BIRDLIFE POLOKWANE

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September 2008 - Newsletter

From the Editor

Spring has finally arrived and quite unfortunately was celebrated the country over by; high winds, bush fires, cold weather and even snowfall in the Western Cape. Despite these adverse environmental conditions, many migrants arrived unannounced.

During a few of August's warmer days many of our club members booked off "sick", or had to urgently attend a business meeting or a family function in Pretoria. Is it coincidental that a rare vagrant bird in the form of a Franklin's Gull was putting in daily shows at the Centurion waterfront during this time …….. I wonder!

As most of you will know September is national arbour month, so please don't forget to plant a beautiful indigenous fruit bearing tree or shrub. Not only will you contribute to the greening of our environment and offset your carbon footprint but you will also be attracting many feathered friends to your garden.

As usual September is a month filled with birding outings, so let's all support these excursions and celebrate spring in true birding style!

Happy birding
Lisa

Interesting sightings from the Polokwane area during August 2008
By Joe Grosel

1) Returning migrants:

The return of the famous Polokwane Nature Reserve **Wahlberg's Eagle** (*Bruinarend*) pair is always a keenly anticipated event. On the 8th of August Almari Robbertse spotted the female bird sitting near the nest site, patiently waiting for her mate to return. Interestingly enough, over the past four years it has been the female who has arrived first. Previous arrival dates are 2004 – 26/08, 2005 – 19/08, 2006 – 02/09 and 2007 – 15/08.

The first report of the season for **Red-breasted Swallow** (*Rooiborsswael*) was on the 3rd of August along the R71 eastern bypass and the first **White-throated Swallow** (*Witkeelswael*) was seen at the Flora Park Dam on the 6th.

The season's opening sighting of a Steppe Buzzard (*Bruinjakkalsvoël*) in the bushveld fittingly took place during the Raptor Course on the 15th of August near Nylsvley.

2) Cape Penduline Tits (*Kaapse Kapokvoël*) are quite common on the Polokwane Plateau. However their cousin the **Grey Penduline Tit** (*Gryskapokvoël*) is far less frequent here. On the morning of August

25th a small party of these tiny birds passed through my garden at Tembele Estate. They were clearly engrossed in feeding on the tiny insects on the newly sprouted *Acacia tortilis* leaves and allowed me to approach to within a few metres.

3) This month's most noteworthy sighting was submitted by Ben de Boer who spotted a **Bush Blackcap** (*Rooibektiptol*) near the Woodbush forest drive on the 9th of August. This is one of only a handful of confirmed sightings for the province.

Please report any unusual sightings to Joe Grosel at 082 415 5250

If you know your stuff …… By Derek Engelbrecht

Koos Du Plessis and I went to Golwe for some birding and ringing in December last year. We caught a robin in a mist-net and ever since then I was puzzled by its identity. I was stumped – clue-less to be honest - and I filed the identification as "pending", delaying the inevitable until I had more information at my disposal to make a more accurate identification. I consulted Oatley and Arnott's "Robins of Africa" and kind of made a hesitant decision that it had to be a Starred Robin. However, its distribution and looks gave me huge doubts and I left the final decision to July when I had to submit my ringing data for the year. Cometh the day I thought I better consult the guru of African Robins, Terry Oatley. I sent him a picture of the bird and asked if he could help with its identification. His reply follows:

Dear Derek,

You are quite correct - it is indeed a Starred Robin, a subadult of about 11 months of age. It still has a few unshed covert feathers from the 'spangled' juvenile plumage phase, which show up nicely in your pictures. Also, it must have lost one (or perhaps two) of its right wing primaries and alula, since it is sporting some adult silver-edged feathers. The flight feathers would normally only be replaced at the first full moult at 15 months of age, but if any tail or wing feather is lost before then, adult-coloured feathers replace them. The silvery-edged primary and alula confirm its subspecific identity as Pogonocichla stellata transvaalensis, which is what it should be in that area. Wing and tail length show it to be a male (95% probability).

It is certainly late for it to be in the lowveld, but as a returning migrant it might have had a long journey - the species moves as far as the Limpopo R. mouth region during the dry season exodus from Afromontane breeding sites.

If you have more queries I'll be happy to send more info.

Best wishes,

Terry

The kind of detail Terry was able to see in a simple photograph truly amazed me and I learned three valuable lessons from this experience:

i. don't hesitate to ask if in doubt,
ii. look beyond the "usual", and
iii. birds have wings and will fly (just a confirmation that ranges are not absolute!).

So, keep the eyes peeled and record as much detail as possible in the time the bird allows you to.

The mystery Robin of Golwe.

Some Avian Records and Record Holders
– Compiled by Joe Grosel

Largest Egg - living = Ostrich
Largest Egg ever = Elephant Bird *Aepyornis maximus* from Madagascar 39cm long = 12 litres = 220 chicken eggs.
Smallest Egg - living = Vervain Humming bird *Mellisuga minima* = the size of pea
Largest individual nest = Mallee Fowl Australia *Leipoa ocellata* builds a mound 5 m high and 11 metres wide.
Smallest nest - many sea and shore birds do not make a nest at all, nest on ground or in case of fairy tern on a branch of a tree otherwise the award goes to the hummingbirds for their thimble sized (1cm squared) nests.
Largest Bill = Australian Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) up to 47cm.
Most feathers = Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) = 25,216.
Fastest Flying = *Falco peregrinus* 270kmh, however this is in a steep dive. In level flight the record goes to the Wandering Albatross which was clocked maintaining 56kmh for 800km.
Fastest Wingbeat = Horned Sungem *Heliacter cornuta* from S. America 90 beats/sec several other hummingbirds have similar wingbeat speeds.
Most acrobatic flight = Hobby *Falco subbutea* which can catch swallows and swifts in mid-air. Many hummingbirds can fly backwards and sideways as well as going vertically up and down.
Longest migratory flight = Arctic tern *Sterna paradisa* from Kondalakaha Russia to Freemantle W. Australia. They breed on shores of Arctic ocean then fly to the Antarctic. One bird was caught 9 months after it was banded 22,530 km away on the 29/11/73.
Highest recorded flight = Ruppell's Griffon Vulture *Gyps ruepellii* recorded flying at 11,277m/37,000ft, at this height human beings would die from lack of air.
Deepest dive = Emperor Penguin *Aptenodytes fosteri* with a dive of 534m/1751ft reported in the journal *Condor* in 1995.
Longest dive = Emperor Penguin *Aptenodytes fosteri* , recorded at 18 minutes.
Largest Single Roost = Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* a roost of 70 million birds was recorded in Switzerland in winter 1951/52.

Largest natural distribution = Peregrin Falcon *Falco peregrinus* = found on every continent except Antarctica.
Largest natural clutch = Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix* over 15-16 up to 20.
Longest lived = Sulphur Crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*) one specimen lived 80 years in captivity.
Quickest generation time = 5 species of quails in the genus *Caturnix* they actually mature 5 weeks after hatching.
Keenest vision = Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* can see a pigeon at 8km.
Fastest Swimmer = Gentoo penguin (*Pygaelis papua*) recorded at 27km/h.
Loudest song = Male Kakapo (Strigops habroptilus) up to 7km away.
Fastest Runner = Ostrich, males can easily run at 72kmh.
The Bird with the Strongest Bill = The rare Hyacinth Macaw (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) from South America which lives on hard palm-nuts. They are also the largest **flying** parrot in the world.

Sources:
World Birds by Brian P. Martin 1987, **The Guinness Book of Animal Records** by Mark Carwardine 2000.

Centurion's Franklin's Gull, *Larus pipixcan*

The unexpected appearance of this gull at Centurion has given many a birder one of the easiest ticks on his / her life list ever! The bird is very much at home at this spot and will most likely be hanging around for a while. Just don't ask me why… this water body is a real vrotgat! (stink hole). A friend of mine helped me navigate through the Pretoria peak hour traffic to a relatively quiet spot next to the water and within five minutes he had located the bird.

It is not unusual for the Franklin's gull to hang around away from the coast… in their usual haunts back in Canada and the USA that is exactly where they are found – mainly some way off the coast!

The Franklin's Gull is unique among gulls in having two complete molts each year rather than one. This is an adaptation in order to maintain their status as one of the world champion long-distance migrants. They need new, strong feathers in order to meet the demands of their 8000-kilometer flights. After nesting in the central provinces of Canada and adjacent states of the northern USA, they undergo a complete molting of their feathers, then fly south to the coast of Texas, and continue south along the Caribbean coast of Mexico. From there they make an overland flight across to the Pacific Coast which they follow all the way to southern Peru and northern Chile. After spending the winter there, they undergo another complete feather molt, and follow the same migration route in reverse.

Rare vagrants fly to northwest Europe, south and west Africa, Australia and Japan. Some records exist around the coastline of South Africa, but this sighting made at Centurion is only the 2nd inland record.

Young birds are similar to the adult but have less developed hoods and lack the white wing band. They take three years to reach maturity. This bird is in non-breeding adult plumage.

Like most gulls they are omnivorous, eating insects, earthworms, fish, mice, garbage and seeds. They forage while walking or swimming and sometimes hawk insects on the wing.

Johan van Rensburg

Several Birdlife Polokwane members made the time or the excuse to travel to Pretoria to see the Franklin's Gull. One of them was Jody de Bryun who took this photograph.

What's on?

1) 05 - 07 September - Mapungubwe Honorary Rangers Birding Weekend. Tshugulu Bush Lodge – Mapungubwe National Park – **Charles Hardy – 083 4571 721**
2) 14 September - Day Outing - Louis Changuion trail (Haenertsburg) **KdP**
3) 19 – 21 September -Birding and Digital Photographic course Marlothii Lodge (Dendron). Contact Alma Whitehead at 084 811 9591.
4) 24 – 28 September – Long weekend outing to Gundani and Segole big tree in Venda. **KdP**
5) 01 October (18h30) Monthly meeting at "Die Koraal".
6) 11 October – Day outing to Jacobskloof (Bandelierkop) **KdP**
7) 14 – 16 November – Birds and Forests Festival – Magoebaskloof. Contact Ben de Boer at 083 294 1013.
8) 21 – 23 Nov - Forest Birding Course – Bramasole Lodge, Magoebaskloof. **LG.**

Contact Koos du Plessis - **KdP** (082 772 5293) or Lisa Grosel - **LG** (083 380 2322) for enquiries & reservations.