haven't seen it for a few weeks, and am a bit concerned because an African Goshawk has been very active in the area, but I keep hoping this little gem of a bird will pop up again!

Derek Engelbrecht comments: This is an unusual record for our area. Judged by the amount of dark patches on the bill, this is a juvenile bird as you indicated - overwintering African Pygmy Kingfishers tend to be juveniles. Although there are sporadic reports of overwintering African Pygmy Kingfishers in southern Africa, most records of overwintering birds are from the coastal lowlands of KwaZulu-Natal and Mozambique. Your record from the Tzaneen area, although situated in a sub-tropical climate, is unusually far inland for an overwintering bird. Interestingly, I recorded another intra-African migratory kingfisher, the Woodland Kingfisher, at Letaba Estates (not too far from your record) in August 2018 and again in August this year.

African Pygmy Kingfisher, 1 August 2019 © Marianne McKenzie.

Age progression in Southern Banded Snake Eagle

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Transition plumages between juvenile and adult for Southern Banded Snake Eagle have never been fully described.

1

Juveniles fledge with creamy-white underparts and dark brown dorsal plumage with white flecking. Cere is pale yellow, and eye colour is slightly paler than adults.

Second plumage birds are similar in many respects to an adult Brown Snake Eagle, but with an orange (not grey) cere and gape, and variable white flecking below.

Third plumage, or older immature plumage differs with white belly plumage developing, barred dark brown. Chest and throat is brown. Pale flecking to dorsal plumage becomes evident. Cere and gape remain an orange colour.

Adult plumages are well described in literature. Age from fledging to acquisition of adult plumage is unknown.

Interesting sightings

16 August 2019 - 15 October 2019

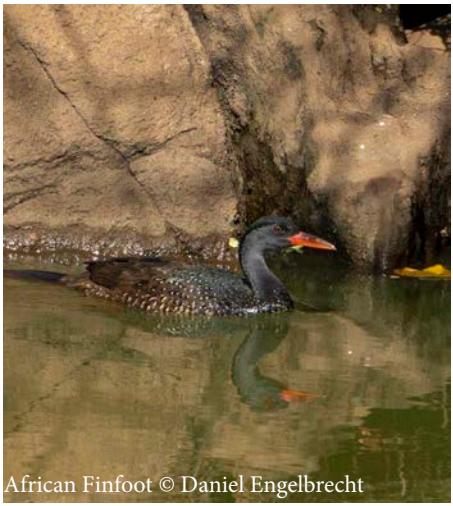
Share your interesting sightings, interactions, behaviour etc. seen within a 100 km radius of Polokwane. Please submit your sightings to thelarknews@gmail.com and include the date, locality and a brief write-up of your sighting. Photos are welcome but will be used at the discretion of the editors. * *= SABAP2 Out of Range record;* ** *Regional rarity;* *** *National Rarity*

Compiled by **Derek Engelbrecht**

Non-passerines

African Finfoot - 10 September 2019. A male present on a small dam for a few days (Daniel Engelbrecht).

African Cuckoo-Hawk - 25 August 2019. A bird crossing the road at the Tzaneen Country Lodge at dusk (Daniel Engelbrecht). 14 September 2019. A bird seemingly chasing swifts over open water at dusk at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).


African Finfoot © Daniel Engelbrecht

African Openbill - 7 September 2019. Two birds seen at a small farm dam at the Eiland junction on the R71 (Jody De Bruyn); 10 September 2019. A single bird seen at a private farm dam east of Tzaneen (Johan Botma).


African Openbill © Jody De Bruyn

African Skimmer - 20 August 2019. Seven birds (six adults and an immature bird) at a private farm dam east of Tzaneen (Derek Engelbrecht)***.

Half-collared Kingfisher - 10 September 2019. A single bird seen at Letaba Estates (Daniel Engelbrecht).


Half-collared Kingfisher © Daniel Engelbrecht

Marabou Stork - 14 September 2019. A single bird seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

Martial Eagle - 16 August 2019. A juvenile bird seen near Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).


Martial Eagle © Derek Engelbrecht

White-fronted Plover - 10 September 2019. A single bird at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht)*.


White-fronted Plover © Derek Engelbrecht

Yellow-billed Stork - 14 September 2019. A single bird was present for at least two days at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

Passerines

Brown-throated Martin - 14 September 2019. A small flock at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht)*.

Cape Rock Thrush - 2 October 2019. One seen south of Chuenespoort (Sean Christopher-Slattery).

Common Myna - 16 June 2019. At least 8 individuals at a farmhouse near Legkraal (Richter Van Tonder)*.

Grey-rumped Swallow - 16 August 2019. Large numbers seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

Gurney's Sugarbird - 11 August 2019. Two birds caught in mist nets on Lajuma peak, Soutpansberg - see article on page 4 (Dawie De Swardt and Ryan Van Huyssteen)*.

Lark-like Bunting - 16 August 2019. Several individuals on the Tweefontein Road (Jody De Bruyn).

Mountain Wagtail - 18 August 2019. Two birds foraging along a small stream on a private farm near Letsitele (Derek Engelbrecht)*.

Quailfinch - 16 August 2019. Several birds seen and heard in a field at Letaba Estates (Daniel Engelbrecht)*.

migrant arrivals

16 August 2019

African Black Swift - Several individuals seen in a mixed species flock of swallows and swifts (Derek Engelbrecht).

Alpine Swift - Several individuals seen in a mixed species flock of swallows and swifts (Derek Engelbrecht).

Common Greenshank - Three birds seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

Common Sandpiper - At least two birds seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

Wahlberg's Eagle - A bird seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

Wood Sandpiper - Several birds seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

18 August 2019

White-rumped Swift - Several birds seen in a mixed species flock of swifts at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

24 August 2019

Little Stint - Several individuals seen at a private farm dam near Letsitele (Derek Engelbrecht).

25 August 2019

African Cuckoo - A bird seen at Lushof east of Tzaneen (Derek Engelbrecht).

28 August 2019

Ruff - Several individuals seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

Woodland Kingfisher - a Single bird seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

3 September 2019

African Reed Warbler - Birds heard calling from a reed bed at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

Booted Eagle - A single bird soaring over Letaba Estates (Johan Botma).

5 September 2019

Klaas's Cuckoo - Mokopane (Bruce Goetsch).

10 September 2019

Marsh Sandpiper - Two birds seen at Letaba Estates (Derek Engelbrecht).

21 September 2019

Spotted Flycatcher - Mokopane (Bruce Goetsch).

23 September 2019

European Bee-eater - A flock flying over Polokwane (Julia Friskin); 5 October 2019. Birds heard in Welgelegen (Daniel Engelbrecht).

29 September 2019

European Roller - A bird seen about 3 km south of the Blouberg Nature Reserve (Richter Van Tonder).

Wahlberg's Eagle - The breeding pair seen at their nest in the Polokwane Game Reserve (Mark Friskin).

5 October 2019

Red-chested Cuckoo - Silvermist near Haenertsburg (Jody De Bruyn and Richter Van Tonder).

Willow Warbler - A bird heard calling and later seen in Welgelegen (Daniel Engelbrecht).

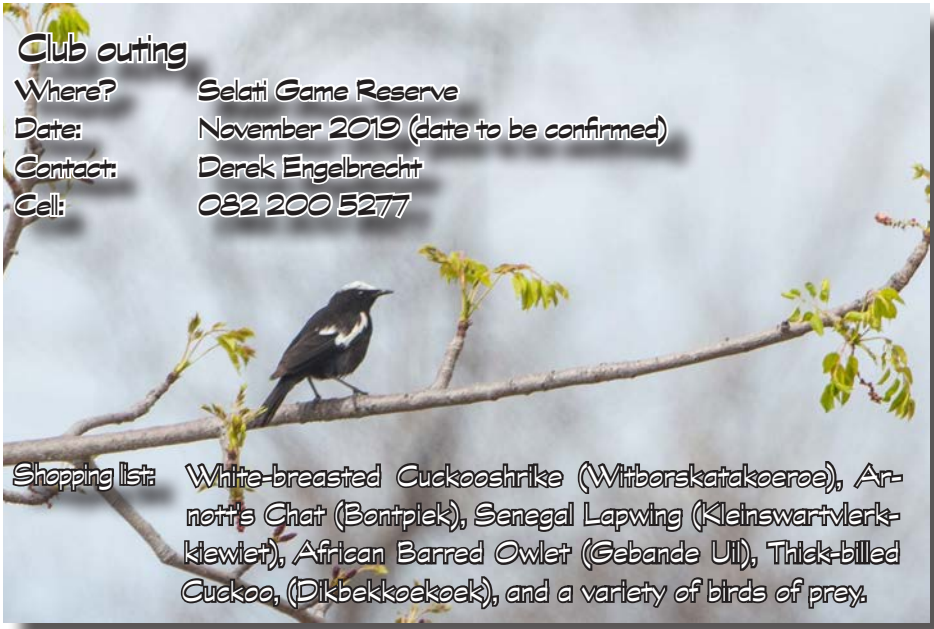
UPCOMING EVENTS

Birdlife Polokwane Year-end Function

Date: 27 November 2019

Time: 18:30

Venue: To be announced



Club outing

Where?	Selati Game Reserve
Date:	November 2019 (date to be confirmed)
Contact:	Derek Engelbrecht
Cell:	082 200 5277

Shopping list: White-breasted Cuckooshrike (Witborskatakoeroe), Arnott's Chat (Bontpiek), Senegal Lapwing (Kleinswartvlerkkiewiet), African Barred Owlet (Gebande Uil), Thick-billed Cuckoo, (Dikbekkoekoek), and a variety of birds of prey.

Saturday 30 November 2019

Birding BIG day

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings

For the first time there will also be provincial BBD counts. All participants will be loaded in each of the nine provincial BirdLasser events and scores will be kept as to how many species each team records in a province. Please note this will only be available for teams using BirdLasser.
The link for Limpopo Province is:
Limpopo: https://www.birdlasser.com/events/bbd2019LIM

South African NATIONAL PARKS Honorary Rangers™

SHARPEN YOUR RAPTOR SKILLS.

RAPTOR IDENTIFICATION COURSE. LETABA REST CAMP, 20-23 FEBRUARY 2020

Join the SANParks Honorary Rangers, Limpopo Region, together with leading birding expert and ecologist, Joe Grosel, in honing your raptor identification skills. Joe's legendary knowledge and practical approach will help you ID raptors of all shapes, sizes and colours in no time, while his personal anecdotes and birding knowledge will keep you entertained and informed. Activities for the weekend include morning and afternoon bird- and game-spotting drives on open game viewing vehicles. The course will be hosted in the Letaba Rest Camp in the Kruger National Park which offers some of the best raptor viewing on the continent.

Date:
20 – 23 February 2020

Venue:
Letaba Camp,
Kruger National Park

Price:
The cost of this exciting Raptor Identification Course is
R2 490* per person.

The price includes tuition, all birding activities and outings, teas and lunches as well as stationery, literature and a full colour raptor identification manual.

*** Excludes park entrance, conservation fee & accommodation.**

Contact:
Charles Hardy
083 457 1721
charlois@mweb.co.za

N.B: Participation is restricted to 16 people. Non participating partners will be welcome to accompany the outings subject to availability. All proceeds from the weekend will be for the Honorary Rangers Environmental Fund.

Partners

Wild explore | conserve | enjoy

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA

SANParks Honorary Rangers - Volunteers in Support of SANParks.
All proceeds from this event will go towards projects identified by SANParks
www.sanparksvolunteers.org | connect@honoraryrangers.org

Cinderella's page

Birdlife Polokwane honours the LBJs of this world which may never make it onto a cover page

Benguela Long-billed Lark © Joe Grosel