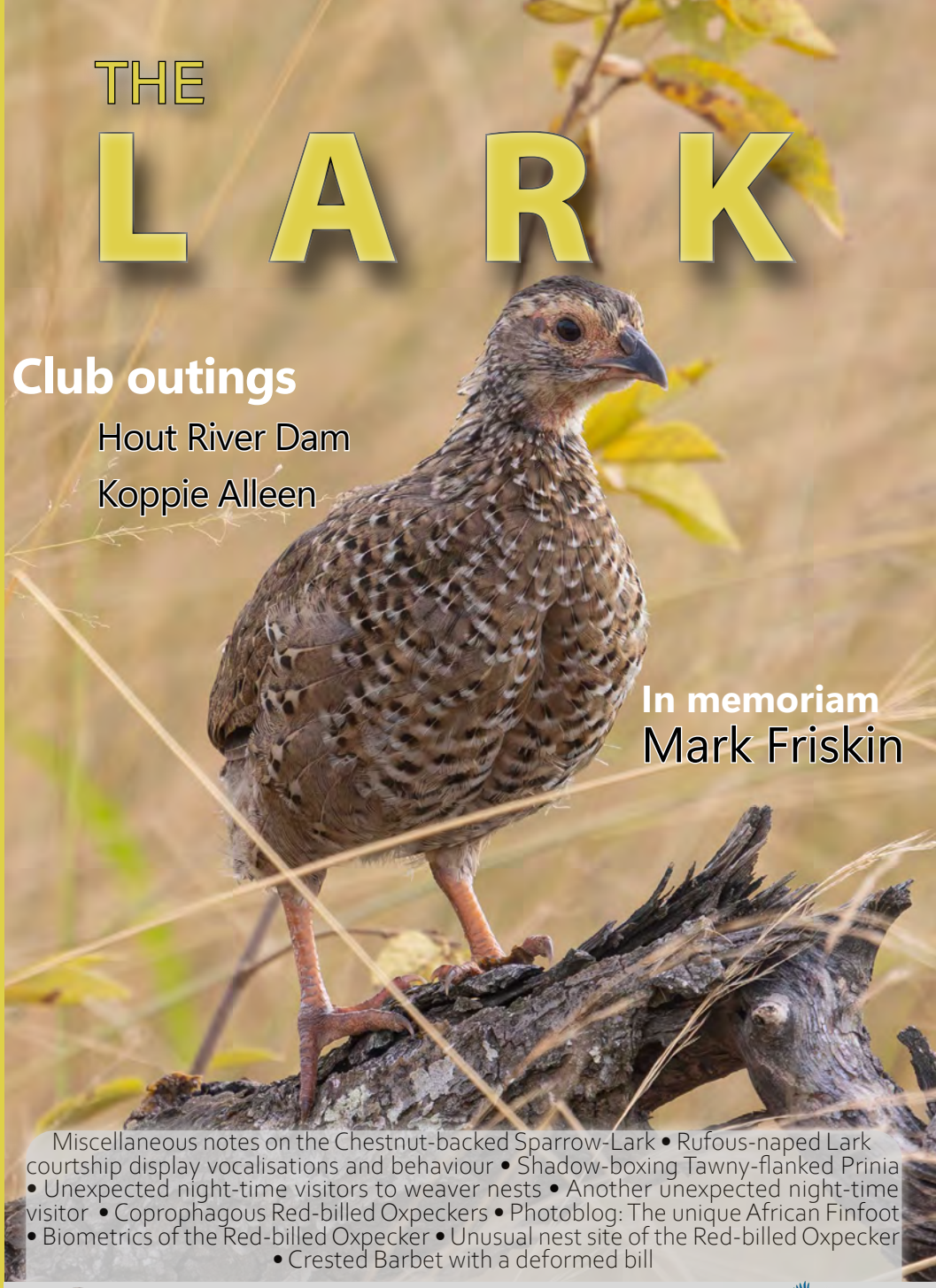
The Birdlife Polokwane Magazine 65 May/June 2026

THE LARK



Club outings

Hout River Dam

Koppie Alleen

In memoriam

Mark Friskin

Miscellaneous notes on the Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark • Rufous-naped Lark courtship display vocalisations and behaviour • Shadow-boxing Tawny-flanked Prinia • Unexpected night-time visitors to weaver nests • Another unexpected night-time visitor • Coprophagous Red-billed Oxpeckers • Photoblog: The unique African Finfoot • Biometrics of the Red-billed Oxpecker • Unusual nest site of the Red-billed Oxpecker • Crested Barbet with a deformed bill

Birdlife Polokwane

Affiliated to BirdLife South Africa

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, frames or signatures.

The editors reserve the right to edit articles as necessary. All images are copyright protected and the property of the author/s of the article unless otherwise stated. Please send all your contributions to the editors at thelarknews@gmail.com.

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

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

15 June 2026

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

Cover page theme 2026: Young Birds

Cover Juvenile Swainson's Spurfowl
© Derek Engelbrecht.

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May/June 2026

Featured

For a lark ...

Hornbill Roadkill Awareness lesson © Derek Engelbrecht

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Editors' chirps

This edition begins on a sad note. On 12 March 2026, we lost our dear friend, Mark Friskin, after a long and courageous battle with cancer. Mark was an integral part of the club for many years, and his passing has left a profound void. He served as deputy chairperson for many years and was a steadfast presence at club meetings and outings. His love for nature was evident, and he and Julia seldom missed an opportunity to join a club outing. Indeed, as a testament to Mark's remarkable strength and the joy, peace, and healing he found in nature, he attended his final club outing to the Van Waveren farm on 14 February, less than a month before his passing. His courage and positive spirit in the face of adversity will remain an inspiration to us all. Julia, our hearts are with you, and please know that you are held close in our thoughts. Mark, you will be deeply missed.

This issue is once again filled with trip reports from club outings to western Polokwane and the rolling Renosterkoppies north of the city. It also marks the close of an era for Chris Patton's much-loved *Reflections* column. Not an ending, however, but rather an exciting new chapter. Chris has kindly agreed to re-imagine the series, broadening its scope beyond Limpopo to share birding experiences and practical insights from South Africa's other national parks. As one reader aptly described it, the column is "an excellent resource of useful information when planning a birding trip." On behalf of the editorial team and BirdLife Polokwane, we extend our sincere gratitude to Chris for choosing *The Lark* as the platform for his thoughtful and engaging articles, and we look forward to this new series with great anticipation. As always, our *Bird Briefs* section is packed with fascinating life-history observations across a range of species. Such records are invaluable for the ongoing revision of species accounts for Roberts 8, and we encourage readers to continue submitting their noteworthy observations to *The Lark*.

We hope you enjoy this edition as much as we enjoyed compiling it, and we look forward to your contributions to future editions.

Raelene and Derek

Going back west

to Hout River Dam and the Chebeng Grasslands

Juvenile Great Spotted Cuckoo © Jody de Bruyn.

text **Willem van der Merwe**

On Saturday, 14 March 2026, a small group of intrepid birders made their way to the Hout River Dam, about 25 km west of Polokwane. It was an overcast, drizzly day, but we had hopes of finding a few feathered friends to cheer us up. The dam, which is quite large, was filled to the brim following the abundant rains this season, leaving very little shoreline. On the main dam, we found very few waterbirds. But walking along the high, sturdy dam wall, we had views on the one side over the waters of the impoundment, while downstream, we could look down on the surrounding savannah. We also ventured a bit into the

Above A Western House Martin passing by © Jody de Bruyn.

bush and marshy regions beyond the dam. It was thus an interesting mix of species we encountered.

Perhaps the groups of birds that most rewarded us at the dam were the swallows and swifts! These swooped over the water to catch small insects or grab occasional drinks. The common Greater and Lesser Striped/Groot- and Kleinstreepswael and Barn Swallows/Europese Swael were all over the place. We had great views of the White-throated Swallows/Witkeelswaels, some of which were perched, including some juveniles with slightly drabber plumage. Nice specials, usually found near water, included the Western House-Martin/Huisswael, and the Brown-throated Martin/Afrikaanse Oewerswael. These small and fast fliers are quite challenging to inspect in mid-flight, but we got good views of them during their leisurely swoops over the water or looking down at them as they glided below the top of the wall. Swifts, not closely related to swallows, but similar in appearance, were also in evidence, in particular Little Swifts/Kleinwindswaels, White-rumped Swifts/Witkruiswindswaels,

and good numbers of African Palm Swifts/Palmwindswaels.

Despite the lack of shoreline habitat, we found a Common Sandpiper/Gewone Ruiter! Not as dependent on the shore habitat, but still often associated with

Right Brown-throated Martin © Jody de Bruyn.

Below A Common Sandpiper walking along the dam wall © Jody de Bruyn.

it, was the Cape Wagtail/Gewone Kwikkie. But just below the dam wall, there was a marshy section with some open water and reedbeds, and here we were rewarded with a few proper wetland species, including another shorebird, the Three-banded Plover/Driebandstrandkiewiet. Our only ducks of the day were a small flock of White-Faced Whistling Ducks/Nonnetjieseende, which took flight, uttering their whistling calls. Also swimming in the small expanses of water were Red-knobbed Coots/Bleshoender, and Common Moorhens/Grootwaterhoender. The Pied Kingfisher/Bontvisvanger was flying around and twittering. The marshes provided habitat for a variety of herons, egrets and their kin: Black-crowned Night Heron/Gewone Nagreier, Purple Heron/Rooireier, Grey Heron/Bloureier, Little Egret/Kleinwitreier and Little Bittern/Woudapie (or Kleinrietreier), the latter offering a great view while flying. More associated with the savannah were the Western Cattle Egrets/Veereier and Black-headed Herons/Swartkopreier.

Below One of the Hout River Dam stalwarts, the Little Bittern © Jody de Bruyn.

Other birds found around the reeds and marshy parts included the common Blacksmith Lapwing/Bontkiewiet, the much rarer African Wattled Lapwing/Lelkiewiet, Black Crake/Swartriethaan, the lovely Purple Swamphen (older name Purple Gallinule)/Grootkoningriethaan, Burchell's Coucal/Gewone Vleiloerie, Lesser Swamp Warbler/Kaapse Rietsanger with its cheerful, bubbly calls, the related Great Reed Warbler/Grootrietsanger with its much deeper, harsh churrs, and Levaillant's Cisticola/Vleitinktinkie with its tinkling call.

The bushveld around the dam hosted a great selection of species, including stalwarts like Crested Francolin/Bospatrys, Swainson's Spurfowl/Bosveldfisant, Natal Spurfowl/Natalse Fisant, Hadada Ibis/Hadeda, Laughing Dove/Rooiborsduifie, European Bee-eater/Europese Byvreter, Grey Go-Away Bird/Kwêvoël, Diederik Cuckoo/Diederikkie, Brown-hooded Kingfisher/Bruinkopvisvanger, Black-collared Barbet/Rooikophoutkapper, Common Bulbul/Swartoogtiptol, Southern Boubou/Suidelike Waterfiskaal, Brown-crowned Tchagra/Rooivlerktjagra, White-browed Scrub Robin/Gestreepte Wipstert, Kalahari Scrub Robin/Kalahariwipstert, White-throated Robin-Chat/

Right A Kalahari Scrub Robin © Jody de Bruyn.

Witkeeljanfrederik, Black-chested Prinia/Swartbandlangstertjie, Tawny-flanked Prinia/Bruinsylangstertjie, Rattling Cisticola/Bosveldtinktinkie, Burnt-necked Eremomela/Bruinkeelbossanger, Chestnut-vented Warbler/Bosveldtjeriktik, Marico Flycatcher/Maricovlieëvanger, Spotted Flycatcher/Europese Vlieëvanger, Chinspot Baits/Witliesbosbontrokkie, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver/Koringvoël, Blue Waxbill/Blousysie, Common Waxbill/Rooibeksysie, Southern Masked Weaver/Swartkeelgeelvink, Spectacled Weaver/Brilwewer, Scaly-feathered Weaver/Baardmannetjie, Cape Starling/Kleinglansspreeu, Marico Sunbird/Maricosuikerbekkie and White-bellied Sunbird/Witpenssuikerbekkie. While these are all species quite familiar to most experienced birders, they are always a treat to see!

Bushveld specials, not seen as often, included the pretty and dainty Little Bee-eater/Kleinbyvreter, Common Scimitarbill/Swartbekkakelaar, the beautiful Crimson-breasted Shrike/Rooiborslaksman, good views of the diminutive Cape Penduline Tit/Kaapse Kapokvoël, the delightful Green-winged Pytilia/Gewone Melba, the exuberant Long-tailed Paradise Whydah/Paradysvink flying with its great black tail arching, and its relative, the more delicate Shaft-tailed Whydah/Pylstertrooibekkie. Raucous calls in the distance alerted us to the presence of the Northern Black Korhaan/Witvlerkkorhaan. Much more delicate calls from above signalled the Zitting Cisticola/Landeryklopkloppie, the most widespread of all cisticolas (occurring as far as Australia!). The Yellow Canary/Geelkanarie is more associated with the dry western regions of Southern Africa, here reaching close to its eastern limit. We saw it well. Another nice find that we had good views of was a juvenile Great Spotted Cuckoo/Gevlekte Koekoek. Unusually for a bird, the juvenile has a more bold, colourful appearance than the adult! Raptors included the Greater Kestrel/Grootrooivalk and the imposing Black-chested Snake Eagle/Swartborsslangarend, perched.

After exhausting our options at the Hout River Dam, we drove a short distance to the Chebeng Grasslands, where we took a productive walk. These grasslands are still extensive, having thus far escaped the ravages

Right It's not often one gets such an obliging Black-chested Snake Eagle © Jody de Bruyn.

Cloud Cisticola © Jody de Bruyn.

of expanding settlements. They rewarded us with some additional grassland specials, especially larks—we had already found Rufous-naped Lark/Rooineklewerik and Sabota Lark/Sabotalewerik around the Hout River Dam. We heard the distant call of a Short-clawed Lark/Kortkloulewerik, though it wasn't prominent this time. But several other lark species showed themselves well: Red-capped Lark/Rooikoplewerik, Spike-heeled Lark/Vlaktelewerik, Pink-billed Lark/Pienkbeklewerik, and, in flight, Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark/Grysruglewerik. Not a lark, but easy to confuse with them, was the African Pipit/Gewone Koester. In addition to the Zitting Cisticola, we found here the similar and related Desert Cisticola/Woestynklopkloppie, as well as the Cloud Cisticola/Gevlekte Klopkloppie. These small, short-tailed cisticolas, called 'klopkloppies' in Afrikaans, are extremely similar in appearance but reveal their identities through very distinctive calls and displays. The name 'klopkloppie' comes from the habit of some members of the group making loud knocking or snapping sounds using their wings. We also heard, but unfortunately did not see, another special of this grassland region, the White-bellied Bustard/Witpenskorhaan. A pleasant surprise was a good view of a dark-morph Booted Eagle/Dwergarend in flight.

All in all, despite the dim and drizzly weather, it was a pleasant outing, and we ended the day with a tally of over 100 species!

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BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings

FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology

LAB
Learn About Birds

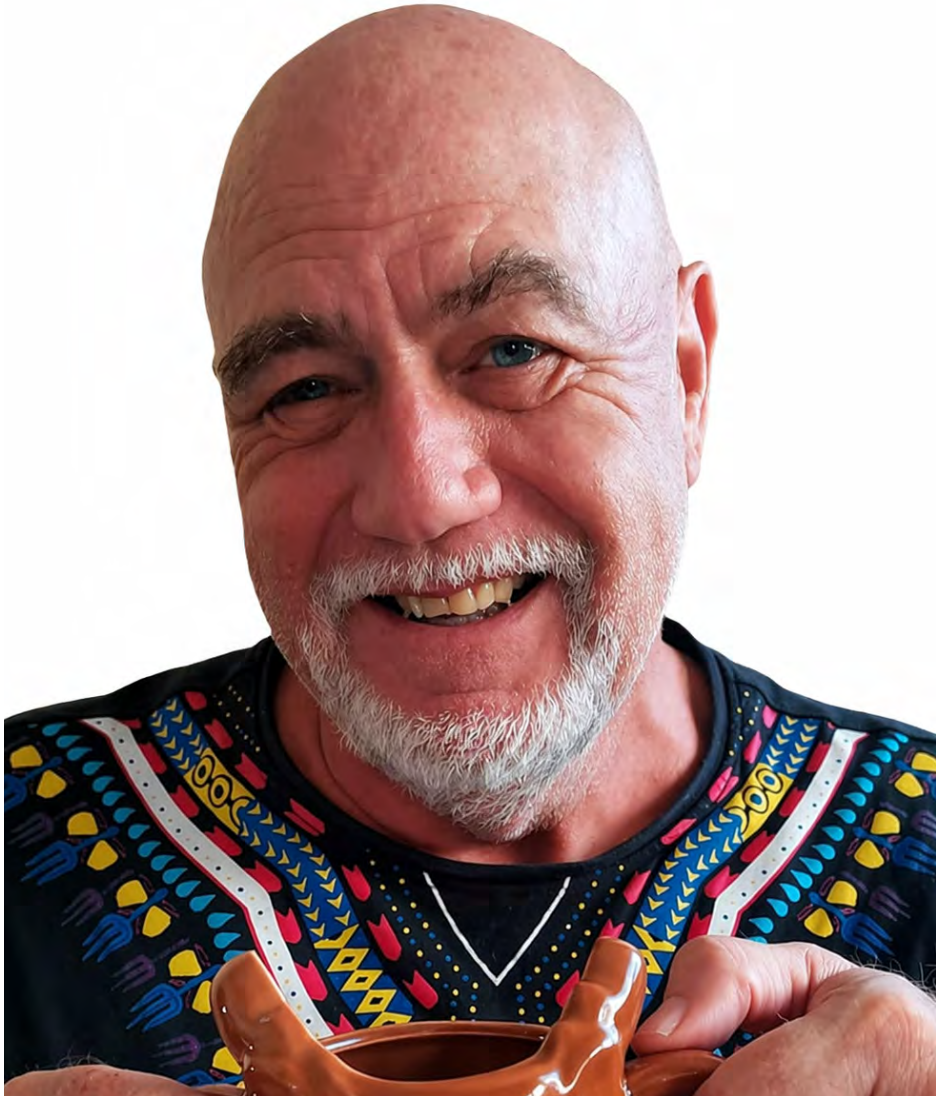
Learn About Birds (LAB) Conference 2026

7th Learn About Birds Conference

20-23 May 2026 | Bonamanzi Game Reserve

BirdLife South Africa and the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology invite you to one of South Africa's premier birding destinations for the 7th **Learn About Birds** conference and **BirdLife South Africa's** 97th Annual General Meeting (AGM - the AGM will take place at 16h00, Friday 22 May 2025). Nestled in the heart of spectacular sand forest and moist savannah, Bonamanzi Game Reserve offers unparalleled opportunities to observe some of South Africa's rarest bird species, including the elusive Green Malkoha and African Broadbill. Whether you're a scientist, seasoned twitcher or just beginning your birding journey, this conference offers something for everyone. Experience the thrill of logging that elusive lifer, learn cutting-edge conservation techniques, and contribute to citizen science projects that protect our rich avian diversity. See here for more details.

Mark Friskin



14 June 1960 – 12 March 2026

With sadness, we have lost Mark Friskin, who passed away on 12 March 2026 after a courageous battle against cancer. Our thoughts and prayers are with Julia and the rest of the family during this difficult time.

Mark has been the club's deputy chairperson since 2017. My first memories of Mark were of a club outing we had to Zaagkuildrift in 2014, which was also the year that Mark and Julia joined the club as members. It was late in the rainy season, and, as anyone familiar with the area knows, the roads can be quite treacherous then. However, Mark and Julia successfully navigated the deep mud in their Isuzu, and we ended up having a truly memorable day.

A few months later, Mark commented on following these crazy birders through deep, muddy pools, slipping and sliding along the route, and picking up a few lifers along the way, not knowing that he would become one of these crazy birders in the future.

Below Mark and Julia on Skomer Island in 2025.

Perhaps this is the best way in which I will remember Mark, a man with no half-measures. Fully committed and passionate not just in birding, but in all other facets of his life; spiritual, family, friends, work and the hobbies he pursued. He also lived life to the fullest and never let his declining health dampen his spirit or his legendary sense of "FOMO." He regularly joined bird club outings until the very end, demonstrating his remarkable strength and passion by joining his final outing this past February, proving that his dedication to his passions was truly lifelong.

Above Mark had a terrific sense of humour - here he is the panic mechanic during their Namibia tour in 2024.

As a member of the Birdlife Polokwane steering committee, Mark's years of experience as a manager in the retail industry stood the committee in good stead. His calm demeanour, management skills, knack for meticulously planning a project uncanny ability to pre-emptively navigate obstacles provided the committee with a sense of security. With Mark around, we had the confidence that any project would succeed simply because it had Mark's backing.

As his interest grew with birding, so did his adventurous side, too. Mark enjoyed many of the club outings to various locations throughout the province. Trips to the Cape and many other provinces were booked and planned in advance to the finest detail.

A ship cruise to Marion Island through Birdlife South Africa, touring through Namibia, and a trip to Skomer in the UK to see the puffins must rate very high on any birder's list, but Mark could also see the beauty in the local garden birds, all special in their own unique way.

Birding Big Day was one of the highlights that Mark prepared for each year, setting higher targets

ABOVE The Red-billed Rocket Tails, Marian, Julia, Mark, and James Friskin, on BBD 2023.

and finding new birding spots along the route. Mark's team, the Red-billed Rocket Tails, was always a contender on the day, finishing overall 5th in the 50 km category in 2023 with 277 species. They then switched to the 6 km category in 2024, finishing the day as victors with a new 6 km record at the time of 208 species! Last year, their team finished in third place, but with the second highest score on the day, 202 species.

Despite the rush on BBD, many a time we would end up with the Red-billed Rocket-tails at the New Agatha Bat Hawk site, having a few laughs and sharing our stories of misses and surprise sightings over a coffee and a sandwich.

Mark's last lifer was a Montagu's Harrier, ending his life list on 725 species. Well done, Mark!

Mark was a one-of-a-kind, unique, passionate man. He will be missed by all.

by Jody de Bruyn

RIGHT Mark's last lifer, this beautiful female Montagu's Harrier seen in the Kruger National Park.

BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA
BIRD OF THE YEAR 2026

Circus maurus

BLACK HARRIER

Black beauty

With a mere 800 or so adults of this magnificent raptor remaining, many people are not even aware that this special bird exists. The Black Harrier is essentially endemic to South Africa (meaning it is found nowhere else in the world), with the exception of a small proportion of the population that occurs in north-western Namibia and in Lesotho. Unlike other raptors that breed on cliffs or in trees, most of the 16 harrier species nest on the ground. Their nest comprises a bowl-shaped stick structure placed in vegetation and lined with soft grasses.

An adult harrier is a sight to behold with its piercing yellow eyes, striking black-and-white plumage, conspicuous white rump and barred tail. Its wingspan of up to 39 centimetres and its very long tail (about 25 centimetres) make it appear much larger than it really is. In fact, female Black Harriers weigh about 550 grams on average; while males clock in at a mere 380 grams – that's little more (female) or less (male) than a block of butter!

Although it is often confused with a Black Sparrowhawk, the Black Harrier is a completely different bird. Whereas the much larger, bird-hunting sparrowhawk is a raptor in forest and plantations, the harrier is mostly a rodent specialist in open country. Although it is not related to owls, it is sometimes referred to as a 'day owl' because it hunts as owls do, flying low over vegetation and relying not only on sight, but also on sound to locate prey. This it does with the aid of a 'facial disc' that directs sound to its ears, helping it to hear mice scuttling in the vegetation.

Sky dancers

Harriers are renowned for spectacular 'sky dancing' displays, performed mainly at the start of the breeding season. The display typically starts with a slow, measured wing beat as the male builds up speed and gains height. Several seriously impressive U-shaped dives follow, as he seems to twist and tumble with each downward fall, turning and flashing his black-and-white plumage while uttering a short 'squeal' at the top of each undulation. The crescendo often ends with a steep dive that almost culminates in a crash-landing before he recovers and flutters to a potential nest site for the mate he is trying to impress.

FAST FACTS

- The **global population** of Black Harriers stands at about 1900, but is **declining** at 2.3 per cent annually.
- Birds move from west to east following the rains, **travelling on average 250 kilometres a day** to find suitable habitat.
- Of 65 tracked birds, the **cause of death** for 11 could be determined: three were killed at wind farms, three on power lines, three from natural causes; one was chopped up by a harvester at night; and one was believed to have been poisoned.
- The **major threats** to Black Harriers are the degradation and loss of habitat, in the long term; climate change; and, ironically, the renewable energy measures designed to address climate change.
- A **lack of genetic diversity** found in a sample of 50 birds suggests that they are poorly equipped to handle future rapid environmental changes.

On the move

Black Harriers are highly nomadic and migratory, travelling great distances to find the best foraging or breeding sites, which may vary from year to year. It is clear that these movements are influenced by rainfall and vegetation (as they impact mouse numbers), yet no two birds are alike, as different individuals undertake radically different journeys in different years.

Black Harriers often leave their breeding grounds in the Western Cape at the end of the winter rains to seek the summer rains in the east. Traversing the Great Karoo is one of the biggest obstacles and the journey is often done fast and at height. One bird covered 523 kilometres in 12 hours of continuous flight from Piketberg to Klerksdorp and kills often reported between 400 and 600 metres above the ground. Harriers also sample sites hundreds of kilometres apart and may then return to these sites with uncanny accuracy months later to breed.

Maximum continuous flight on a single day was 525 kilometres (across the Karoo) and **maximum travel speed** was 80 kilometres per hour.

Did you know?
This was the first BirdLife South Africa Bird of the Year to be chosen by the public, in a voting process in September 2025.

Black Harrier conservation

Black Harrier research started in earnest 25 years ago and while many of the species' secrets have been revealed since then, recent monitoring has provided the most alarming outcomes of all: if just five additional adults are killed annually through manmade causes, the species will go extinct in the next 75 years.

Conservation action is critical and urgent. In order to pool knowledge and resources, several specialists, state organisations (CapeNature) and NGOs (including BirdLife South Africa, the FitzPatrick Institute, the Overberg Renosterveld Trust, the Endangered Wildlife Trust and Hawk Watch International) have formed a partnership known as the Black Harrier Task Force and generated a Conservation Action Plan to guide future conservation priorities. These range from the expansion of protected areas to improved mitigation measures for wind farm developments.

Adult Black Harriers train their fledglings early to take aerial food passes, but attempts are not always successful.

The two to four tiny (20-gram) harrier chicks are at their most vulnerable in the nest. They will take wing in just over five weeks.

ODETTE CURTIS-SCOTT (3)

Harrier habitats under threat

The Cape Floristic Region encompasses lowland and montane fynbos, coastal strandveld and renosterveld, and is recognised globally as the smallest plant kingdom – one that harbours extraordinary biodiversity and exceptional numbers of rare, range-restricted and threatened plants. This is the case of the Black Harrier's breeding distribution, but the species also breeds in Karoo and grassland habitats when conditions are suitable – in other words, when mice are abundant following good rains.

Although Black Harriers nest in a variety of fynbos habitats, from the coastal belt to fynbos-covered mountains, the highest breeding densities occur on South Africa's west coast in structured vegetation and in the Critically Endangered renosterveld habitat of the Overberg. Worryingly, these habitats have experienced major losses. Coastal habitats have been significantly transformed by development, and by invasive alien plants, which have altered thousands of hectares of montane habitats and catchments. In the fertile renosterveld lowlands, as much as 95 per cent of the area has been converted for agriculture.

Habitat loss is therefore a major cause of this species' decline. As it selects only the largest, most intact and contiguous remnants of natural vegetation to breed in, the Black Harrier is considered a flagship species for many habitats within the Cape Floristic Region.

Juvenile Black Harriers face an uncertain future in a rapidly warming and habitat-limited world.

Threats from renewable energy

In addition to habitat loss, a more recent threat comes from the generation of wind power to help combat climate change. For many birds, and raptors in particular, the spinning blades of large wind turbines may be difficult to detect because of birds' surprisingly poor ability to detect contrast (10-fold poorer than ours). This essentially renders the white blade invisible to birds passing through wind farms, and raptors, despite their excellent eyesight, are most affected.

The Black Harrier is no exception and, like the Cape Vulture and Verreaux's Eagle, it suffers a significant number of collisions with turbines. With the global movement towards renewable energy, this threat is likely to increase exponentially in the coming years, unless effective mitigation measures are put in place by wind farm developers.

Research in this field is urgent and ongoing, and several promising options are in place, starting with the avoidance of wind farm developments in and around breeding or other high-use areas. Another promising mitigation is to pattern turbine blades to make them more visible. The 'four-year Hoyerfeld experiment' with colour-patterned blades has shown a significant reduction in all bird strikes and a median 80 per cent decline in fatalities compared to unpatterned turbines. Importantly, no more Black Harriers or Jackal Buzzards have been killed.

Another less tangible but equally alarming threat is the impact of climate change on the species. Research models have predicted that as temperatures rise, Black Harriers will be forced from their preferred habitats to remnants of coastal renosterveld and strandveld. By 2080, only about 20 per cent of currently suitable habitat will remain for this species. With more erratic rainfall and longer periods of drought, prey numbers will also be affected.

TEXT BY DR ODETTE CURTIS-SCOTT & DR ROB SIMMONS

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA
HANS HOHEISEN charitable trust

Koppie Alleen

text **Julia Friskin**

Shaft-tailed Whydah © Derek Engelbrecht.

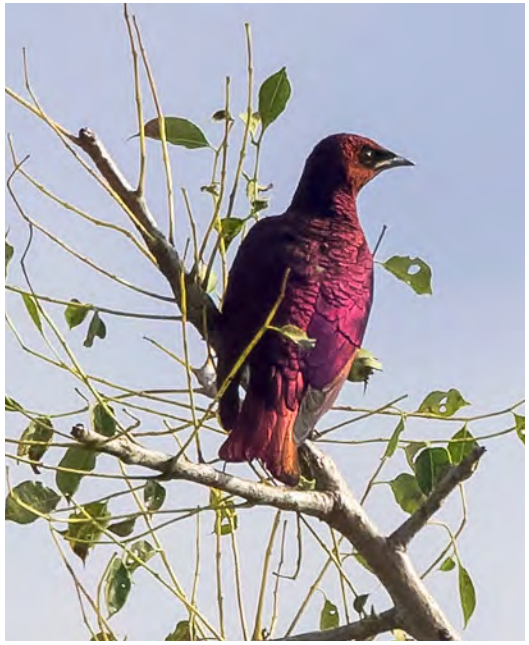
After some soaking rain overnight, the skies cleared in time for our early morning bird outing to the farm Koppie Alleen on the Bylsteel Road on 18 April 2026. Nine members of Birdlife Polokwane met at 6 am to take a slow drive towards our destination, enjoying the beauty of the first light touching the grasslands along the way. Upon our arrival at the farm, we had the somewhat unusual experience of having to spray our car tyres and shoes as a decontamination measure to contain the spread of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in the province.

The raucous call of the Natal Spurfowl was our first noted species as we approached the farm, and the melodious song of the White-browed Scrub Robin welcomed us to the new day ahead. Good sightings were had of the pretty Shaft-tailed Whydahs sitting along the wires, as well as Sabota Larks, White-browed Sparrow-Weavers, and both Ring-necked and Laughing Doves. Of

Below Following Foot and Mouth Disease protocol, Audrey's "hooves" get sprayed © Julia Friskin.

interest was a Willow Warbler—most have left for their summer grounds by now. It is worth noting that Southern White-crowned Shrikes were plentiful. It was also Interesting to see flocks of Wattled and Cape Starlings together.

Upon arrival at the farm's homestead, our host, Francois Goosen, welcomed us warmly onto his farm, and, after introductions and our morning coffee, we were ready to alight on the safari vehicle to begin an exceptional drive around



Above The stunning Violet-backed Starling was everywhere © Jody de Bruyn.

Left An orb web spider © Willem van der Merwe.

this scenic farm. Jewelled raindrops clung to the abundant orb spider webs. Fortunately, our vehicle was equipped with two front poles that cleared our path of the orb spiders and their strong webs. Still, many orbs hitched a ride with us, some for some distance! After a slow start, the birds suddenly became more vocal, and Chinspot Batis, Violet-backed Starlings, Southern Black and Ashy Tits, Brubru, Red-billed Oxpeckers, Long-billed Crombec, Chestnut-vented Warbler, Black-faced Waxbill,

Above The open plains in the western section of the farm is replaced by the rolling hills and valleys of the Renosterkoppies © Derek Engelbrecht.

Right The Lazy Cisticola we found in an isolated valley was flagged as an out of range species by SABAP2 © Jody de Bruyn.

Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Barred Wren-Warbler, Cardinal and Golden-tailed Woodpeckers all made it onto our trip list.

As we drove to the higher points on the farm,

Above This female Mocking Cliff Chat also generated a SABAP out of range form © Jody de Bruyn.

we were mesmerised by the beauty of the landscape and the backdrop of the Soutpansberg and the De Loskop koppies. The road grew steeper, and many opted to lighten the vehicle's load and walk farther up the hill, where we encountered magnificent, clear views of this picturesque area. The Lazy Cisticola, Mocking Cliff Chat, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Orange-breasted Bushshrike and the Yellow-bellied Greenbul were heard and seen here. Calls from the Shelley's Francolin and some Southern Red-billed and Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills were notable birds for our list.

We stood for some time on this high point watching soaring White-backed Vultures and a variety of swifts, including the Alpine, African Black and Little Swifts. The sky was darkening and with rain approaching, we made the timely call to return to the farmhouse.

Our appreciation goes to Francois, Derek and Richter for organising this very special outing. A Cape Sparrow was our last species noted, which brought the tally to 102 birds.

Author email: juliafriskin@yahoo.com

Left to right, top to bottom A Common Scimitarbill; the stately Groundscraper Thrush, a grumpy Pearl-spotted Owlet, a Southern Black Tit, the comical Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill (all © Jody de Bruyn), and the view of De Loskop hills to the northwest from one of the hills at Koppie Alleen (© Julia Friskin).

For the love of birds, and their future

KNYSNA TURACOS JO GROBLER

AFRICAN JACANA THINUS VAN STADEN

"Birding has brought me great joy over the years, from quiet garden moments with a Cape Robin-Chat, to the call of a Fiery-necked Nightjar on a summer night, to the flash of a Crimson-breasted Shrike in the bushveld. Each encounter has deepened my appreciation for South Africa's birds and wild places.

I want to give back and help ensure that species such as the Botha's Lark, African Penguin, and Secretarybird continue to inspire future generations. That is why I have chosen to leave a legacy gift to BirdLife South Africa – so that the wonder of birds endures.

Leaving a gift in my will is my way of protecting habitats, supporting research, addressing threats to birds, and ensuring that the joy of birding continues beyond my lifetime."

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ROBERTS 8 WISH LIST

Derek Engelbrecht
roberts8revision@gmail.com

Do you have any unpublished data, observations, images or sound recordings of any of the species below you'd like to share with the world? Please email me at roberts8revision@gmail.com.

Spotted Crake
- Showing behaviour
- Photos showing diet
- Photos at nests

Goliath Heron
- Nests and nestlings
- Behaviour
- Diet
- Typical habitat
- Young birds
- Recordings

Bearded Vulture
- Typical habitat
- Feeding or dropping bones
- Interesting behaviour

Southern Double-collared Sunbird
- Different age classes
- Photos showing diet
- Photos showing behaviour, interactions, birds at nests, nestlings, etc.
- Photos of nests

Palmnut Vulture
- Photos showing behaviour and diet
- Habitat photos.

Recently published species accounts

Yellow-billed Stork
Southern Brown-throated Weaver
Great Egret
Cape Weaver
Pale-winged Starling
Green-headed Oriole

Roberts 8

Regulars

Birds in Art

Southern White-faced Owl

Text and Artwork

Willem van der Merwe

View my gallery by clicking on the logo below:

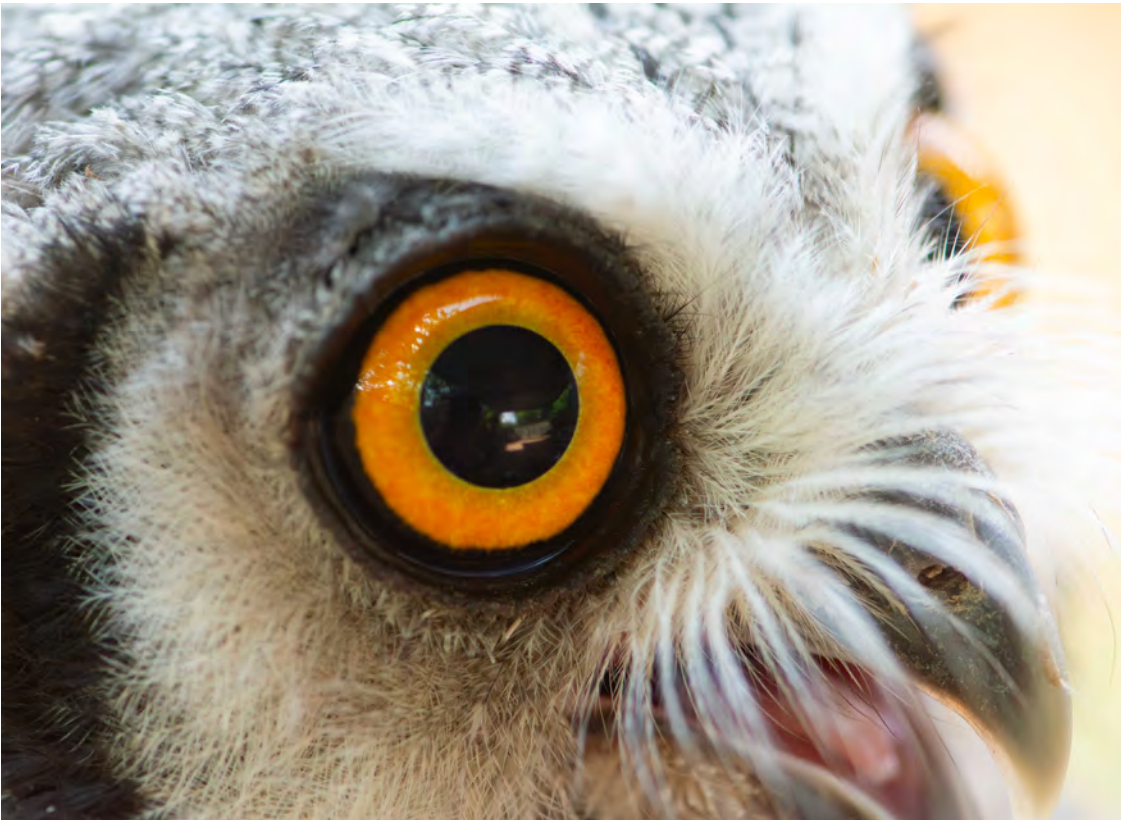
DEVIANT ART

Southern White-faced Owl

Here's a Southern White-faced Owl (*Ptilopsis granti*). What a long name for a pretty little owl! Here in South Africa, we simply call it a White-faced Owl. It is a relative of the African Scops Owl (*Otus senegalensis*), though not a very close one. All the proper scops owls are in the genus *Otus*, while this one shares its genus with just one other species, the Northern White-faced Owl (*Ptilopsis leucotis*). The southern species occurs in dry savannah and woodland in Africa south of the equator, while the northern species occurs in the same habitat north of the equator. In fact, there is just the tiniest region of overlap between the species at the equator itself! The northern species is slightly paler than the southern one and has a different call.

This owl is not frequently seen; I've seen it myself a few times, both in the wild and in captivity at bird rehabilitation centres. It's perhaps the prettiest of all owls to be seen in South Africa. It is fairly small, 25–28 cm in length, and very fluffy, with big, soft, puffy feathers all over its body and head. It has hair-like bristles almost obscuring its bill, and, like the scops owls, prominent ear tufts. Its face is very striking: its eyes are huge and orange-red; they are ringed by its white cheeks and eyebrows, which, in turn, are neatly bordered in black.

As is the case with all of the 'eared' owls, the ear tufts have nothing to do with the owl's actual ears or hearing, but have the function of breaking up its outline as it sleeps in the daytime. It will stretch itself out and press its feathers close to its body, suddenly appearing to have slimmed down to half its original girth; it will close its eyes, and even its bold black-and-white face will suddenly not be very noticeable. With its overall grey colour, it will blend in with the bark, resembling a broken branch. Unlike the scops owls, the white-faced owls don't



BELOW A close-up view of the face of a Southern White-faced Owl, showing the stiff, hair-like feathers covering the bill and protecting the eyes © Derek Engelbrecht.

RIGHT The sleek posture adopted by a bird that knows it has been spotted © Derek Engelbrecht.

come in a rufous or brown morph, only grey, and so will only sleep in trees with grey bark. Unlike the true scops owls, they do not always press themselves close to the bark of the tree, and, as such, can be spotted a bit more easily.

When a predator comes too close, though, revealing that it had indeed spotted the owl, it will suddenly transform! It will now puff up its feathers, spread out its wings, and open its eyes wide. Now the ear tufts, together with the huge eyes, make it look like a wild cat! This sudden transformation is enough to startle most predators. It will hiss angrily at them as well. A female disturbed on her nest will give a snarling alarm call reminiscent of fighting tom cats! If the predator persists, the owl will defend itself mightily with its sharp beak and strong claws. These owls will occasionally attack humans trying to photograph them, sometimes drawing blood. But at other times, it may seem to be in denial about the threat … relying on camouflage so much that it does nothing, refuses to move and can actually be caught by hand!

This little owl is a doughty predator. It mostly catches small rodents, as well as insects and other invertebrates, and, from time to time, small birds. The largest prey items recorded in its diet are laughing doves and squirrels. When there are bushfires, they may take advantage of them to search for invertebrates and small mammals fleeing the flames.

Below and opposite A nest with chicks placed on top of an old Cape Sparrow nest © Derek Engelbrecht.

When courting, the owls start by calling each other. The display call is a soft, pleasant, bubbling hoot, quite different from the *croop* of the scops owl. The male calls to the female, walking towards her along the branch, bobbing his head up and down. If she flies off, he will chase her, hopefully wearing her down until she gives in to his charms. Like many other owl species, this one will use the nests of other birds after they've been abandoned. It has been recorded using everything from unlined natural hollows formed by branches to the flimsy nests of Grey Go-away-birds or the sturdy platform nests of birds of prey. The eggs are laid on top, and the mother incubates them, lying flat during the day to be inconspicuous. The male will assist her for short shifts during the night, one of the few cases of male owls helping females that have been recorded. The two or three eggs hatch after thirty days. The chicks are almost fully feathered at three weeks, and at five weeks they can fly, but tend to stay near their nesting tree. The parents still escort them around for two weeks or more before they are fully independent.

This is a species not frequently seen because it is quiet and unobtrusive, but it has a very extensive distribution and is presently in no danger of extinction.

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Reflections

Birding in SANParks

In 2020, during the COVID lockdown, we found out Chris Patton is a birder working for SANParks and urged him to write articles on the three SANParks' Limpopo parks. Thirty-seven Limpopo bird articles later, he's now moving on to sharing his memories or tips on birding in National Parks throughout the rest of the country. We hope you continue to enjoy his insights.

Learn that Birds are Dinosaurs at Kgodumodumo Dinosaur Interpretation Centre

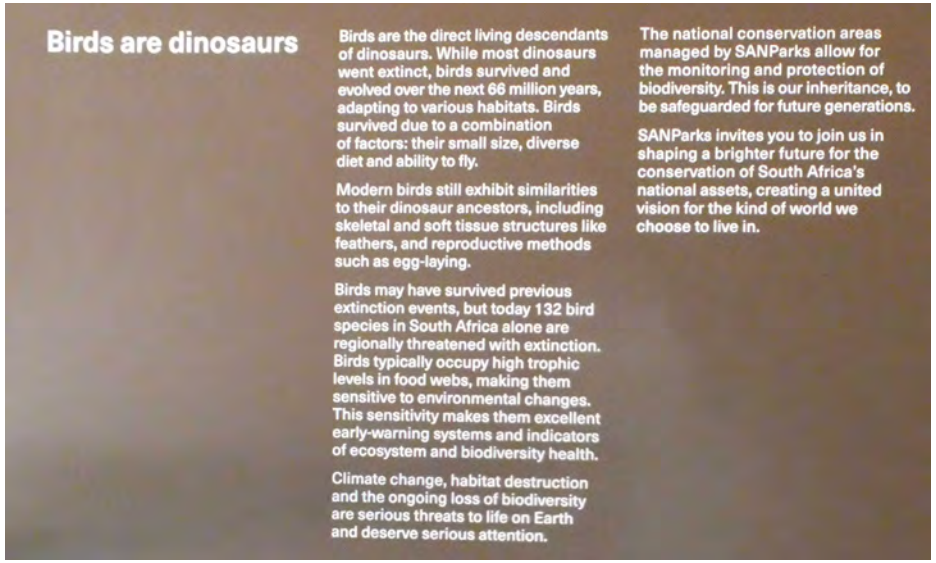
Chris Patton

In this edition of *Reflections*, I'd like to do something a little bit different… After 37 articles about my birding memories in the national parks of Limpopo (Marakele in the Waterberg, Mapungubwe in the Limpopo Basin at the tripoint where Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa meet, and the northern section of Kruger, the parts between the Olifants and the Limpopo rivers, I've been given the license by the editorial team to write about my memories and experiences of birding in all the other national parks of South Africa, and to hopefully share some insight and ideas of some of the lesser known places in the parks where birding rewards are prolific.

Above The Kgodumodumo Dinosaur Centre – a new world-class facility all South Africans should put on their bucket list

I may be based in the Garden Route National Park these days, but my project work or my consultation work with colleagues in the parks takes me to all twenty-odd of the publicly accessible national parks throughout the country (currently there are two national parks in habitat recovery phase where there are no tourist facilities, and to which I have not yet been). While birding is seldom the reason for my park visits, I invariably travel with binoculars and a camera, taking the opportunity to observe things either in transit or in and around my accommodation. Over my three decades working with SANParks, I've had many fantastic birding experiences, and moving forward, I will start to share a combination of tips and memories about birding in the various parks.

But when I wrote above that "I'd like to do something a little bit different" in this article, I don't want



Above A "Birds are Dinosaurs" display panel at Kgodumodumo and the bird-like feet of one of the dinosaur recreations © Chris Patton.

to write about birding memories in a specific park, but rather on my involvement with an interpretation project that has lots to do with birds… and that is to write about the Kgodumodumo Dinosaur Interpretation Centre.

For readers who have not heard of this facility, a quick online search will reveal that "The Kgodumodumo Dinosaur Interpretation Centre is a world-class, interactive facility in Golden Gate Highlands National Park, in the eastern parts of the Free State Province in South Africa, that showcases palaeontological, archaeological, and geological wonders. It highlights the region's 200-million-year-old fossil heritage—including the world's oldest dinosaur embryos—through modern exhibits, in situ fossils, and interactive technology." The centre highlights fossils discovered in the area, including the oldest known dinosaur embryos, and highlights BaSotho cultural heritage.

Above Some close-ups of dinosaur models local to the Golden Gate area © Chris Patton.

Kgodumodumo officially opened on 22 June 2025, and features three main storylines or exhibition sections. The exhibition is structured around these key themes:

- **Palaeoscience**: Focuses on fossil formation, geological history of the Golden Gate region, and the Wits University fossil archive.
- **Local Dinosaurs**: Showcases scientific advancements, featuring 6 m *Massospondylus* models, a full skeleton model, original dinosaur egg fossils, and a 10 m model of *Ledumahadi mafube*.
- **Indigenous Knowledge**: Explores BaSotho mythology, specifically the story of the "Kgodumodumo" monster, linking local heritage to the palaeontological finds.

The facility is designed as an interactive, immersive experience, including a "display area-exhibition and display installation" section that integrates these three areas.

Kgodumodumo is Sesotho for "Great Giant," named after a mythical monster, and the Kgodumodumo Dinosaur Interpretation Centre was created through a partnership between the South African Department of Tourism, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), SANParks, and the Evolutionary Studies Institute of the University of the Witwatersrand, as well as with input from local communities, to link it to BaSotho culture. The Department of Tourism funded the project

Left One of the impressive sculptures that creates atmosphere along the external access route into the centre proper
© Chris Patton

Above The building was designed to blend into the surrounding environment
© Kevin Moore.

through R120 million donated by the European Union, and it involved a large team for design, curation, and fabrication, including partners such as Digital Fabric, Scale Studios, and MGG Productions. Mashabane Rose and Associates handled the building's architectural design, while the exhibition and interpretation design of the Kgodumodumo Dinosaur Interpretation Centre was designed and developed by Office 24-7 Architecture, with many SANParks and Wits University staff having ongoing involvement in the design, construction and content of the displays.

The building was designed to blend into the surrounding environment. Despite being a large building, it has natural grass growing on its roof, and indeed some of the local wildlife has already embraced it as part of the environment…

My first involvement with the Dinosaur Centre was back in 2016, when plans for the centre were

Above Proof from the official opening, some local wildlife has already embraced the Kgodumodumo's presence… © Chris Patton.

emerging, and I was to provide input on the building's accessibility for people with disabilities. Issues of extreme slope gradient over a considerable distance from the parking area to the building entrance have been addressed with a staggered pathway that passes several outdoor dinosaur sculptures, making access part of the experience. Inside the building, wide, non-slip ramps, with support railings and linked by transition landings, make accessible movement part of the flow for everyone. Several audio and tactile exhibits (including Braille) for visitors also open the facility to blind and visually impaired guests and enhance the experience for sighted guests. This is a key part of visitor management and interpretation.

In 2016, I had a different job with SANParks. I did not know at the time that I would soon transfer to the unit that works on visitor interpretation and take up a position as SANParks Content Manager to research, write, and/or edit content for interpretation centres, displays, and other interpretive platforms. So, four or five years after my initial involvement, I was part of the

Above My first involvement with the Kgodumodumo Centre was around accessibility.

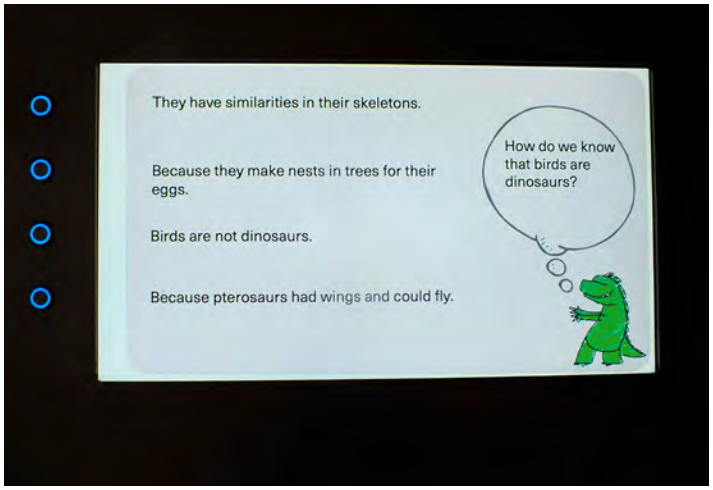
Below A mini film theatre, where an introductory film is played to visitors © Chris Patton.

SANParks' team tasked with providing the exhibition installation designers with content on conservation and ecology in the Park, and in particular, the prominent, iconic and endangered birds found in the park, the latter with their specific link to dinosaurs through the threat of extinction.

One of the first chambers visitors will encounter on entering the Kgodumodumo building is a mini-film theatre where an introductory 10-minute video is screened for visitors that anchors and explains the

intersection of local BaSotho mythology, palaeontological science, and the region's rich prehistoric history, and spoiler alert, first details that birds are modern-day dinosaurs.

The entire Centre is particularly big on captivating children, with several puzzle opportunities along the route and a series of interactive touch boxes that pose many questions with various correct and incorrect options, complete with cartoon dinosaur graphics and sound effects to enhance the interaction.



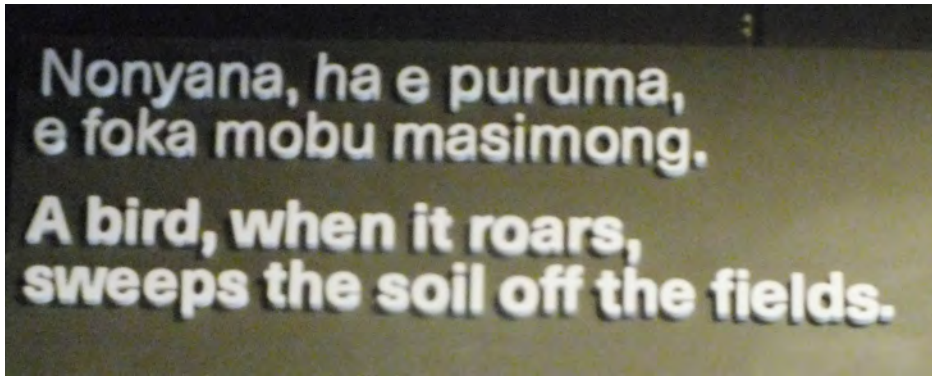
Above An example of the bird-related content on the interactive touch boxes © Chris Patton.

The journey through the Kgodumodumo exhibition culminates in a chamber devoted to explaining the relationship between dinosaurs and birds. This relationship is detailed in several ways. The evolution of birds, their conservation, and their cultural significance in BaSotho culture are three themes.

Birds and BaSotho culture

Local folklore speaks about an interconnection between people

Below A BaSotho proverb about birds © Chris Patton.



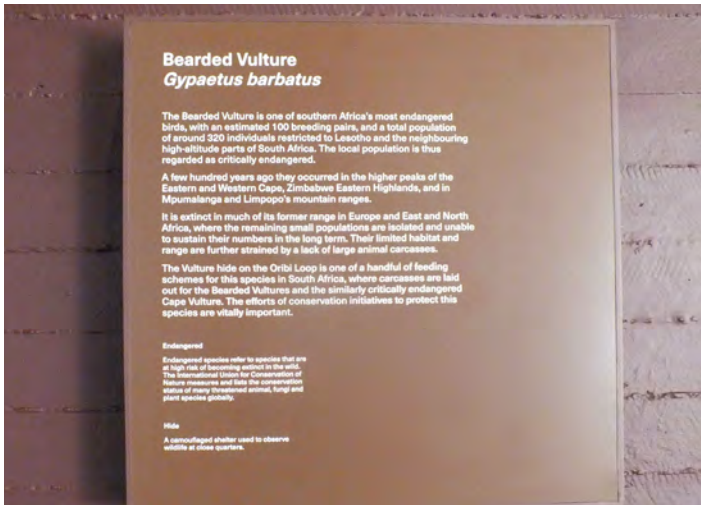
Above A display on prominent birds of Golden Gate Highlands National Park and an explanation of their diversification © Chris Patton.

Above The eggs and evolutionary significance of those same 12 prominent Golden Gate birds © Chris Patton.

and creatures of the sky. Some birds - real and mythical - are associated, depending on their attributes and behaviour, with good or bad weather and form part of holistic ecological thinking about humans, animals, agriculture and climate. African Fish Eagles (messengers of the Gods), Hamerkops (signs of extreme weather), Spotted Thick-knees (associated with bad omens) and swallow species (indicators of changing seasons) are particularly revered.

Above The Hamerkop is a species particularly revered in BaSotho culture © Chris Patton.

As one nears the exit of the exhibition centre, the parting message to visitors is one of conservation, and the focus turns to species found in the Park that are red data listed as endangered or vulnerable, some because of restricted distribution, limited habitat dependence, loss of food supply or conflict with humans or other processes. Perhaps the one most associated with the heights of the Drakensberg and the Maluti Mountains is the Bearded Vulture, one of my contributions to the Centre, which always fills me with melancholy at its plight. Other featured species include the Secretarybird, the Southern Bald Ibis, and Gurney's Sugarbird.



After leaving the interior exhibition centre at Kgodumodumo, the message continues through a series of outdoor interpretation displays, several of which detail local bird species that are vulnerable because of restricted ranges and localised, specialist diets.

Above Linking the threat of dinosaur-like extinction with modern conservation challenges are displays of endangered species, such as the Bearded Vulture © Chris Patton.

Above Along the Centre's exit boardwalk are displays on Golden Gate's bird species © Chris Patton

The Kgodumodumo Project was a slow-burner, and there were many contractual, structural building and funding delays along the way, so much so that it even became a political issue in parliament. But the 10 years in the making were well worth the wait, because the result is an inspirational, interactive and educational venue that all South Africans can be rightly proud of and add to their bucket list of must-visit places.

I hope the readers have been okay with this deviation from actual birding sightings in national parks and the 'gen' required to see those birds. I promise that in the next edition, I'll write about proper birding memories. It is perhaps logical that I should write about birding in Golden Gate, because I've had some spectacular and unexpected sightings there over the years. If readers are inspired to visit the Dinosaur Centre, they can double down and do some birding while they are there.

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Saving Botha's lark

a story of hope

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Miscellaneous notes on the Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark

Derek Engelbrecht

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Between 2008 and 2016 (excluding 2014), I studied the nesting ecology of birds at Al3 De Loskop farm, about 40 km north of Polokwane (Fig. 1). The research focused mainly on ground-nesting species, particularly larks (Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark, Pink-billed Lark, Sabota Lark, Monotonous Lark, Rufous-naped Lark, and Red-capped Lark) and the Quailfinch.

These data supported several postgraduate projects, the results of many which were later published in peer-reviewed journals. Most student studies were based on two years of data collection, after which the results were analysed and written up as either dissertations or scientific papers. However, data collection also continued independently of these projects, resulting in a much larger overall dataset, spanning the entire study period from 2008–2016. Consequently, individual student projects, and therefore the papers published from them, often relied on smaller sample sizes than the full dataset, typically two years instead of the entire 8-year period.

For this note, I analysed the complete dataset for certain aspects of the species' nesting ecology and compare it with previously published results of Engelbrecht and Dikgale (2014). As much of the interpretation has already been covered in that paper, the focus here is on presenting the results from the larger dataset, with discussion limited to cases where results differ significantly from those reported by Engelbrecht and Dikgale. In addition to presenting the results from the larger dataset, I also include previously unreported incidental observations. The study and data collection protocol are described by Engelbrecht and Dikgale (2014) and will not be repeated here (a copy of the paper can be obtained from the author).

Dispersal and Site Fidelity

The population of Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks at De Loskop are resident, with birds present throughout the year, but casual

BIRD BRIEFS

Figure 1. The main nesting sites of Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks at Al3 De Loskop. Sites 1, the floodplain of an earth dam, and 2 and 6, fallow fields, were used most frequently.

observations suggest numbers fluctuate within and between years. In years of high rainfall, population numbers are lower, but it is possible that individuals are simply more dispersed. Their favoured site is the floodplain of an earth dam, which is flooded in such years, forcing them to nest elsewhere. Although data are lacking for residency at the individual level, indications are that some individuals either reside permanently at De Loskop, or they return to the site from time to time. To this end, three noteworthy retraps include the following:

- Adult female AM84966 recaptured 1,729 days (4 yr, 8 mo, 24 d) after it was initially ringed as an adult,
- Adult male AB81398 recaptured 1,320 days (3 yr, 7 mo, 12 d) after it was initially ringed as an adult, and
- Adult male AB81509 1,104 days (3 years and 9 days), after it was initially ringed as an adult.

BIRD BRIEFS

Despite the number of nestlings ringed at De Loskop (105 colour-ringed individuals), resightings of these individuals after fledging were rare, with only a single record—a resighting of a juvenile at a waterhole at the same site 5 mo, 4 d after it was ringed as a nestling. It's not known whether this low resighting rate stems from high fledgling mortality due to predation and exposure, or if it reflects a natural post-juvenile dispersal from natal breeding grounds during the post-juvenile moult. Alternatively, the challenge may be purely observational, as marked individuals might simply "blend" into the larger population, making it difficult to distinguish them among hundreds of other sparrow-larks.

Diet and Foraging

Adults eat mainly seeds but will opportunistically eat invertebrates. The seeds eaten are too small to identify positively, but an individual was seen eating sorghum seeds in a fallow field. Invertebrates recorded in the diet are primarily those that were recorded being delivered to nestlings and are thus assumed to

Figure 2. An adult male with a beak full of termites near its nest.

constitute part of the adults' diet as well. These include grasshoppers and locusts (order Orthoptera), termites and their alates (order Blattodea; Fig. 2), ants (family Formicidae), spiders (Order Araneae), butterflies and small moths, as well as their larvae (order Lepidoptera), centipedes (class Chilopoda), earwigs (order Dermoptera), stick insects (order Phasmida), and dragonflies and damselflies (order Odonata).

The Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark drinks regularly, either at the earth dam on the farm or at smaller water sources, such as pump stations or pools at leaking pipes. One colour-marked male was recorded drinking twice on the same day in August. How nestlings meet their water requirements remains unclear. Although lark nestlings typically receive water from invertebrate-rich diets, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark nestlings consume substantial amounts of seed, potentially increasing water demands. It has been suggested that parents may obtain water by consuming faecal sacs and subsequently regurgitating fluid to chicks (Morel and Morel 1984). Observations of yellowish fluid being fed to nestlings—especially in arid areas far from surface water—support the idea that this water may be metabolically derived (Hancock et al., 2017). In more than 410 hours of nest video footage, I have observed behaviour that could be construed as regurgitation, but it is inherently difficult to distinguish whether a bird is regurgitating seeds or water. It is worth noting that De Loskop is situated in a considerably more mesic region than the sites mentioned in the aforementioned publications, and surface water is readily available, perhaps obviating the need to form water through metabolic processes; if regurgitation occurs at this site, it may instead reflect the regurgitation of ingested surface water. This behaviour remains poorly understood and warrants further study.

Social and Interspecific Behaviour

The population at De Loskop numbers in the hundreds, possibly low thousands. Although they are usually seen foraging or flying in small, loosely-knit groups, they may also forage in mixed-species flocks with Grey-backed Sparrow-Larks, Red-capped Larks, Pink-billed Larks, as well as Red-headed Finches and ploceids, such as Red-billed Queleas, Scaly-feathered Weavers, Southern Red Bishops, and White-winged Widows.

Figure 3. Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks display no antagonistic behaviour towards other species at drinking places. Here, a Quailfinch is drinking with three sparrow-larks.

When nesting, most nests are spaced at least 15–20 m from the nearest conspecific nest, but sometimes less than 10 m, and two nests were a mere 4 m apart. At De Loskop, it shares its breeding grounds with Red-capped Lark and Pink-billed Lark, but at Noordgrens on the Limpopo River, it shared its breeding grounds with Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark and Red-capped Lark (Engelbrecht, 2017).

Individuals sometimes gather in numbers at surface water, but I have not observed any agonistic behaviour towards other species when drinking, including Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark, Red-capped Lark, Quailfinch, and Shaft-tailed Whydah (Fig. 3). Once, though, an individual was observed repeatedly charging at a much larger Three-banded Plover on the water's edge. It's unclear what the cause of this agonistic behaviour directed at the plover was.

The only confirmed predator of an adult was a Western Cattle Egret, but trail camera footage placed near nests showed White Stork (Fig. 4a), Spotted Eagle-Owl and an unidentified rodent taking nestlings or eggs. A record of a Montagu's Harrier taking two eggs was published elsewhere (Engelbrecht and Mulaudzi, 2017). An Armoured Ground Cricket was observed feeding on a nestling a few centimetres from the nest, but it is not known if the cricket actually killed the nestling (Fig. 4b). A Cape Skink attempted to prey on very young nestlings, but the parents dive-bombed it continuously and succeeded in chasing it off. At one of the waterholes, a Gabar Goshawk repeatedly tried to catch small passerines, including Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks, coming to drink water (Fig. 4c). Although it failed to catch any birds while I was there, it is likely that the Gabar Goshawk would occasionally succeed in catching unsuspecting Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks.

Breeding

Nest site characteristics

Pairs nest in two main micro-habitat types at De Loskop: the floodplain of an earth dam and fallow fields with some vegetation cover, but also plenty of bare ground. Most nests are well-spaced from conspecific pairs, typically > 15–20 m, but two nests were only 4 m apart, with no obvious interactions observed between the two pairs over several hours of continuous observations.

Figures 4a) A White Stork about to predate a nest. b) the remains of a nestling that an Armoured Ground Cricket was feeding on. The nest can be seen in the background. c) A melanistic Gabar Goshawk hawking small passerines coming to drink at a pool of water on the left of the image.

Bird Briefs

Bird Briefs

Table 1. Clutch size, fresh egg and estimated egg mass, and egg dimensions of the Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix leucotis* in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. FEM = fresh egg mass; EEM = estimated egg mass; EW_{max} = maximum width of the egg; EL_{max} = maximum length of the egg; EEI = Egg elongation index.

	Engelbrecht and Dikgale 2014			Combined		
Parameter	**Mean ± SD**	**Range**	**n**	**Mean ± SD**	**Range**	**n**
Clutch size	1.88 ± 0.33	1.00–2.00	88	1.91 ± 0.28	1–2	204
FEM (g)	2.02 ± 0.20	1.67–2.40	23	2.02 ± 0.18	1.55–2.4	51
EEM (g)	1.98 ± 0.17	1.66–2.29	43	2.00 ± 0.17	1.55–2.47	164
EW_{max} (mm)	13.90 ± 0.45	13.00–15.00	66	13.83 ± 0.43	12.38–15.14	215
EL_{max} (mm)	19.87 ± 0.91	18.10–21.90	66	19.73 ± 0.87	17.3–21.9	215
EEI	1.43 ± 0.07	1.25–1.60	66	1.43 ± 0.07	1.24–1.64	215

Nest construction usually lasts 1–3 days, but I have seen laying begin before any lining is added (Fig. 5).

Egg Dimensions

Table 1 presents a comparison of various egg parameters from the study by Engelbrecht and Dikgale (2014) and the larger dataset, which combines all years from 2008–2013, 2015 and 2016. The mean clutch size across all years was 1.91 ± 0.28 (range: 1–2). There were no significant differences in the clutch size across years (ANOVA with post-hoc testing, $p > 0.05$).

Incubation

Both sexes incubate. Only females develop a brood patch, although I once ringed a male with a partial brood patch. The incubation period, i.e., the period from the laying of the last egg of the clutch to hatching of that egg, was determined to be 10.5 days ± 0.51 SD (range 10–11, n = 23). The eggs invariably hatched in the morning, although some hatched later in the day, even mid-afternoon.

Brooding

Both parents brood and feed the young. The parents defend a small area in the immediate vicinity of the nest, approximately a 40-cm radius. The defence includes posturing by fluffing the body feathers and spreading the wings and tail to appear larger than it is, as well as physical attack and dive-bombing, accompanied by a harsh scolding sound. Attacks observed were

BIRD BRIEFS

BIRD BRIEFS

Figure 5. Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks may begin laying eggs immediately after excavating the nest cup, but they continue to add the lining throughout the incubation period

directed at conspecifics, as well as Ring-necked and Laughing Doves, Southern Red Bishop, Red-billed Quelea, Yellow-crowned Bishop (Fig. 6), and Desert and Zitting Cisticolas.

A possible record of co-operative breeding in northern Botswana requires confirmation. In > 700 hours of video footage of colour-ringed adults at nests at De Loskop, I have never recorded any evidence of co-operative breeding.

The nestling period was determined to be 10.02 days ± 0.75 SD (range 9–12, *n* = 46). Upon fledging, young birds are unable to fly, but from ~18–22 days of age, they can fly short distances. Although the post-fledging dependence period is unknown, a juvenile was observed being fed by an adult about three weeks after fledging. Furthermore, juveniles are often seen arriving and departing with a pair of adults two months after the breeding season ended, suggesting they may have been part of a family unit (Fig. 7). However, the extent of these juveniles' dependence on

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Figure 6. A male is attacking a Yellow-crowned Bishop that strayed too close to the nest. The well-camouflaged female can be seen sitting in the nest at the base of the green forb.

Figure 7. The juvenile (left), estimated to be at least 2–3 months old, is progressing through its post-juvenile moult while remaining in the company of an adult pair—pictured here with a female—which are presumably its parents.

Figure 8. The remains of two nestlings that died after their nest was flooded during a storm.

their parents at this stage, if any, is not known.

Nest Failure

Causes of nest failure include predation, flooding (Fig. 8), trampling, and exposure. A cold snap and unseasonal rain in April 2010 caused mass abandonment of nests. Termites are also known to occasionally steal the nest lining.

Conclusion

This multi-year study revealed many previously unreported details of this species' life history, but I feel that even after eight seasons of study, there are still many secrets to be unveiled.

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Rufous-naped Lark courtship display vocalisations and behaviour

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On 29 December 2025, I conducted full-protocol SABAP2 surveys in grasslands approximately 50 km east of Bloemfontein, towards Dewetsdorp, Free State Province. While atlassing, I encountered several Rufous-naped Larks (*Corypha africana*) calling either from fence pole posts or from low shrubs. At an intersection on the farm Vrederust pentad 2920_2630), a few kilometres south-west of Rusfontein Dam Nature Reserve, Bloemfontein district, I made the following interesting behavioural observations of two Rufous-naped Larks. It was about 10:00.

Figure 1. The female Rufous-naped Lark perched on a fence and calling the presumed courtship call (ML647761520).

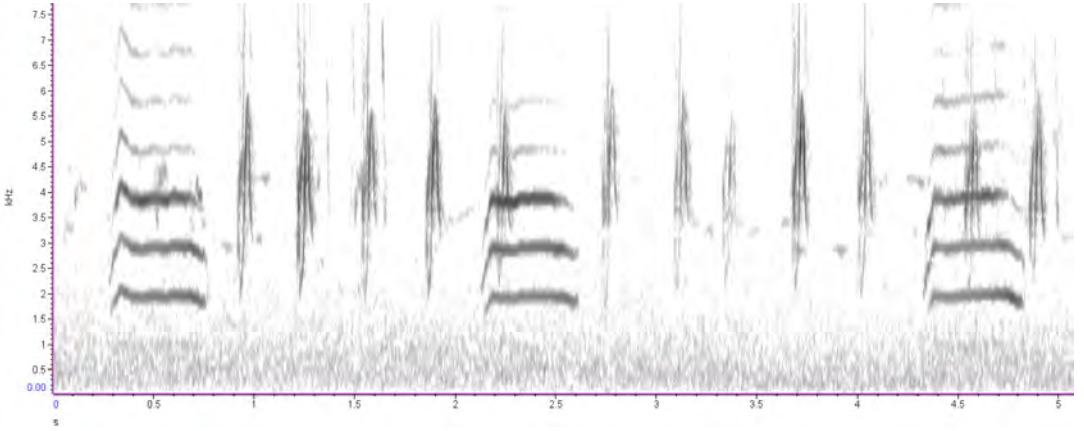

Figure 2. Sonogram of presumed courtship calls given by the pair; the female's calls are the short *wisp* calls, and the male is calling the longer, drawn-out *meeuw* call (ML647807284).

While driving towards the intersection, I observed a Rufous-naped Lark perched on a fence post and calling softly (Fig. 1). Each time I attempted to get closer to obtain sound recordings and/or photographs, the individual would fly to the next pole and continue calling. The female was vocalising the "*wisp-wisp-wisp*" notes, and the male was answering with a cat-like "*meeuw*" call, resembling the call of a Cape Longclaw (Fig. 2; ML647807284). When the male arrived, it also perched on the fence, displaying with its tail raised (as in *Cercotrichas* species) (Fig. 3), and both flew a short distance where they went unseen for a short while. They weren't away for long before both returned to the fence, where both individuals continued calling the soft vocalisations.

Maclean (1993) (and repeated by Dean 2005), describes four main vocalisations for this species, namely the song (the typical "*tseep-tseeoo*" call), a flight song which comprises a series of rambling whistles, tweets and trills, including imitations from other species, a loud whistled "*pee-wit*" or "*pree, pree*" alarm call, and a possible contact call described as a clear whistled "*pew-it*" or "*peet*." Engelbrecht (2022) also confirmed four vocalisations: song, which includes wing song, a flight song and heterospecific mimicry, contact calls, alarm calls, nestling and fledgling and begging and distress calls. The calls described by Engelbrecht are similar to Maclean's, except for the alarm call, which Engelbrecht describes as a "*kwirt-kwirt-kwirt*" call – delivered by a bird flushed from a nest. None

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Figure 3. The male Rufous-naped Lark, calling the *meeuw* call after he joined the female. While calling, the male dropped his wing slightly and cocked his tail (ML647761523).

of the calls described by Maclean or Engelbrecht matches the vocalisations reported in this paper, nor has similar vocalisations been submitted to the Macaulay Library or Xeno-canto online databases.

Engelbrecht (2017) described the courtship and copulation of the Eastern Clapper Lark (*Corypha fasciolata*). In this species, the female initiates the courtship display by calling a medley of repetitive notes from near the nest site while quivering her wings, which attracts the male and courtship and copulation take place at or within the nest. It seems plausible that the pair reported here vocalised as part of the courtship ritual, with the male cocking his tail and lowering his wings, before flying off to copulate on the ground. The unusual calls reported here, together with circumstantial evidence of the pair's behaviour, suggest they were likely courtship calls.

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Shadow-boxing Tawny-flanked Prinia

Derek Engelbrecht

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Shadow boxing (also referred to as "window-fighting" or "mirror-fighting") is an intentional, aggressive behavioural display where a bird repeatedly attacks its own reflection in a shiny surface, such as a window, a mirror, or any shiny surface that will enable the individual to see its own reflection. It is a very common behaviour, especially during the breeding season or in highly territorial species, and has been recorded across a great diversity of species in numerous taxa (see the World Shadow Boxing database).

On 1 April 2026 at 14:45, I was sitting on my veranda when I saw a pair of Tawny-flanked Prinias foraging in a *Tecomaria capensis* bush. The one bird, presumably the male, repeatedly attacked one of the windows. At first, I thought it was trying to catch an insect on the window, but upon closer inspection, I saw it was shadow boxing its own reflection. I then went inside and got a few photos of it attacking its own reflection. It would attack its own reflection, before disappearing for a while, only to return again. The "attack" lasted about 15 minutes. According to the World Shadow Boxing database, this is the first record of shadow boxing in this species, and a first for the genus *Prinia*.

BELOW The shadow-boxing Tawny-flanked Prinia.

Unexpected night-time visitors to weaver nests

TEXT AND PHOTOS Ingrid Weiersbye

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After a long, hot drive through the Karoo to Tierpoort south of Bloemfontein, we sat enjoying sundowners on our little stoep. As the vivid sky dimmed and darkened, we were aware of birds settling down all around us and idly watched as a group of five or so very small birds arrived, landing in a nearby tree about a metre from two old Southern Masked Weaver nests.

The group performed a little ritual of bowing, bobbing, and tail-raising whilst contact calling in a swizzling, finch-like manner, or perhaps akin to the mobbing calls given by young mannikins soliciting from parents.

Once it was established they were certainly not white-eyes, their advance to the nests convinced us we were observing Scaly-feathered Weavers, or perhaps more excitingly, Cut-throat Finches, whereupon I went and fetched my camera.

It was now nearly dark, and the birds silhouetted as they investigated both nests, and after some to-ing and fro-ing, appeared to finally settle in one nest. I resorted to flash photos, hoping that once home, I could brighten the shots and identify the strange little birds.

Upon increasing the exposure of the images, I was surprised to discover the birds were not what we thought, but in fact Cape Penduline Tits.

Reading up in the literature, the records of Cape Penduline Tits roosting in weaver nests date back to an account by the legendary Margaret Courtenay-Latimer, who, back in May 1959, observed this behaviour in Damaraland, Namibia (South West Africa) (Courtenay-Latimer and Clancey, 1959). However, overall, there appear to be far fewer records published for the Cape than for the Grey Penduline Tit roosting in weaver nests (Dean 2005a, Dean 2005b).

Upon submitting to SABAP2, I was delighted to receive an ORF (out-of-range form), made even more satisfying by being able to validate the record with photos!

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ABOVE A Cape Penduline Tit entering the nest on the left, while the nest on the right already has three inside it.

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Another unexpected night-time visitor

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After working late recently, I took a shower at close to midnight. The large bathroom window was some distance away, and the curtains were not drawn, so light from the bathroom beamed out across the mountainside. In total, I had the lights on for about 20 minutes.

Upon leaving the cubicle, a movement at the window caught my eye. I saw a rounded grey head of what appeared to be a toad. It moved and bobbed around a bit, and I wondered in surprise how on earth a toad could've climbed up onto the window ledge. The window rim prevented me from seeing the body below the head.

I noticed moths had already been drawn to the light, and whatever the creature was, it was catching them. As I approached closer, a small, drab, featureless bird flew off into the darkness.

Of course, no one believed me, and I had no photos.

I strongly suspect it was one of the four familiar chats living in the backyard, who possibly had a nest nearby, judging by their vociferous attacks on the mongoose every day in that vicinity.

I told a young friend who said he'd observed Familiar Chats and Cape Wagtails hunting insects around the pathway lights at a retirement village at 21:00.

Coprophagous Red-billed Oxpeckers

TEXT AND PHOTOS Derek Engelbrecht

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Beyond their typical diet of ectoparasites such as ticks, lice, and leeches, oxpeckers consume a surprisingly diverse range of food items, including blood (Patten and Hart 1985; Bosque 2009), tissue from open wounds, earwax, and bits of skin tissue. They also occasionally exploit prey flushed by their ungulate hosts, such as grasshoppers and stick insects (Engelbrecht 2025), as well as termite alates (Engelbrecht 2026). More unusual dietary items include carrion (Dean and Macdonald 1981), drying or dried meat (including biltong), nectar (Engelbrecht et al. 2014), and fruit (Bolster 1935). However, in the latter case, the birds may have been attracted primarily to insects associated with ripe fruit rather than the fruit itself.

An under-appreciated yet significant component of the oxpecker's diet is mucophagy, or the consumption of mucus. Common sources include mucus from the nostrils, ears, and ocular discharge (rheum). They also consume mucus lining the anus and fresh faeces, which are available only briefly during defecation.

On several occasions, oxpeckers have been observed exploiting this resource opportunistically. In one case, a bird feeding on a host rushed to the anus as the animal began to defecate, apparently to access fresh mucus (see ML656441975). On another occasion, a Red-billed Oxpecker feeding near a Giraffe's anus actively pulled at emerging droppings, seemingly to maximise access to the mucus coating.

On 1 March 2026, while birding in the Hoedspruit Wildlife Estate, I observed three Red-billed Oxpeckers—two adults and one juvenile—from a group of five feeding on fresh giraffe dung on the ground. The birds were observed scraping or nipping small bits off the surface of the dung, but also picking up larger pieces and vigorously shaking it to break it into small pieces before swallowing. Their feeding strategy led me to surmise that they were targeting the mucous-coated outer layer of the dung, as it was still fairly wet and

Mucus, gathered from the nostrils (TOP), fresh or crusty eye secretions (BOTTOM), and the ears, forms part of the diet of oxpeckers.

One of the adult Red-billed Oxpeckers with some dung in its beak (TOP) and vigorously shaking it to break it into smaller pieces (BOTTOM).

Above The juvenile swallowing bits of dung it managed to dislodge.

they showed no interest in the more compact interior of the droppings.

The calorific value of mucous is minimal, but it has nutritive value. Mucous contains important glycoproteins, proteins, inorganic salts, and antimicrobial enzymes, and as such may provide important dietary supplements.

Interestingly, during the same observation of birds feeding on fresh dung, the birds were seen eating grit (also known as gastroliths). The grit was either picked up and swallowed directly from the soil surface, or , in the case of the juvenile, swallowing pieces of grit-coated dung.

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Below The juvenile eating a grit-coated piece of dung.

Bottom One of the adults consuming grit.

Photoblog: The unique African Finfoot

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The shy cormorant-like African Finfoot have chicks with bright orange feet - like the adults. The only other finfoot species in the world, the Masked Finfoot of Southeast Asia, and their chicks don't have bright yellow/green legs like the adults! However, a close relative of these two finfoots (i.e., in the same family), the Sungrebe of South and Central America, have chicks with brightly coloured, aposematically coloured feet - like the adults. For avian chicks to have brightly coloured legs is highly unusual.

Another fascinating fact about the African Finfoot is that, although they may occasionally eat small fish, medium- and large-sized fish often follow them while feeding. Fish probably feel safe in the proximity of the bright orange legs (versus the dark legs of cormorants), and also possibly benefit from crab scraps, etc., dropped by a feeding finfoot.

LEFT An adult male African Finfoot.

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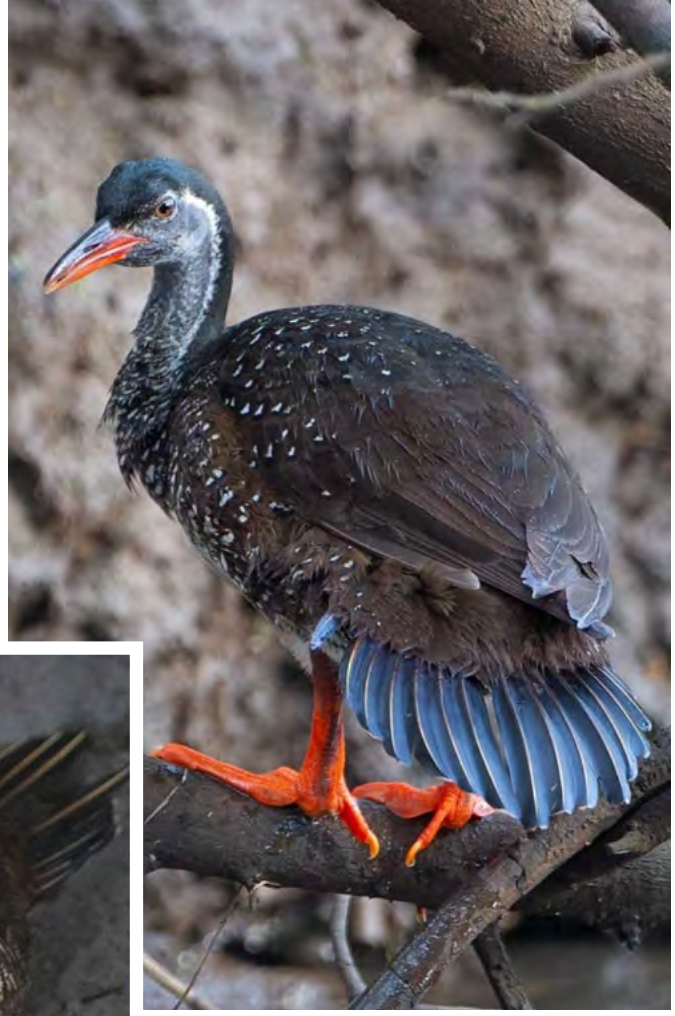
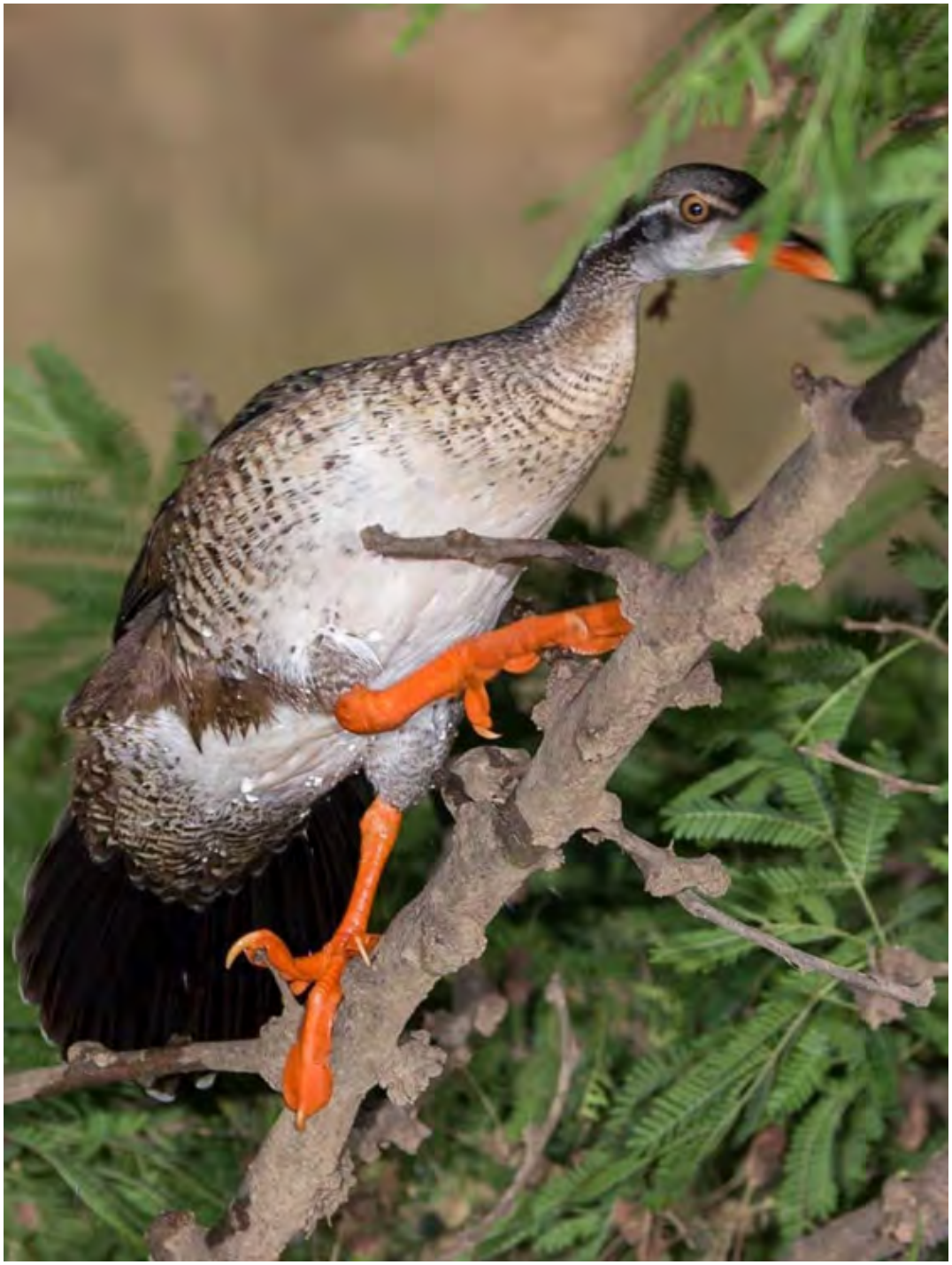


Above An adult male showing his stiffened tail feathers which are used as a prop when climbing.

Left Those feet!!

Above Medium- and large-sized fish often follow foraging finfoots.

Right An adult male bathing in the shallows.



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Opposite African Finfoots often have a ramp leading to the nest. Here, a female is climbing to her nest, using her strong feet and claws as well as her tail as a prop and for balance.

Right An incubating female on her nest.

Below Two 1-day-old chicks and an egg. Note the bright orange feet.

Biometrics of the Red-billed Oxpecker

Joseph Heymans, Kobie Raijmakers, Shonie Raijmakers, Tony Raijmakers, and Derek Engelbrecht

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Red-billed Oxpeckers are cooperative breeders, and ensuring an appropriate sex ratio within groups is therefore an important consideration for reintroduction programmes. However, the sexes are monomorphic in plumage, making field sexing difficult. During the early 2000s, Joseph Heymans and the Raijmakers brothers, Kobie, Shonie, and Tony, were involved in the capture and translocation of Red-billed Oxpeckers in Limpopo for reintroduction to sites in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. Because accurate sex determination was essential for assessing group sex ratios, blood samples were collected from a sample of individuals and sent to a laboratory for sex determination.

This note presents biometric data collected by three SAFRING-registered ringers involved in oxpecker reintroductions between 2006 and 2010: Joseph Heymans, Kobie Raijmakers, and Tony Raijmakers. Data collected by Shonie Raijmakers was excluded because it contained no males. To minimise inter-observer variability, the measurements from each ringer were analysed separately.

Table 1 presents summary statistics for selected morphometric measurements of male, female, and unsexed adult Red-billed Oxpeckers captured at various localities in Limpopo and Mpumalanga. All measurements were recorded following the methods described by de Beer et al. (2001).

To assess whether Red-billed Oxpeckers exhibit sexual size dimorphism (SSD), Welch's t-tests were used, with significance determined at $p < 0.05$. The results indicate mild to negligible SSD for most biometric parameters, with considerable overlap between males and females. Patterns of SSD were not entirely consistent among observers, likely reflecting small differences in measurement technique between ringers. Nevertheless, culmen length and, to a lesser extent, wing length,

Table 1. Biometric data of adult Red-billed Oxpeckers collected in north-eastern South Africa by three SAFRING registered bird ringers. WL = Wing length (to the nearest 1.0 mm), TL = Tail length (to the nearest 1.0 mm), CL = Culmen length (to the nearest 0.1 mm), TA = Tarsus length (to the nearest 0.1 mm). Mass was recorded to the nearest 0.1 g.

		SAFRING #1105	SAFRING #162	SAFRING #1282
WL	Male	120.8 ± 2.93 SD (range 114.0–124.0, n = 16)	122.2 ± 3.21 SD (range 117.0–126.0, n = 19)	118.5 ± 3.97 SD (range 110.0–124.0, n = 13)
	Female	119.1 ± 3.59 SD (range 112.0–125.0, n = 24)	118.7 ± 2.85 SD (range 112.0–125.0, n = 27)	117.2 ± 2.95 SD (range 112.0–122.0, n = 20)
	Unsexed	119.9 ± 3.60 SD (range 112.0–129.0, n = 71)	121.4 ± 4.08 SD (range 112.0–131.0, n = 60)	118.9 ± 3.35 SD (range 111.0–126.0, n = 63)
TL	Male	95.1 ± 3.53 SD (range 88.0–103.0, n = 16)	95.6 ± 4.76 SD (range 86.0–105.0, n = 19)	95.4 ± 3.48 SD (range 90.0–100.0, n = 13)
	Female	94.7 ± 4.25 SD (range 86.0–105.0, n = 24)	94.0 ± 2.98 SD (range 89.0–102.0, n = 27)	95.0 ± 3.45 SD (range 87.0–103.0, n = 20)
	Unsexed	96.5 ± 4.93 SD (range 87.0–109.0, n = 70)	95.2 ± 4.59 SD (range 87.0–107.0, n = 60)	95.7 ± 3.84 SD (range 87.0–104.0, n = 63)
CL	Male	20.4 ± 0.91 SD (range 18.9–21.9, n = 16)	21.4 ± 0.94 SD (range 19.5–22.7, n = 19)	20.1 ± 0.53 SD (range 18.8–20.9, n = 13)
	Female	20.3 ± 1.14 SD (range 18.4–22.4, n = 24)	20.6 ± 0.99 SD (range 19.2–23.5, n = 27)	19.6 ± 0.80 SD (range 18.4–21.2, n = 20)
	Unsexed	20.0 ± 1.15 SD (range 17.1–23.3, n = 71)	20.5 ± 1.43 SD (range 17.0–24.5, n = 60)	19.8 ± 0.83 SD (range 17.5–21.4, n = 63)
TA	Male	21.5 ± 0.95 SD (range 20.3–24.0, n = 16)	21.0 ± 0.75 SD (range 19.7–22.2, n = 19)	21.0 ± 0.66 SD (range 19.7–21.7, n = 13)
	Female	21.2 ± 0.59 SD (range 20.3–22.4, n = 24)	21.1 ± 0.74 SD (range 19.8–22.9, n = 27)	20.6 ± 0.68 SD (range 19.2–22.3, n = 20)
	Unsexed	21.2 ± 0.72 SD (range 19.8–23.0, n = 71)	21.3 ± 1.02 SD (range 18.7–23.8, n = 60)	21.0 ± 0.56 SD (range 19.8–22.6, n = 63)
Mass	Male	48.4 ± 4.15 SD (range 42.1–55.9, n = 16)	49.1 ± 3.48 SD (range 41.5–54.6, n = 19)	49.7 ± 3.42 SD (range 42.6–54.0, n = 13)
	Female	48.8 ± 3.87 SD (range 39.7–58.3, n = 24)	48.4 ± 2.70 SD (range 41.9–53.9, n = 27)	48.3 ± 2.45 SD (range 44.0–51.8, n = 19)
	Unsexed	48.0 ± 3.03 SD (range 40.2–55.4, n = 70)	48.9 ± 3.77 SD (range 40.9–57.0, n = 60)	49.0 ± 3.29 SD (range 39.6–58.7, n = 62)

emerged as the most consistently dimorphic traits. Culmen length showed significant SSD across the datasets for two ringers, with males having longer bills than females.

Given the relatively small sample sizes of genetically sexed individuals, these findings should be interpreted with caution but warrant further investigation. If confirmed, sexual dimorphism in bill length could indicate ecological niche partitioning or dietary specialisation between the sexes, potentially reducing intraspecific competition for food resources.

In conclusion, Red-billed Oxpeckers appear to display only mild sexual size dimorphism for the biometric traits measured, and it remains uncertain whether these small statistical differences are biologically meaningful. Subtle dimorphism may also be easily obscured by minor differences in measurement technique among observers.

Acknowledgements The authors wish to thank Sally Hofmeyer, coordinator of The African Bird Ringing Project (AFRING) for her assistance in extracting the AFRING data for us.

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Below A juvenile (front) and an adult Red-billed Oxpecker © Kobie Raijmakers.

Above Head and bill profile of an adult Red-billed Oxpecker © Derek Engelbrecht.

Above Anyone who has handled oxpeckers before will appreciate just how sharp those claws are © Derek Engelbrecht.

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

Breeding: Nest Site

Unusual nest site of the Red-billed Oxpecker

Oxpeckers are cavity-nesters, and their typical nest site is a cavity in a tree (Craig 2005). However, atypical nest sites include a crack in a boulder (Sclater and Moreau 1933), a gap in the stone wall of a cattle kraal (Henderson 1953), the roof of a house (Maciver 2025), and a utility pole (Rockingham-Gill 1992). It also readily nests in artificial nest boxes.

On 1 December 2022 on the farm Bultfontein, approximately 30 km east of Polokwane, I found a group of Red-billed Oxpeckers nesting in a metal pipe at the end of a centre pivot irrigation system. On 17 February 2026, this time on the farm Brakfontein, about 4.5 km north of the Bultfontein nest, another group appeared to be inspecting potential nest or roost sites in another centre pivot irrigation system.

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Derek Engelbrecht • faunagalore@gmail.com, received 13 May 2026).

OPPOSITE TOP A group of Red-billed Oxpeckers at their nest at the end of a pipe of a centre pivot irrigation system © Derek Engelbrecht.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM One of a group of Red-billed Oxpeckers that were inspecting potential nesting sites on a centre pivot irrigation system © Derek Engelbrecht.

Plumages, Moults, and Structure: Bare Parts

Crested Barbet with a deformed bill

Bill deformities, such as Avian Keratin Disorder (AKD), cause the keratin layer to grow excessively, often resulting in crossed, elongated, or severely curved bills. These deformities are triggered by many factors, including infection by a poecivirus, environmental contaminants, poor nutrition, nutritional deficiencies, parasites and other diseases, injury, or genetics, but the proximate cause of an abnormal bill is usually unknown. It is surprisingly common in hornbills (Engelbrecht 2020, Stanback and Engelbrecht 2024), but I have also seen it in several other species, including the Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark, amongst others (Engelbrecht 2016) and the Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird (Engelbrecht and Engelbrecht 2026, in press).

On 15 November 2025, I photographed a Crested Barbet in Talamati Bush Camp in the Kruger Park with an elongated maxilla. It's rather surprising that an excavator like a barbet would develop such a condition. Nevertheless, the bird showed no problem eating fruit and other scraps on offer.

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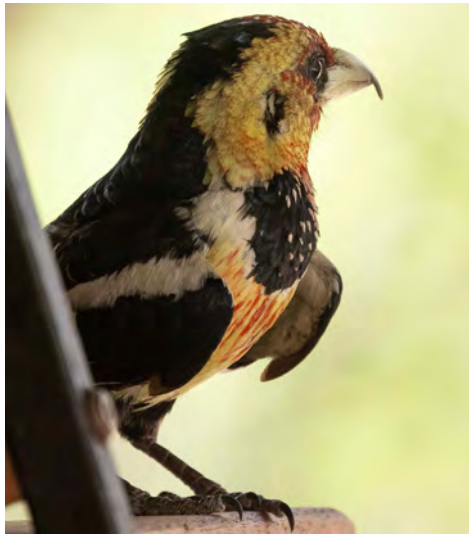
(received 14 April 2026).



Left A Crested Barbet with a deformed bill © Derek Engelbrecht.

BIRD BRIEFS

Interesting sightings

16 February 2026 - 15 April 2026

Share your interesting sightings seen within the Limpopo Province. 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; Regional Rarity; National Rarity, †Unvetted

Compiled by Derek Engelbrecht

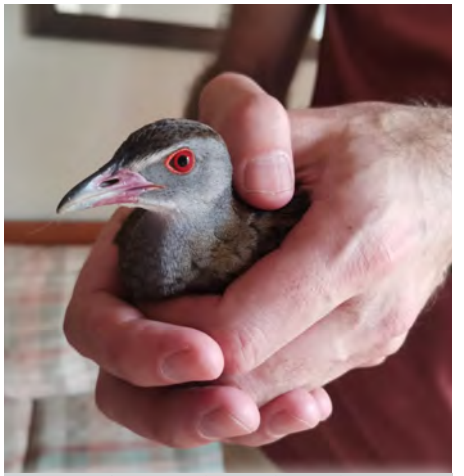
Non-passerines

African Crake - 21 March 2026. One flew into a house in Dorp (Julia Friskin).

African Hawk-Eagle - 28 February 2026. One seen near Bandelierkop (Johann Roos).

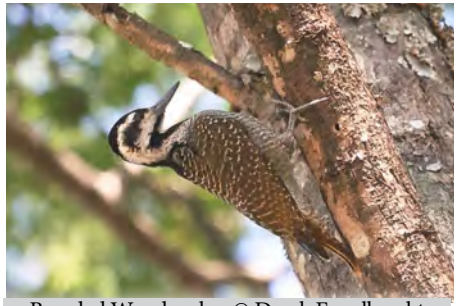
Bearded Woodpecker - 29 March 2026. A female seen in Welgelegen (Rupert Harris).

Booted Eagle - 14 March 2026. One seen at Hout River Dam (Birdlife Polokwane club outing).



African Crake © Julia Friskin

Burchell's Sandgrouse - 19 February 2026. Three seen at Rietpol farm east of Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).
Pearl-spotted Owlet - 20 February 2026. One heard in Welgelegen (Derek Engelbrecht); 30 March 2026. One heard in Welgelegen - probably the same individual as the previous record (Rupert Harris).
Southern Bald Ibis - 10 March 2026. One on the golf course of the University of Limpopo (Craig Widdows).
Spotted Eagle-Owl - 14 April 2026. One seen in Cycad Estate, Bendor (Charles Hardy).
Verreaux's Eagle-Owl - 22 March 2026. One seen and heard calling in Welgelegen (Rupert Harris).


Bearded Woodpecker © Derek Engelbrecht


Booted Eagle © Jody de Bruyn


Burchell's Sandgrouse © Derek Engelbrecht


Verreaux's Eagle-Owl © Derek Engelbrecht

Passerines

Bushveld Pipit - 17 February 2026. Several individuals seen in *Vachellia* savannah on the farm Kleinfontein east of Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).
Common Whitethroat - 19 February 2026. Three seen in a relatively small area on farm Kleinfontein east of Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).
Cuckoo Finch - 19 February 2026. A small flock was recorded over several days drinking at a temporary waterhole near Dikgale (Derek Engelbrecht).
Gorgeous Bushshrike - 19 February 2026. A few birds were heard calling in thickets along a drainage line of the Rietspruit on the farm Kleinfontein east of Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).
Malachite Sunbird - 17 February 2025. A pair caught in a mistnet during a bird ringing session in the Haenertsburg Grasslands (Derek Engelbrecht).
River Warbler - 19 February 2026. One heard in riverine thicket along the Rietspruit on farm Rietgat (Derek Engelbrecht).
Short-toed Rock Thrush - 15 April 2026. A male seen along the Randfontein road near Haenertsburg (Schalk van Schalkwyk).
Striped Pipit - 17 February 2026. A pair seen on a rocky outcrop island in *Vachellia* savannah on the farm Kleinfontein east of Polokwane (Derek Engelbrecht).
Terrestrial Brownbul - 2 April 2026. One seen at Soetdorings (Minkie Prinsloo).


Cuckoo Finch © Derek Engelbrecht


Short-toed Rock Thrush © Schalk van Schalkwyk


Striped Pipit © Derek Engelbrecht


Terrestrial Brownbul © Minkie Prinsloo

Best of the Rest
Limpopo Province

Non-passerines

Denham's Bustard - 21 March 2026. One seen in a fallow field between the N1 and Settlers (Stephan Terblanche).

BirdLife South Africa — Giving Conservation Wings
environmental affairs — Department: Environmental Affairs — REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

HELP SAVE OUR SEABIRDS

The Mouse-Free Marion Project is a partnership between the South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and BirdLife South Africa, which established the Non-Profit Company (MFM NPC) to help restore Marion Island to its once-pristine beauty by eradicating the invasive mice plaguing the island.

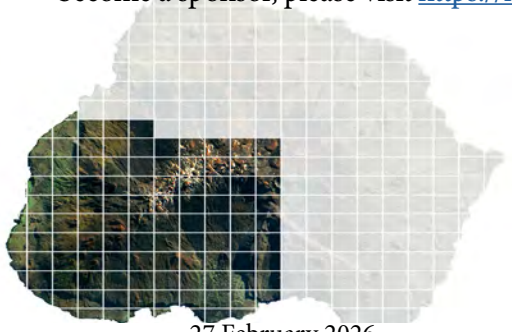
To help raise the necessary funds, please would you consider sponsoring one or more hectares of land on Marion Island.

At R1000, you can aid us in ensuring that this monumental project will be successful.

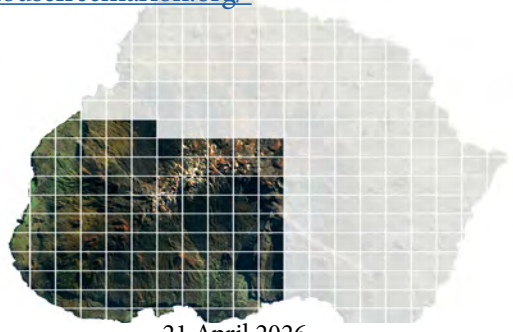
Once completed, Marion Island will be the largest island from which mice have successfully been eradicated in a single attempt.

Be a part of history, and sponsor one (or more) hectares of this beautiful oceanic gem.

For more information about this very worthwhile project and how to become a sponsor, please visit https://mousefreemarion.org/



27 February 2026
Percent of target reached: 43.7%
Sponsored Hectares: 13122 ha
Sponsors: 2479



21 April 2026
Percent of target reached: 45.3%
Sponsored Hectares: 13592 ha
Sponsors: 2717

UPCOMING EVENTS

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 5 May 2026
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

WINTER BREAK

No club meetings in June and July

STAY WARM!

Birdlife Polokwane Club Meeting
Date: 4 August 2026
Time: 18:30
Venue: Polokwane Golf Club

Shopping list: Hooded, White-backed and Cape Vultures, Tawny Eagle, Shikra, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Arnot's Chat, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Orange-winged Pytilia, Bushveld Pipit, Green-capped Eremomela, Grey Penduline Tit, and many more.

Shopping list: Cape Vulture, Black Stork, Verreaux's Eagle, Booted Eagle, Lanner Falcon, Rock Kestrel, Pearl-spotted Owlet, White-necked Raven, Greater Honeyguide, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Rock Kestrel, Mocking Cliff Chat, and many more.

Shopping list: Cape Vulture, Three-banded Courser, Grey Penduline Tit, Retz's and White-crested Helmetshrike, White-crowned Shrike, Striped Kingfisher, Southern Crested Guineafowl, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Shikra, Greater Honeyguide, Ashy Flycatcher.

All birds are equal

In 2026, the front covers of **The Lark** will be dedicated to Young Birds and the back cover to other special birds.

Protea Canary © Daniel Engelbrecht.