

THE HORNBILL

NO. 114 Spring 2014

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COMMITTEE 2014

CHAIRMAN

Don Williams (013) 744 0538 (h) cell 082 392 1762
donwill@telkomsa.net

TREASURER

Frank Webb (013) 744 0705 (h) cell 082 804 3486
Frank.webb@nelweb.co.za

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

Karen Bullen (013) 010 1228 (h) cell 083 305 8553
Birdlife.lowveld@gmail.com / sweets25@soft.co.za

SECRETARY

Brenda Williams (013) 744 0538
donwill@telkomsa.net

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

André Burger - (013) 752 8271 (w)
andre.burger@nelvet.co.za

Siegfried Wolff - Cell 073 303 3445
hertsiewolff@gmail.com

Garth Batchelor - (013) 744 9097 (h)
keyart@global.co.za

Linda Slyper (co-opted)
Tea Co-ordinator and Slide Librarian (013) 741 3999 (h)
liwood@global.co.za

THE HORNBILL

Peter Lawson - Editor and Committee member
Cell : 082 893 8804
peter@lawsons-africa.co.za

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EDITORIAL

This is not easy. I have written almost 100 editorials but have never found it as difficult as this one. I have started a number of times and scrapped what I have written each time. The reason is that I can't get Duncan Christie out of my mind. He was a member of our Club since the start and a committee member for many years. Duncan and I were birding partners and he was an important member of the SABAP2 atlas team. I have atlased with him in some remote and wild places and we worked well together. Fond memories keep coming to the fore, like the leopard that came walking up to us as if to share our lunch we were enjoying. Duncan was completely calm and just smiled. That was Duncan and I miss him already and dedicate this issue to him.

This is not intended to be an obituary. You can read a eulogy elsewhere in this issue and Don Williams will no doubt also say something in his Chairman's Report. I just need to pay tribute to a great man and we will all miss him for certain.

This is our Spring issue and it's an exciting time of the year for birding. The dawn chorus is becoming more intense as birds get into breeding mode, some are changing into bright summer garb and migrants are starting to return. So dust off your binoculars and get out there. Our September outing is to a new venue near Barberton and birding will be good. No doubt we will once again have a good attendance such as we have experienced on recent outings. I like that because that is what our Club is about – to enjoy our hobby and we keep on learning too. In fact birding is one hobby where you never stop learning and that makes it all the more exciting. I have been involved with birds almost my entire life and I still keep on learning something new.

Our "Turning Kruger Green" project for SABAP2 is advancing steadily and we are ahead of target. It is a three year project with a mammoth task set to atlas all pentads in Kruger National Park a minimum of four times, more if possible. The area to be covered is vast and even more so because the target set for us includes all pentads from 31°E and North of 26°S. Thus anyone involved in atlasing can play a part and not just the few of us registered with SANParks to cover remote areas. A progress report appears elsewhere in this issue.

To date we have had minimum feedback on The Hornbill going digital. Only a few members have said they are happy to receive e-versions, but we would like to hear from more of you. If any of you are unable to download it and read it this way then please let us know and we will still print a few hard copies. All we are trying to do is to reduce costs, but our members of course are foremost in mind and we want to keep you all happy.

Enjoy this issue and make the most of this Spring for good birding.

Peter Lawson, Editor.

NOTICE TO CONTRIBUTORS

The Hornbill is the newsletter/magazine of *BirdLife Lowveld* and is published four times a year – Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. The magazine features notes and articles by members – it is YOUR magazine and YOUR means of communicating interesting observations and happenings to fellow-members, and the wider membership of BirdLife South Africa.

Contributions are required on all topics related to birds and birdwatching, with particular emphasis on the Lowveld and Escarpment region of Mpumalanga. Short articles on birding trips to other regions and other countries are also welcome. Bear in mind that observations of feeding habits, courtship, nesting and general behaviour are generally of more interest to readers than lists of species seen. Single or multiple records of unusual or out-of-range species in the area will be featured in our section of “INTERESTING LOCAL SIGHTINGS”. Viewpoints on club activities, projects and conservation matters are also very welcome. Illustrations and cartoons of birds of the region are also invited. Drawings should be in black ink on white paper – no larger than A4 please – with the name of the bird written clearly. Contributions in English or in Afrikaans should be typed or written clearly on one side only of a page. Receipt of written contributions and illustrations will not be acknowledged and use thereof will be at the discretion of the Editor.

Bird Names

It has been our policy to use common bird names as they appear in the 3rd Edition of SASOL Birds of Southern Africa by Sinclair, Hockey and Tarboton. Roberts V11 and the 4th edition of SASOL have a few further name changes and since new field guides have been published our policy now is to use the names as they appear in these references.

DEADLINE FOR
SUMMER EDITION
NO. 115 – 24 OCTOBER 2014

A BIG THANK YOU TO

NASHUA 

LOWVELD

For the generous photocopying of this issue - No. 114

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

**Irma Sliedrecht, White River
Ernest and Adele Wevell, Barberton**

We extend a huge *Thank You* to those members who make welcome donations with their subscription renewals. We appreciate your generosity.

Please send observations, notes and articles to

Peter Lawson – Editor : *The Hornbill* P O Box 16849 West Acres 1211



Email : peter@lawsons-africa.co.za
Cell: 082 893 8804



E-mailed copy is preferable - It is then stored and not likely to be forgotten
as phone calls sometimes are.

Email : birdlife.lowveld@gmail.com or
sweets25@soft.co.za at home

**CHECK WITH THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY TO BE SURE THE CLUB HAS
CORRECT DETAILS FOR YOU.**

From the Chairman's Desk.....

Good day to each of you.

Looking back over the past few months, we note that our monthly meetings have been well attended and our speakers have all given us interesting information about birds and conservation. The outings have also been well attended (about 25 at the outings) and the differing habitats has provided for a wide variety of birds to add to our sighting's list. Peter Lawson and the 'Turning Kruger Green' team are doing good work with their atlasing project.

Sadly we have lost two of our regular members in recent months and I ask you to uphold Ivy Wordsworth and Isabel Christie in your thoughts and prayers. A tribute to Duncan, who had such a commitment to our club, is included in this edition.

At the end of July I attended a meeting at BirdLife South Africa's (BLSA) offices in Johannesburg when the proposed changes to the constitution were discussed with the intention of introducing the changes in January 2015:

The first relates to membership. It will no longer be compulsory for bird club members to be members of BLSA. Members will now be able to choose to which organisation they wish to affiliate – BLSA, BirdLife Lowveld or both. It is hoped that this will help increase membership for BLSA and for bird clubs, especially for those who are financially stretched. However, the discounted offer to the glossy African Birdlife magazine will only be available for those who are members of BLSA.

The second relates to constitutional changes with a new format of governance for BLSA with clubs, like ours, being linked with other clubs in the vicinity to form 'Forums' where matters relating to birding and conservation by the clubs is discussed. Our club participates in the Northern Forum (Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces) where helpful and interesting discussions take place. The members of this forum supported the changes as they felt that this would enhance the effectiveness of BLSA.

We are asking for your feedback regarding the e-edition of The Hornbill as we will definitely be converting to the electronic format from 2105 and only have hard copies available for those who specifically ask for one. Please let us know how you are finding an electronic format – and as Frank has reminded us, the magazine can be downloaded to your Kindle for reading at your leisure.

Go well good people. Enjoy your birding and, please, remember to report any interesting local sighting as the migrants return in the coming months.

Don Williams, Chairman

A BIG THANK YOU TO OWEN Mc GEE (OWNER)
AND STAFF OF



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WE APPRECIATE YOUR SUPPORT AND HELP SO MUCH.

Unit 35, Central Park, Suikerriet Street, Nelspruit
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Tel 013 712 3437/013 712 2723 Fax 013 712 5903

Bird Alert

Our column on 'Interesting Local Sightings' in The Hornbill is often frustrating for some of our members as bird sightings are reported too late for them to get out there to see the bird that has been reported. Navarre de Villiers has thus kindly offered to run a programme to receive notification of interesting or out-of-range Lowveld birds and email details to members. This is a great idea from Navarre and could entail a lot of interest once it gets off the ground.

The idea is not only aimed at rarities which are ably covered in Trevor Hardaker's Rare Birds Alert, but interesting birds in the Lowveld such as the Peregrine Falcon that sometimes roosts on a building in the CBD. Members can elect whether they would like to participate in Bird-Alert and receive emails periodically from Navarre. Of course we also want interesting sightings to be submitted to Navarre without delay together with an accurate description of the locality and he will then decide whether members should be alerted or not and do the necessary. The success of the programme is in the hands of our birders; the more information and interest, the more effective it will be. If you would like to participate in this programme please let Navarre know. His contact details are -

navarre@mweb.co.za
Mobile 083 626 4702 / fax 086 550 6243

A NOTE ABOUT YOUR SUBSCRIPTIONS

BirdLife SA has worked long and hard for many months on their Pastel membership data base and some major changes have been made to ensure accurate record-keeping and the processing of subscriptions. Please read this carefully so that you are aware of the new systems.

One major change involves the due and overdue issue. Membership of this Club and BirdLife South Africa is still on a "rolling basis" which means that if you joined, say in January, **11 months** down the line you will be receiving your **FIRST** invoice for the following year. The next invoice you receive will state **FINAL** Invoice. (The change is that each member will now only receive **two** invoices instead of **three** as in the past). BirdLife SA is sending emailed invoices to those who have that facility and posting others. If you would like to receive your invoice by email, please ensure that this club has your correct details.

This Club's Membership Secretary keeps a beady eye on membership status and will contact you with reminders when necessary. But remember - when your payment is late, it means that your address label is not supplied to us by BirdLife SA and you then miss out on any correspondence from us including our newsletter, **The Hornbill** as well as **African Birdlife** if you are subscribed to that magazine. We are all guilty of putting aside an Invoice hoping to remember to pay it closer to the time, so we would like to suggest the following-

- With all the electronic wizardry at our disposal, the most practical way of payment is a direct transfer into **BirdLife Lowveld's** account. (All bank details are obtainable from Karen Bullen). If you don't have electronic facilities available.....
- The next best option is payment by Credit Card. Details can be entered on your Invoice and faxed to 086 558 1473 or emailed to birdlife.lowveld@gmail.com or sweets25@soft.co.za. Card details can also be given to Karen Bullen verbally.
- Invoices from BLSA carry their bank details if you wish to pay directly.
- Because of recent and ongoing fraud activity, we would prefer you **not** to pay your subscriptions by cheque.

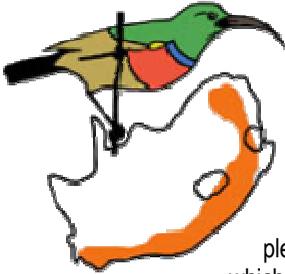
It goes without saying too, that if you do not wish to renew your membership, please let us know in writing.



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For more information, contact Membership Secretary Karen Bullen
on (home) 013 010 1228 or (cell) 083 305 8553

SABAP2



We had been set a target by SABAP2 to atlas 350 pentads during 2014 in Greater Kruger National Park. That includes the entire National Park plus all pentads east of 31°E and north of 26°S. Thus all private reserves to the west and south are included. There is more to this challenge though as the target is for 1250 checklists to be submitted to SABAP2 by the year end.

Now that is a mammoth task and a vast area to cover, but I am pleased to report that by 31 July there has been coverage of 292 pentads which is 83.43% of the target. Also, 784 checklists have been submitted which constitutes 62.72% of what initially looked like an impossible target.

Our team has done exceptionally well so far, but there is more to it than this as citizen scientists from throughout South Africa have contributed enormously when visiting Kruger National Park and surrounds. I commend everyone for this and valuable data has been collected. The more data collected the better and no pentad can ever have too many cards.

As far as 'turning Kruger green' goes we are also well into the project. For those of you not aware what the meaning of this term is, the original target set by Doug Harebottle and Les Underhill when they were approached by the SANParks Avian Research Manager, Sharon Thompson, to register the SABAP2 project with SANParks, was to focus on turning as many pentads as possible within the Kruger National Park green by the end of 2016. Thus all pentads must be atlased a minimum of four times during this time period. We have been making good progress so far and every opportunity is taken by our team of four registered observers to travel to remote areas away from tourist routes. Of course there is still a long way to go but we are on track.

Besides the four observers registered with Scientific Services we have a list of registered assistant observers on file and can call on these willing workers whenever needed to accompany us on excursions to remote areas. We are required to work in pairs and hence the reason for assistants. A number have so far been called on and I must thank them for giving of their time for the project. Others on the list may be wondering why they have not as yet been called but I can assure you all that you will be needed at some stage in the future.

For ease of management Kruger National Park is divided into four Regions, each under the control of a Regional Ranger. Each Region is sub-divided into five or six Sections, each managed by a Section Ranger. The Marula South Region is the closest to our Nelspruit base. There are six Sections in this Region, namely Pretoriuskop, Stolsnek, Malelane, Skukuza, Crocodile Bridge and Lower Sabie. They cover a massive area of 419 290 hectares and 69 pentads are included. It gives me great pleasure to announce that as at 31 July there are only five pentads in this entire Region that have not as yet turned green, and of these one requires one more card submission, three need two cards each and one needs three cards. The area has been covered by Duncan McKenzie and I, assisted by Navarre de Villiers, Jacques de Villiers, Lynton Balcomb, John Davies, and Tom

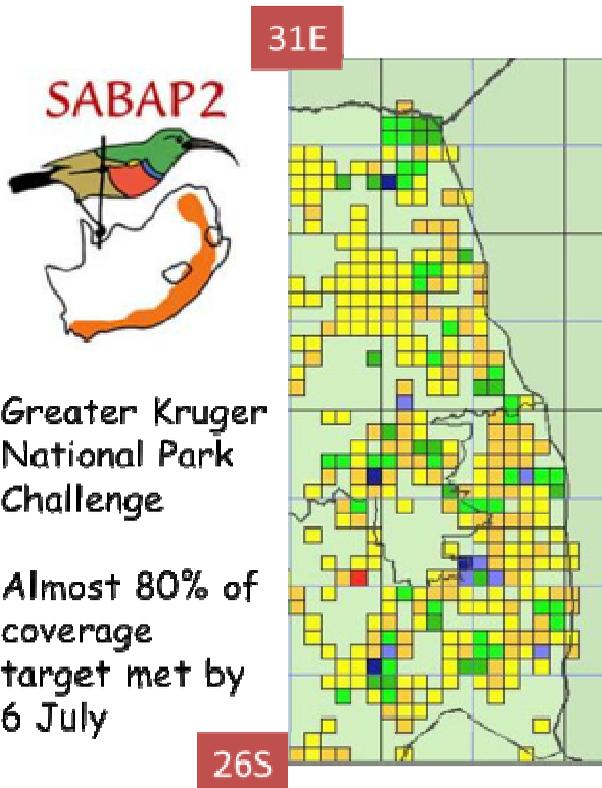
Vorster. Plus of course all areas open to the public, including some on the boundary, by various citizen scientists.

In the Nxanatseni Region North, Joe Grosel, assisted by Charles Hardy has recently turned eight pentads in the Shangoni Section orange and the Marula Region North has had coverage by Duncan McKenzie and I with assistants Johan Eksteen, Dave Malloch-Brown and Robert Wienand. I commend everyone for the diligent work they have done so far.

One last thing I need to remind people of is the huge cost of conducting a project of this nature. We have limited funds and have to be aware of this on every exercise. If anyone reading this has an idea for fund raising we would be pleased to hear from you. It is a wonderful project and is providing a wealth of valuable material and it would be sad indeed if we had to cut it short due to lack of funds. To those individuals and organisations who have contributed in some way or another to date we owe a big thank you. Without your generosity we most certainly would not have been as advanced as this report shows.

Peter Lawson, Project Leader.

(Graphics lifted from SABAP2 Website)



A bird in the hand is (Part 4)

A bird ringer has the incredible privilege of appreciating a bird 'up close and personal'. It is whilst holding that bird in the hand that we can learn so much about it, remembering that 'a bird in the hand looks different to a bird in the bush – and quite different from your Sasol or Roberts guide'. In the previous magazines we looked at the bill, wing and feathers of a bird. This time we will look at a bird's eyes.

Birds have the most advanced eyesight of all animals and are intricately adapted to their lifestyle. A bird's eye takes up a large percentage of its skull and is larger than their brain. An eagle's eyes are similar in size to us humans. An ostrich has the largest eye of terrestrial animals and it takes a whale to beat it for size. Nocturnal birds have an eye that is proportionally larger than diurnal species. Whilst we can move our eyes freely, because of their weight, the eye of most birds is fixed in the skull. That's why we see birds cocking their heads when looking out for raptors or turning their heads from side to side to get a better view. An exception is cormorants, gannets and herons that have limited eye movement to facilitate following their prey whilst hunting.

It is obvious that there is a vast difference as to where a bird's eye is placed on their head. This has to do with survival – feeding and awareness of the presence of predators. Passerines (song birds) have their eyes set high up and at the side of their heads. The eyes of some non-passerines are on the side of their skull (eagle) whilst others are central (owls) or even slightly on the lower side of skull (Eurasian Bittern) so that they can look forwards during their upright stance. The eyes of an owl face forward, like us humans, giving a larger field of vision for each eye that can be combined into a single image, much like the image through our binoculars. Whilst this is good for forward vision, it isn't helpful for all-round vision and that is why owls can rotate their heads up to 270 degrees.

A different dynamic comes into play when birds are flying as their forward and upward vision is limited. This is why cranes and vultures are susceptible to collide with power lines and other obstacles. However, passerines have excellent eye/brain/wing co-ordination enabling them to fly through bush and other obstacles without causing major damage to their feathers or wings.

Without going into detail, the size, shape and structure of the internal eye all influence the quality of vision. This is what differentiates nocturnal birds from passerines, raptors from bitterns and sea birds from non-passerines. Birds do see the world in colour. They enjoy a wider range of colours than us humans and are even able to see in the ultra-violet spectrum. This broader spectrum facilitates finding ripe fruit; attracting nectar feeding birds to flowers; identifying toxic vs edible insects; for small raptors (e.g. kestrels) to follow the urine trails of rodents and for identifying and choosing a mate whose plumage is of a similar colour (e.g. doves).

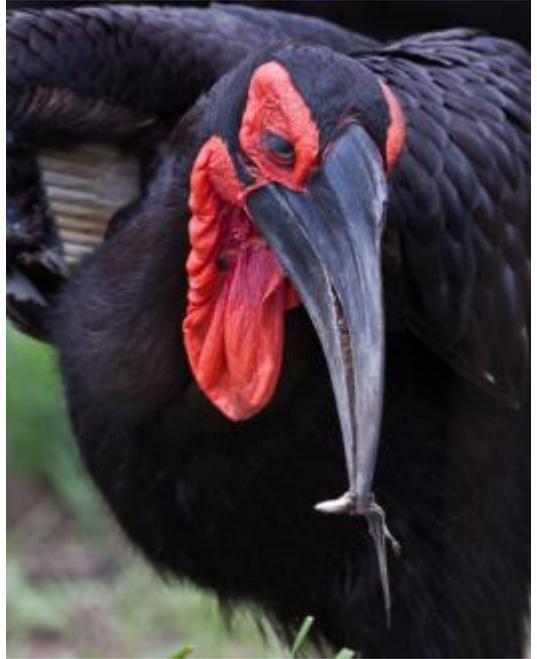
Birds do not use their eyelids to moisten their eyes and keep them clean. Instead a third membrane, the nictitating membrane moves across the eye like a windscreen-wiper and does the job. This membrane also provides protection from sunlight and cold whilst flying at great heights, also while feeding on land and in water (e.g. African Darter) and while preening.

Some birds have a distinctive ring around their eye. For some this ring is of skin, (Firefinches, many of the Pigeons and Doves, and African Paradise-Flycatcher) whilst for others it is feathers (White-eyes). And the Southern Ground Hornbill pictured below, has eyelashes that many women would kill for.

For those of us who ring birds, the colour of the eye assists in sexing birds which are in non-breeding plumage (the male Southern Masked Weaver's eye is red whilst the female's is brownish). Eye colour also assists in ageing a bird (juvenile African Golden Weaver and Sombre Greenbul's eyes are darker than those of the adult bird).

You and I are so blessed with our binocular and colour vision. But let us celebrate the incredible vision of the birds we love.

Don Williams, Nelspruit



Photograph by Ed & Liz Harris ©

In order to see birds it is necessary to become a part of the silence.”

Robert Lynd

Pentad Embarrassment

Turning Kruger Green takes us to some remote areas in Kruger National Park but does not always result in great lists. Since the start of SABAP2 I have atlased almost 600 pentads throughout South Africa and submitted well over 1 000 atlas cards, and with great embarrassment I have to admit that my lowest total came from a pentad in the bird-rich Kruger National Park.

Together with assistant Lynton Balcomb we tackled the Lebombo Mountains in early July, 2014. The first pentad we got to had reasonable birding and a fair list. Going was slow and we spent three hours in this pentad. Then we crossed into pentad 2500_3200 in the Lower Sabie Section which had one previous card submitted. By the time we had reached this pentad it was close to mid-day, not the best birding time but certainly not as bad as we were to experience. A strong wind had come up which resulted in few birds showing themselves and even fewer calling. To add to our list of excuses, mid-winter is also not the best birding season, but we definitely expected more than we were adding to the checklist. In our first hour we had listed the sum total of seven species I am ashamed to admit.

A decision was then made to leave the mountain and atlas the plain below as we thought the wind would not be as strong, plus a different habitat could result in different birds. This was not a good choice though as the track we had to negotiate was in poor condition and had long grass hiding some sizeable rocks in our path. It was very slow going, with no habitat variation. At the end of the compulsory two hour stint we had doubled our total and decided to call it a day. Fortunately this pentad has to be atlased twice more to turn green and hopefully the total will grow.

I was in two minds as to whether I should actually submit our list but we did get some interesting birds and every list is of value to the project. Some of the interesting species picked up were Red-crested Korhaan, Croaking Cisticola, Flappet Lark and Plain-backed Pipit. A bit of colour was added to the list with bright birds such as Cape Glossy Starling, Lilac-breasted Roller and numbers of delightful Golden-breasted Buntings. Without them our list would have been drab indeed.



Perhaps we can get to this pentad again a few more times than the required minimum and make up for our poor performance.

Peter Lawson, Nelspruit

**Golden-breasted Bunting, Mkhuze Game Park, SA.
Photographer : Peet van Schalkwyk ©
(lifted from the Web.)**

June Outing to Kaapsehoop

Our Club outing on 29 June was to Kaapsehoop. Although this venue is on the escarpment and much colder than Nelspruit, we specifically chose this date due to *Aloe arborescens* flowering in profusion at this time of the year. These aloes are a great attraction to sunbirds and we were not disappointed. Feeding on the bright red tubular flowers we had Amethyst Sunbird, Malachite Sunbird, Greater Double-collared Sunbird and White-bellied Sunbird. There was also a number of Gurney's Sugarbirds, which visit Kaapsehoop at this time of year.

Members participating on this outing started arriving at our meeting point at 07:30 and we had an excellent turnout. The weather was kind to us as well and we had a cloudless sky and not a breath of wind. Although a bit chilly at the start it soon warmed up as the morning progressed and we could not have wished for better.

While waiting in the parking area we had a visit by a Chorister Robin-Chat right out in the open. Unfortunately only some of us saw it as it did not stay for long. Everyone did get to see a Cape Rock-Thrush perched on a roof top though. Speckled Pigeons also gave a good show and so did a Black-headed Oriole, African Stonechat and a Cape Grassbird.

Due to the large attendance we split the group in two and Bernard Heritage took one group on a walk amongst huge boulders and I followed with the rest of the party shortly after they had got a bit ahead. Our trail had been made for us by some of the wild horses that live in this area and walking was easy.

Some of the bird 'specials' encountered by both groups were Buff-streaked-Chat, White-necked Raven, Lazy Cisticola, Yellow Bishop, Cape Longclaw and Cape Canary. Bernard's group also got Red-necked Spurfowl, Familiar Chat, Striped and Long-billed Pipits. Drakensberg Prinia was one seen by my group and there were a number of other species encountered by both groups. The total came to 38, not a big total but a fair list for just a couple of hours at a highland venue in mid-winter. The outing was enjoyed by all.



Peter Lawson, Nelspruit

July Outing to the Sudwala Valley

Sunday 28th July saw us at the home of Peter and Iona Wendelspiess on their farm in the Sudwala valley. It was cold at 07:00 when we arrived but true to tradition there was hot coffee and rusks set out for us. Once again there was a good attendance.

Birds in the garden and parking area to greet us were Greater Double-collared Sunbird (with a nest and hungry chicks), Black-headed Oriole, Kurrichane Thrush, Yellow-fronted Canary, Red-winged Starling, Spectacled Weaver and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow. Bernard had seen African Hoopoe in the parking area and of course Southern Boubou and Hadedda Ibis were voicing their opinion.

We took a slow walk to the nearby dam and before we got there we found both Cape and African Pied Wagtails in the mowed grass. They were accompanied by a delightful pair of Yellow-throated Longclaws. On cresting the rise to the dam a Little Grebe took off from the far side and a Wattled Lapwing was telling us to look at him. Then Siegfried spotted a delightful little Malachite Kingfisher perched close by and it was seen by all.

We skirted the dam and had a confiding Brown-hooded Kingfisher perched on the gate we were about to walk through. Looking back at the two tall dead trees in the parking area we saw a Green-backed Heron come flying in to enjoy the early sunlight. We strolled along the fence line but birding was not easy as we had to contend with trying to identify birds while looking into the low sun. We did have a good sighting of an African Dusky Flycatcher though, plus a pair of Blue Waxbills, Cape Robin-Chat, Golden Weaver, Purple-crested Turaco, Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove, Crested Barbet, African Firefinch and Fork-tailed Drongo. The recently burnt field on the other side of the fence had flocks of winter plumaged Southern Red Bishops, Red-collared Widowbirds, Cape Turtle Doves and Pin-tailed Whydahs feeding on the ground.

Once we could change direction the viewing was better and we had a White-browed Scrub-Robin close by and a couple of African Pipits and Common Waxbills. Then the excitement started when a stunning White-starred Robin

(an out-of-place forest bird) appeared in low vegetation along the drainage line. We had really good sightings as it moved about and it was a lifer for most of the group. Other birds were less exciting after this and they included African Stonechat, Groundscraper Thrush and a Jackal Buzzard flying parallel to us.

The rest of our walk was enjoyable but new birds became scarce. We only picked up Streaky-headed Seedeater, African Palm-Swift and White-bellied Sunbirds for our list, which totalled 57 species in all. Peter had the braai on the go on our return and everyone enjoyed the social side of a good outing. Many thanks to our host and hostess who really made the morning for us all, especially when Iona produced cake and trifle to end our brunch.

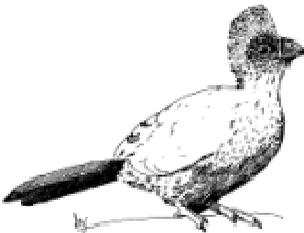


Peter Lawson, Nelspruit

We acknowledge and thank the following artists and illustrators for the use of their artwork in this issue

- * Denotes from Bird Atlas of Natal by D Cyrus and N Robson, Illustrated by A Clarkson
 ** Denotes from the Atlas of Southern African Birds Volume 1 or 2 Edited by JA Harrison, DG Allan, LG Underhill, M Herremans, AJ Tree, V Parker and CJ Brown, published by BirdLife South Africa, Johannesburg.- Various artists as indicated.

Cover	Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill by Roy Sarkin
Page 1	Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill from the original drawn by Eddie Harris
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Duncan Christie
06 February 1953 ~ 10 July 2014

This eulogy comes from the heart of Karen Bullen and was said by her at the well-attended Memorial Service held for Duncan during July. It is so appropriate of this great man and is fitting to publish, rather than an obituary. Editor.

On behalf of the Committee and all members of BirdLife Lowveld I extend our deepest sympathy to you Isabel, your children – Margo, Gina and Ryan, Monique and Ryan and your new little grandson, Judah, Duncan's siblings and the extended family. His untimely death has shocked and saddened us all.

I have here with me the Minute Book of what was, way back then in 1985 The Lowveld Bird Club and recorded in the minutes of the AGM held in the auditorium of the local Library on 20 August 1986, is the appointment to the Committee of one - Dr Duncan Christie. Next year the club will be 30 years old and Duncan has served the club and the world of birds and birding for 28 years – give or take the odd 'sabbatical'. I thought it amusing, and other committee members will know what I'm talking about.....the Minutes say "No vote was necessary" – and that has remained the trend over the ensuing years. The Committee gets voted back on en bloc year after year! We must be doing something right!

Duncan certainly did a lot righthe participated fully in the club's day-to-day running, serving on the committee with energy and a lot of humour; he brought lightness and not a little bit of naughty into our committee meetings and he always had a joke to tell ; a funny story to relate and a glint of mischief in his eyes. His involvement was real and hands-on – with active participation at meetings and outings and also acting as an enormous encourager to those wishing to get involved in bird-watching - wanting them also to get to know the rich diversity of this country's birdlife.

He was a terrible tease and I remember how he used to set up mostly me, or Moneybags Mary Lawson and Judy Goldstone – stringing us along with his play on words and a completely straight-face.

His bird knowledge was excellent and I know that he served on the Club's Rarities Committee, vetting reports on rare and unusual birds seen in the Kruger and Mpumalanga in general. He and Eddie Edmonds worked alongside one another and of course, with Peter Lawson as well, our other resident expert on many aspects of bird-watching and education of the public to the cause of birds, their habitat, its destruction and ultimate well-being. Duncan also was very involved in Bird Surveys conducted in places like the Nelspruit Nature Reserve and the Botanic Garden amongst others.

As far back as April 1987 the word Atlasing is mentioned in the minutes and Duncan, along with Eddie and Peter were very active in this regard. Their enthusiasm and dedication meant that thousands of birds were recorded, lots of people were involved submitting lists, many of them club members and it was even suggested that an assistant would be required to help with some of the paper work. Committee members like Toni Ponting and Sheila Wilson helped with this massive task. This work continues today and will do so for very many years still with citizen scientists contributing valuable data collected.

It is impossible for me to document all that Duncan was and all he did for the bird club – it was I believe an intrinsic part of his life, as natural as breathing – pure and simple. He loved birds and nature; he wanted others to experience it all as well; teaching and guiding and encouraging came naturally to him and if that meant serving alongside other like-minded people for nigh on 30 years, then so be it. His family always came first though and in the early years Isabel and their children, especially Gina - often accompanied him on the park trips and outings the club arranged. Thank you though for sharing him with us.

I was away on a game farm when the news of Duncan's death came through and I was recounting a story to Andrew about Duncan's hearing. You all, we all know - that his hearing was bad enough to wear hearing aids and especially when out birding he would cup his ears with his hands to hear a bird call. And on the occasions when we were out birding in a group he would ALWAYS not be able to hear the call of a Golden-tailed Woodpecker – a distinctive and nasal call which everyone else could hear, loud and clear - and the novices would want to know "what bird makes that sound", and despite cupping his ears, he just couldn't pick up the call. It was Murphy's Law that after talking about this, we kept hearing the Golden-tailed's call and I was beginning to think Duncan was out there in the bush, playing the fool with us.

He loved sharing a beer or a glass of red wine with you and he and notably Pierre Neethling got together to sell beers and cold drinks at club meetings – to raise some funds and create some 'gees'.....and this tradition has continued. Members, guests and visitors alike enjoy this little extra and perhaps we should have a Duncan Christie Memorial Corner at future meetings to continue his lively spirit and encourage togetherness, camaraderie and 'geselligheid'.

Another notable thing about Duncan was how he made you feel – he was always happy to see you, greeted you with a handshake or a hug and when he left a room or a place - those staying behind would always have a smile on their lips. He could lift your spirits and dismiss a bad mood very quickly with his quirky sense of humour and sense of fun. And although smiling may be the last thing you and I feel like doing right now, let's all remember him with a smile – a legacy from him if you like.

Duncan will be sorely missed by everyone in BirdLife Lowveld and in birding circles – our club and the birding fraternity is the poorer for his loss and as we go forward without him, we pray comfort and peace upon his immediate and extended family, friends, business partners and the wider community of Nelspruit and Mpumalanga

Hamba kahle Duncs – thank you for your love and light and may you soar with the eagles, until we meet again.

*"There is something about birds,
Their beauty and freedom,
That is good for a man's soul"*

Duncan the Vet.....

Someone at the Memorial Service asked me why I hadn't mentioned Duncan's other love – that of his work as a veterinarian here in Nelspruit. In a way it was remiss of me not to mention this very important aspect of his life.....

Duncan was an extraordinarily gifted vet, who served this community for many years in a practice with like-minded men, including one of his brothers Clive. It was here that many people got to know Duncan, to like his manner of dealing with them, and especially their dogs/cats/horses/cows/birds/snakes/lizards – you name it, he could treat it!

“Born to be Wild”



Liza '82
edited by Gina 2012

He had a no-nonsense approach to things; he was practical and down to earth, and he always made you feel that your animal and its problem was the most important thing he was dealing with that day. He was brutally honest and was quick to point out when and if he thought it necessary for you to make that awful decision – to put down an animal which was old or suffering. But then, his empathy, sympathy and understanding was brilliant and he accompanied you on that particular journey.....

He was well-liked by patients and staff and made a difference right here where he lived. Many people who honoured him at the Service of Memory were there because of how he treated them and their animals in his surgery.

Our community has lost a very special man. We miss him.

Karen Bullen, Nelspruit

Sketch of Duncan by Liza '82 and edited by Gina 2012, used with permission of Isabel Christie

Atlasing the Lebombo

Pentad 2520_3200 had been atlased once by Duncan McKenzie in October, 2012, whilst pentad 2515_3200 to the north was still virgin territory. Both pentads are just narrow strips on the eastern boundary, but are important areas to cover in terms of the SABAP2 project, 'Turning Kruger Green'. It took several attempts to cover them once more, but we finally made it on 13 May, 2014, when Navarre de Villiers, a registered assistant with SANParks and I were given the go-ahead to list birds in this unique and lovely area. Both of these pentads are in the Crocodile Bridge section of Kruger National Park. Beautiful autumn weather made this excursion even more worthwhile, but rocky terrain made for careful driving at times and I was pleased that Navarre was driving, although I was concerned about his car at times.

Lebombo is a Zulu word meaning 'ridge' and makes a perfect boundary separating two African countries. The scenery at the summit was stunning and we had it all to ourselves. Vegetation at the summit of the long mountain range favours the shallow, stony soil made up of slow weathered acid igneous rhyolite rock, but is not suited to many plants that grow in the foothills. It is also not suited to grass-eating herbivores as the grasses are sour and unproductive, but we did see evidence of buffalo throughout the area we covered. The dominant tree we saw was Red Bushwillow (*Combretum apiculatum*) which is an indicator of the relatively infertile soil. What we found particularly attractive was the Lebombo Euphorbia (*Euphorbia confinalis*), a southern African endemic. The name is most appropriate as it is confined to a narrow line stretching from south-eastern Zimbabwe, Limpopo Province, Mpumalanga, southern Mozambique and eastern Swaziland, ending in northern Kwa-Zulu Natal. It favours rhyolitic soils in rocky terrain.

Birds were not prolific, but if we can get back again in summer our lists will grow. Of interest was the presence of a Fiscal Flycatcher which is a winter vagrant to Kruger in the west. Our bird was far-east of where it is normally found. Atlasing always brings surprises and that makes it exciting I find. Another surprise was a single Black Saw-wing, flying south with purpose. Not only was this bird a late migrant, but also a scarce bird for Kruger National Park.

Another seldom-seen bird in Kruger National Park that gave us a good show was a Buffy Pipit. This was only the second one atlased in the Park and of interest, both were in plains close to rocky areas. The first one atlased was by Duncan McKenzie and I in the Stolsnek section earlier this year. The adjoining pentad we atlased on this occasion had a few Plain-backed Pipits as well. This is another seldom seen bird in the Park and appears to be a winter vagrant from the escarpment to the west. Surprisingly Familiar Chat came up as out-of-range and yet the habitat is perfect for it and it is a common bird elsewhere in Kruger National Park.

Most of the birds we encountered were Park regulars and expected to be there. Some of the less frequently encountered species were Black Cuckooshrike, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Flappet Lark, Yellow-throated Petronia, Jameson's Firefinch, Brown-headed Parrot, Brown-crowned Tchagra,



Pale Flycatcher and more. Habitat variation produced Grey-rumped Swallow, Zitting Cisticola, Bushveld Pipit, Yellow-throated Longclaw and others we would normally expect.

Now that the ice has been broken I am more than keen to get back there again, hopefully when migrants are returning.

Peter Lawson - on behalf of the 'Green Team'.



INTERESTING LOCAL SIGHTINGS

This column is intended for unusual or out of range sightings in Mpumalanga, plus early or late migrants. We will however, accept worthwhile sightings from further afield. Positive vocal identifications are also acceptable. We welcome your records for this column so let us hear from you, preferably in writing and not verbally. The date and locality of sightings should be included. Please note, however, that it is the Editor's prerogative to decide whether records should be included or not.

A number of sightings are telephoned through at times when it is inconvenient or impossible to record them. We apologise if your sightings have not been included but would request that in future you email sightings to either Peter Lawson or Karen Bullen. In that way they will be stored for printing. Your co-operation in this regard would be most appreciated.

White-backed Night Heron seen at Bundu Rocky Estate at approximately 18h15pm on 12 June (Sharon Eigenhuis)

A single bird was seen hunting at dusk on the Sabie River near Skukuza on 27 June 2014. (Dr Andy Bradfield).

White Stork – while atlasing between Hectorspruit and Jeppes Reef on 3 July I came across a lonely-looking White Stork perched in a recently cleared cane field. This bird must have overwintered as it was too early to be an early arrival of a migrant from Europe. (Peter Lawson).

Hadedea Ibis - Pieter Viljoen recently sent us photographs of a leucistic Hadedea Ibis taken at Komatipoort on 15 June 2014. *It was an unusual sighting but recently many different leucistic species have been seen. There is an excellent article on leucism and albinism in birds on page 14 of the July/August issue of African Birdlife magazine. The article explains that leucism is rare in birds but it is caused by a genetic mutation and is not the same as albinism. Editor.*



Photograph provided by Pieter Viljoen.

More on leucistic birds –

Lynton Balcomb has had a partially-leucistic Southern Black Flycatcher resident on his farm near Hoedspruit for most of this year. He also reported a leucistic Dark-capped Bulbul seen recently in a different area. (Editor)

Yellow-billed Kite A single bird was seen and photographed by Brian Phelps in Komatiport on 12 June. Most certainly an over-wintering bird.

A single bird seen near Kiepersol on Friday 1 August 2014 (Gavin Bullen)

We saw two separate Yellow-billed Kites on 4 August in the Kruger National Park. One was seen on the H1-3 south of Satara and one on the S90 north east of Satara. It was interesting that our first sightings of this species in 2013 were also near Satara, two days earlier on 2nd August. (Jeremy and Jill Brown)

Martial Eagle - We would like to share this sighting at Croc Valley with you. My husband Johan spotted a Martial Eagle right next to the old N4 road at Croc Valley on Friday 18 July. Fortunately he always has a "mik en druk" camera with him in the vehicle so he could take a picture (regrettably not printable). We have never seen a Martial Eagle in this area so needless to say we were all very excited. (Biem Wessels)



Black-chested Snake Eagle – on 6 August, we had another interesting (we thought) sighting on our farm, Valley Farm – previously known as Alco Estates - we wondered whether the Black-chested Snake Eagle has been spotted in the Nelspruit area before, or is it a regular visitor to the area? (Biem Wessels)

This certainly is a rare bird for Nelspruit. It has only been atlased once in the Nelspruit pentad. (Editor)

Bat Hawk – Garth Batchelor reports two birds in fantastic display on an overcast 9 August. This was at Croc Valley where Duncan Christie reported a pair a few months prior to this sighting.

Secretarybird – a single bird was at Eden Wildlife Estate on the Lydenberg road during July. It was present for a couple of weeks. (Mike Heritage).

Wood Sandpiper – two birds were seen and photographed by Victor Soares at Sunset Dam, Lower Sabie on 21 August. An early arrival of a Palearctic migrant.

Lemon Dove – a single bird was seen at Lowveld Botanical Gardens on 20 July. (Garth Batchelor).

Purple-crested Turaco - During 2013 a large flock of Purple-crested Turacos gathered in White River for about two weeks. I saw them on several occasions and the most I counted were eleven. They visited a palm tree that was in seed and spent a lot of time playing and chasing each other.

This year the flock has increased to 16. They visited my bird table and again spent a lot of times

playing by rapid hopping around from branch to branch. They appear at different times of the day. At one stage there were seven on the bird table together with not enough space and they then went onto the ground under the table. The rest of the flock stayed in the trees. I wanted to get photos but by the time I got the camera they were gone. I haven't seen them now for two days so they may have dispersed. Roberts VII speaks of this behaviour having been observed once before. (Rob Douglass)

Crowned Hornbill – Garth Batchelor saw a single bird fly over his Steiltes, Nelspruit garden on Sunday 24 August.

Greater Striped Swallow – Rob Douglass saw a single bird on the 14th green of the Nelspruit Golf Course on Sunday 17 August. This swallow is common at higher altitude but is a scarce bird for Nelspruit.

Lesser Striped Swallow – on 2 July I was atlasing on Tulloh Farm with Lynton Balcombe and we saw a pair of Lesser Striped Swallows. Thinking they must be an early arrival of a local migrant I mentioned this to Duncan McKenzie who commented he had been seeing them in Kruger National Park throughout the winter. (Peter Lawson).

Fiscal Flycatcher – was seen and photographed by Victor Soares on 21 August on the S28 near Lower Sabie. This flycatcher is a late winter migrant to Kruger National Park and is not often seen this far east.

Violet-backed Starling – whilst atlasing in the Noordkaap area on 8 June I came across a single male and female Violet-backed Starling. Most certainly should not have been present at almost mid-winter. (Peter Lawson).

Red-billed Oxpecker - Ralph Kirsten reports that a few birds have taken up residence at St. Pauls Wildlife Estate in the Schoeman's Kloof area. They have been seen on buffalo and Impala.

Purple-banded Sunbird – found in riparian forest on the Crocodile River in Lowveld Botanic Garden on 3 August by Leon Marais. This is the fourth consecutive year they have been present at this locality, each time in August.

Dark-backed Weaver – On 10 August a Dark-backed Weaver was atlased by Eckhart Buchmann in the Barberton Mountains. The record came up as out of range but it has been accepted by the RAC. The bird was in a remote forest patch on Sappi land behind Barberton Mountain Lodge. This is a range extension as the nearest known birds are at Serenity near Malelane and this locality is not far from that locality.

Red-headed Weaver - On Sunday, 11 May 2014 a Red-headed Weaver was seen near the Low's Creek area of the Mountainlands Nature Reserve by Marjorie Nuns, Andrew Lean, Roland Jones, Stewart Matheson and Mark Needle. Red-headed Weaver has not been recorded previously in the Reserve but as we had seen the remains of a nest in the same area a few months earlier we realized it could be around. (Marjorie Nuns)

Cape Canary – Lynton Balcomb was most surprised to see this canary on his farm at Hectorspruit on 18 July. They do on occasions move to the Lowveld at this time of year but this is no doubt a first for the Hectorspruit area.

On 3 August I was surprised to see a massive flock of Cape Canaries on the Cairn road near Nelspruit. There were literally hundreds perched in an *Acacia sieberiana* and it looked as if the tree was in bloom with a mass of yellow flowers. The birds were singing and their trills and twitters could be heard from quite a distance. This canary is normally based on the escarpment in our area but at this time of year some do move to lower altitude, but I have never seen them en masse previously. (Peter Lawson).



Swallows and other tales.....

Sitting in our garden soaking up some sun (what a treat!) surrounded by various chirps, twitters, harsh squawks and melodious song it seems incredible that the Barn Swallows have returned after a six-month absence. The first group of them back in the small barn arrived on 7th April. As previously last year there seemed to be much discussion on occupation. I marvelled at tiny lean bodies sitting on wires outside my window, wondering how far they had flown. Perhaps they had come from North Africa or Spain as their arrival was so early. Did they make an early appearance to book the barn? One early morning, contributing to the dawn chorus, a swallow sitting on the wire sang its heart out as though happy to be home. Due to an excessively wet and damp winter, clouds of midges were already available and the swallows soon plumped up. With regular showers creating puddles with muddy edges - the task of nest building immediately commenced and now there is one new nest - presently totalling three.

A Great Spotted Woodpecker continued to visit the bird table for peanuts for a couple of weeks and called often from the stream. A mate was found and many a pole was explored. An old tree trunk on the stream bank now has two holes in it so I guess the old nesting site is a suitable place for another years' breeding. Many a time it is heard calling during presumably busy times.

A couple of new visitors are not quite so welcome to the feeding tables - a Jackdaw and a pair of Magpies as they gobble all the available food long before the smaller birds get their share. However they ate then departed to raid elsewhere no doubt. The Magpies spent days and days nest-building in a neighbour's hedge and the day a clutch of three fledged there was such a commotion with the parent birds chasing the large bumbling youngsters away from the nest.

A Blackbird with one of her young scampered across the newly-mown lawn towards the ground feeders but stopped in their tracks at the sound of juicy worms. Both parent Blackbirds frequented

the garden, gathering morsels for their young until eventually they brought all three to show them where to find their own food supply.

Once roads were passable after the extensive prolonged flooding we visited the wetland reserve late in February. There were thousands of migrants still present and crowds of Lapwings were particularly awe-inspiring as they continually rose and settled in their hundreds in the marshlands. Bewick Swans were not so plentiful this last winter as the season was very mild with continuous rain and westerly winds blowing incessantly. At times the gales were quite alarming and I could not help but wonder if any migrants were caught in the horrific sandstorms blowing from the Sahara.

Under "Interesting Local Sightings" I noticed our Editor's comment on Mallards. In South Africa there is concern about them possibly cross-breeding. Here however they are left to their own natural breeding and not once have I seen a male chasing any other female breed other than its own. I have to add though that the males are extremely dominant and fight over the females often until death occurs by drowning either the female or one of the male's opposition. The mothers are wonderful carers and it is rather sad to observe the constant hassling they receive from the males.

On an outing to Lydney Docks we saw the remarkable sight of a female Mallard and her brood of seven very young ducklings which were still wearing downy coats. They had been caught in a lock at low tide and while the parent-bird could fly out she did not as her ducklings would then have been vulnerable to the gulls. We could feel their frustration. She remained with them until the tide returned and the water rose again to the level of the river and away they swam to the safety of reeds and weeds to fill their starving, empty crops.



**Benny Rainsford
Westbury-on-Severn**

Photo lifted from the Web.

For those of you who don't know Benny and are wondering why we would include something on British birds, I need to mention that Benny and her late husband Joe lived in the Barberton area and were members almost from the start of our club. Benny has contributed numerous articles over the years and we always welcome them and her unique writing style. Editor.

ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST LAUNCHES A ROADKILL MITIGATION PROJECT IN THE PILANESBERG NATIONAL PARK

The Endangered Wildlife Trust's Wildlife and Transport Programme (EWT-WTP) has launched a new project which aims to reduce animals killed on roads in National Parks. Pilanesberg National Park in North West Province is the first South African park to support the initiative. Pilanesberg is the third most frequented park by international and national visitors alike, and is managed by North West Parks and Tourism Board. The Park is unique in that it occurs within the transition zone between the dry Kalahari and wetter Lowveld vegetation, commonly referred to as "Bushveld". Thus it has a rich diversity of birds, mammals and plant species.

According to Wendy Collinson, Field Officer of the EWT-WTP, "Road mortality is probably the best known and visible impact of roads on wildlife but whilst this is a relatively new area of study in South Africa, roadkill was first noticed as far back as the early 1920s. Roadkill only became common with the advent of the car at the beginning of the 20th Century; there may well have been incidents from carts and wagons, but it would have been rare due to the slow speed of these vehicles." There is evidence locally and from other countries that roadkill is a real threat to the survival of a variety of species.

"During last week's surveys in the Pilanesberg I found 23 dead animals on the road including terrapins, snakes and rodents. There were also a number of frogs and birds, which were unfortunately too squashed to identify accurately to species level. From work already conducted, we know that roadkill peaks between January and April in South Africa when migratory birds are present, and reptiles, amphibians and mammals are more active. I was not expecting to find as many casualties of roads as I did in the month of May," said Collinson.

"We also conducted approximately 234 questionnaire surveys during our May visit, 181 of which were visitors from South Africa, with the remaining 23 from overseas. Twenty-seven respondents declined to participate in the survey. Of the surveys, 141 said that they had noticed roadkill outside of protected areas, whilst only 19 said that they had seen roadkill in national parks. These included tortoise, birds, snakes, and even a rhino."

Interestingly, when asked to define what roadkill is, many people considered roadkill to only be wildlife and not livestock. Fifty-four people did however mention invertebrates such as moths, butterflies, and dung beetles, and said that these were also at risk from vehicles.

141 respondents further said that they had experienced roadkill first hand, whilst 66 said that they had never hit an animal on the road. However, further questioning revealed that many people did not consider smaller species such as frogs and rodents to be a roadkill, possibly because they did not cause damage to the vehicle or are too small to be noticed on the road. This highlights a likely under-reporting of data being submitted by the public, and more public awareness is needed to highlight that ALL species have the potential to be affected by vehicles on roads. The EWT-WTP has started analysing the questionnaires in detail and will be able to provide further details once this process is complete.

"Some of the less obvious impacts of roads is that they often fragment habitat, which restricts animal movement and increases the isolation of populations. In addition to altering animal behaviour, some animals are attracted to roads. For example, snakes and other ectotherms habitually bask on tar roads, and some birds consume spilt grain from roadside vegetation. Similarly, antelope and other browsing herbivores are attracted to the dense vegetation or so called 'green curtain' of roadside edges. This attraction often exposes them to increased risk of being killed by vehicles. Some species avoid roads altogether and may shift home ranges, feeding sites and nesting areas away from the roads," continued Collinson.

The EWT-WPT will be back in Pilanesberg in October 2014 to conduct more roadkill data collection and questionnaires. Visitors to parks are encouraged to become citizen scientists by contributing to the research. If, during your travels, you spot any roadkill on our roads please record your sighting via our cell phone app, Road Watch South Africa, and the EWT-WTP will use the data you share in their work to reduce the impacts of transport on our wildlife. The app has been designed to simplify data collection. Just with a click of a button you will send us a photo of the incident, as well as the date time and GPS co-ordinates. To take part simply type this link into the Safari browser on your Android platform phone: <http://www.prismsw.com/roadwatch/android/RoadWatchSouthAfrica.apk>. The app is also available Apple – simply search for Road Watch.

Thanks to Pilanesberg National Park, Copenhagen Zoo and Bridgestone South Africa for supporting the initiative. Thanks too to the citizen science volunteer network and Africa:Live, iSpot, Pilanesberg Honorary Officers and Makanyane Volunteers. For further information please contact Wendy Collinson on wendyc@ewt.org.za or Claire Patterson-Abrolat on clairep@ewt.org.za
End

Contact: Claire Patterson-Abrolat
Manager: Wildlife & Transport Programme
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
clairep@ewt.org.za

Wendy Collinson
Project Executant: Roadkill Research & Mitigation Project
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
wendyc@ewt.org.za

and
Nomonde Mxhalisa
Communications Manager
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
nomondem@ewt.org.za

BRAKE FOR WILDLIFE

We need your help!



The Endangered Wildlife Trust, together with Pilanesberg National Park are currently researching the problem of animals killed on roads. If you spot any roadkill during your travels, please record your sighting and send the information to us (location – preferably GPS co-ordinates, species, and date seen). Your information will assist us with reducing the impacts of transport on our wildlife and making our roads safer for all users.

Sightings can be submitted by:

E-mail: roads@ewt.org.za

Cell phone app Android (type this link to your browser)

<http://www.prismsw.com/roadwatch/android/RoadWatchSouthAfrica.apk>

Apple – Download from SA store iTunes

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/EndangeredWildlifeTrust?ref=hl-Facebook>

GivenGain - <http://www.givengain.com/cause/2347/projects/14490/>

Twitter - @EwtRoads

AfricaLive: Apple app store, Google Play

BRIDGESTONE



Marula South Region - Kruger National Park

When visiting Kruger as a tourist as we all do, it is not easy to envisage why it should take so long to cover the area entirely. The maze of tourist roads, plus entrance gates, picnic spots, view sites and rest camps should by rights make it easy to cover the entire region with little effort in a short space of time. However, it is not all that simple. There are many pentads in such a large area that have no tourist facility access at all and many of these take time and effort to cover. As an example the last two virgin pentads were in the Lower Sabie Section and were tackled by myself and registered assistant Tom Vorster on a day excursion from Nelspruit on 20th June and it took a full 13 hours from base to return to cover them. I really do appreciate assistants giving up their time for this worthwhile cause. If we had sufficient funding for an overnight stay it would not be the long and tiring excursions we are forced to make at present. Donations received have made the project feasible so far and are truly appreciated, but please excuse us when we keep on pushing for more.

Although we had a long day to cover the last two virgin pentads in the Region it was a most enjoyable day, in spite of birds being scarce in mid-winter and not being call responsive. We did manage reasonable totals though, but with a lot of concentration and by remaining attentive throughout. It took a fare bit of time to get into our first chosen pentad but when we did we paused for our first mug of coffee of the day and I set up my scope to view some pools on the northern side of the distant Sabie River.

With coffee mug in one hand and the other focusing my scope, plus straining my ears for anything calling, I was in full concentration when Tom calmly said, "look what is coming". Thinking it was a bird I turned to look into the face of a huge bull elephant striding towards us with purpose. He was in musth too and we could soon smell the strong odour. However, he was a good lad and deviated from our path just before reaching us.



The landscapes in this area were stunning and we had vistas of pristine habitat to the horizon. At times such as this one just wants to take in the stunning scenery but it is necessary to concentrate to the full on birds. After all that is our purpose for being in such a wonderful and pristine area but my mind deviates to those who have assisted the project to date with sponsorship in one way or another.

This is a wonderful and worthwhile conservation project and without your help we would be lost.

Peter Lawson, Nelspruit



A pair of Pied Crows (*corvus albus*) decimate Tortoises

The Position Statement of BirdLife South Africa (BLSA) on the potential impact of Pied Crows *Corvus albus* on South African biodiversity, and an Editorial by the Chief Executive Office (CEO) of BLSA have emphasised the need for research into the Pied Crow problem before any action is taken (BLSA 2012; Anderson 2013). The CEO wrote: "It needs to be demonstrated that crows are causing significant damage to livestock and pose a threat to biodiversity, including raptors and tortoises." The Chairman of the Cape Bird Club's Conservation Committee has supported the BLSA position, and described how the Committee has resisted requests to take action against these "nuisance birds" in the city. He has emphasised the need for "solid evidence" and speculated that this may be a long time in coming (Whitelaw 2013). The recommendations made by BLSA were rational based on available information when they were tabled. New proof of excessive predation on tortoises must now be collated with other facts.

Pied Crow predation on tortoises in the Karoo

During 2012 a pair of Pied Crows nested on a windmill on a farm in the Ceres Karoo and reared four chicks (Fig 1). An accumulation of carapaces of small tortoises was noticed beneath the nest and a count detected 160. The position of the nest is S 33° 04.607' E 19° 53.197'. These results have been reported online (Lambrechts 2012).



The following year four more chicks fledged from the same nest to join the burgeoning crow population. Alerted by the slaughter of the previous year, a thorough collection of carapaces established that at least 315 small tortoises had been killed to feed the chicks and parents. (Fig 2 (below left) and 3 (below right)). All photographs by Nollie Lambrechts



This
rate
of



predation is almost certainly not sustainable and any defenceless species will be equally at risk, including the eggs, nestlings and fledglings of many birds.

These, as well as dwarf chameleons, geckos, skinks and other small prey may be digested entirely leaving no trace of predation. The Geometric Tortoise *Psammobates geometricus* is locally extinct in parts of its original range and the relict population is classified as endangered. Heavy predation on tortoises by the White-necked Raven *Corvus albicollis* (formerly called Cape Raven) has also been described (Uys 1966).

Ecology of Pied Crows

The ecological role of Pied Crows has been adapting over time to a range of environmental changes that relate mainly to human population pressure, which is often associated with degradation of habitat and loss of biodiversity. Using a windmill in the Karoo as a safe haven for nesting and a vantage point is an example of opportunistic adaptation in an ongoing natural experiment. Both the first and second bird atlas projects (SABP1 and SABP2) have monitored this experiment in South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. Pied Crows have been detected in 1307 quarter degree grid cells with four or more checklists in both atlas phases. The number of cells with increased reporting rates in SABAP2 is close to double those with decreases (L G Underhill, *in litt*). A parallel study reported a significant increase in Pied Crow abundance across South Africa that is greatest in urban areas and shrubland (Madden 2013).

Observations by reliable individuals such as the examples that follow are a source of powerful ecological information that must be recognised. In the Calvinia district where the human population density is low, Pied Crows often converge in loose flocks of 50 to 100. The three indigenous corvid species occur in the area but Pied Crows have increased to outnumber the other two species by 30:1 or more (F van der Merwe, *in litt*). Rob Martin and Jessie Walton have compiled a bird list for the 100 000 hectare Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve (personal communication). It has been meticulously updated over several years. The corvid population originally consisted predominantly of Cape (Black) Crows. Currently Pied Crows probably outnumber the Cape Crows. Disproportionate harassment of raptors by Pied Crows is happening country-wide *ad nauseum*. Frequent reports that Pied Crows mutilate ewes and lambs need to be investigated thoroughly.

Discussion

The hard evidence of heavy predation on tortoises in order to feed successive broods of four chicks each is unlikely to be unique. A comprehensive survey to establish the extent to which this degree of damage may be replicated needs to be undertaken urgently. If it is confirmed that similar situations are widespread there is a responsibility to do whatever is practical, at least via pilot projects. Key components of research and some inevitable obstacles have been summarised (Anderson 2013). Clarity on action, responsibilities and accountability is needed.

That corvids are intelligent and adaptable does not mean they should be allowed to proliferate to the extent that they contribute to declines of some reptiles and other birds.

**John E. Fincham (SABAP2 Atlasser 11587)
and Nollie Lambrechts, Farmer**

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STOP PRESS

Congratulations to Peter Lawson who won a pair of Zeiss binoculars (donated by David Chamberlain) for the account of his Favourite Birding Moments – *Birding Highway Code* – which appears on page 28 of the Spring issue of African BirdLife (September/October 2014)

We just know he'll enjoy using those fabulous binoculars and that they'll bring him endless pleasure and many excellent sightings as he continues his work in 'Turning Kruger Green' for SABAP2



Did you know that by purchasing Zeiss binoculars through the BirdLife South Africa website www.birdlife.org.za you are supporting bird conservation as a significant contribution from each sale goes directly towards the work of BirdLife South Africa

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Atlasing the far north

Pentad 2215_3105 covers a bend of the Limpopo River, with only a small section in South Africa and the balance in Zimbabwe. It is one of the most difficult pentads to access, due to remoteness, dense and very thorny riparian forest and plenty of hidden elephant and buffalo. The situation is in the Makuleke concession of Kruger National Park.

A pentad of this nature is an absolute challenge which to me is one of the highlights of atlasing, and yet it has now been atlased four times and is thus light green on the website map. The total species list is 111 which is not high for this area, but considering the access difficulty I feel it is a pretty good list. I first atlased it a couple of years ago and later it was covered by Duncan McKenzie, Bruce Lawson and again by me on 29 June, 2013. I was accompanied by two armed back-up trails rangers and thus could concentrate on birds and not elephant and buffalo.

There is an old and very overgrown military track along the river and this gave us vehicle access for a very short distance, although it was difficult to look for birds when ducking and diving under thorny branches whilst seated in an open Land Cruiser. However we would stop, look and listen every few metres and started our list this way. We then walked along fresh elephant tracks through the dense forest and found one leading to the river. The wide Limpopo was not flowing and birding was better as we walked on the sandy riverbed with the tall forest alongside. We found 'specials' such as African Yellow White-eye, Tropical Boubou, Grey-headed Parrot, Brown-headed Parrot, Gorgeous Bush-Shrike, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Bearded Scrub-Robin and a Black-throated Wattle-eye that responded well to 'spishing'.

We covered a fair distance this way and could pick up some birds by sight and sound across the river into Zimbabwe as well. A pleasant surprise was coming across a pool of water close to the shore that was like an oasis for birds in the current drought. There were flocks of Red-billed Firefinch, Golden-breasted Bunting, Emerald-spotted and Tambourine Doves, Natal Spurfowl and others coming down to drink and bathe. Although it was the only water for kilometres, and not a big pond either, it was enough to also attract African Fish-Eagle, African Pied Wagtail, Pied Kingfisher, Red-faced Cisticola, Egyptian Goose and other water associated birds.

After birding for a full two hours we made our way back to the vehicle and negotiated our way through the thorns again to exit one of my favourite pentads, with a low-flying Bateleur as escort.



Photo by Gerhard Geldenhuys ©

Peter Lawson, Nelspruit

TRAGIC DEATH OF A LEOPARD ON THE ROAD IN NORTHERN LIMPOPO

Public holidays often see an increase in traffic on the roads, particularly visits to our national parks, and weekend during June was no exception. Sadly, this public holiday one of our country's charismatic Big Five, a young female Leopard, was hit by a vehicle on the road in a recognised roadkill hotspot area.

Wendy Collinson, a field officer with the Endangered Wildlife Trust's, Wildlife and Transport Programme (EWT-WTP), was on hand the next morning to record this incident. Collinson, resides in northern Limpopo, where she has conducted intensive surveys of wildlife killed on the roads traversing the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area (GMTFCA). This area was recognised as an important area for conservation and cultural heritage when it was declared a World Heritage Site in 2003. Over a 120-day period in 2012, Collinson found 1121 roadkill carcasses. This did not account for animals that crawled off the road to die after being hit or were scavenged by predators.

The GMTFCA is rich in species diversity which makes it an upcoming top destination for wildlife enthusiasts. Currently, of the mammals occurring in the area, six are considered Endangered and 12 Vulnerable. Southern Africa is considered to have the highest reptile diversity in Africa and 25% of these reptiles occur in the GMTFCA. Of the 858 species of birds that occur in South Africa, at least 50% of them are found in the GMTFCA.

Mining, particularly diamond and coal mining, is the most significant contributor to the GDP of Limpopo Province with several areas in the GMTFCA currently being mined and many more earmarked for exploration. The prospect of heavy and increasing traffic by way of labour transportation and heavy vehicles is a cause for concern due to their potential impact on wildlife. In addition, with the GMTFCA having the potential to become a major tourist destination in southern Africa, tourist-borne traffic is likely to also increase. Collinson said, "I have huge concerns about the increase in roadkill numbers in this area, particularly with the increase in mining trucks on the road, and more visitors to the area to see the exceptional wildlife. A dead Leopard is something they really do not want to see."

From her surveys in 2012, Collinson identified a major roadkill hotspot on one section of the road in the GMTFCA – precisely where this young Leopard was hit. She found that on days when large trucks were using the road, roadkill numbers also increased. This presented the EWT with a perfect opportunity to implement a recognised mitigation measure that has been used effectively in other countries – the use of signage and roadside fencing to direct wildlife to cross the road through existing culverts. This mitigation measure will be implemented once funding is secured. Many species, including Leopard and Wild Dog are therefore still at risk from the potential threat of vehicle collisions.

On the back of Collinson's findings in Limpopo, the EWT has launched a new project to reduce the number of animals killed on roads inside national parks. Pilanesberg National Park in North West Province is the first park to support the initiative. Unfortunately park staff have already also reported

a Leopard killed on the road in Pilanesberg earlier this year, and similar reports have also been received from other parks across the country. Due to their nocturnal behaviour, Leopards are vulnerable to roadkill both in and outside of protected areas. This, in tandem with other threats including loss of habitat and persecution, means that Leopards are very likely to be up-listed in the latest revision of the Red List of Mammals of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland due out in late 2014.

The EWT's Wildlife Roadkill Project is supported by Bridgestone SA and Arrow Bulk Logistics, with logistical support from Mopane Bush Lodge. For further information please contact Wendy Collinson on wendyc@ewt.org.za or Claire Patterson-Abrolat on clairep@ewt.org.za

End

Contact: Wendy Collinson
Project executant: Roadkill Research and Mitigation Project
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
wendyc@ewt.org.za

Claire Patterson-Abrolat
Manager: Wildlife & Transport Programme
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
clairep@ewt.org.za

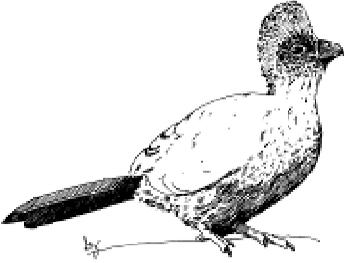
and
Nomonde Mxhalisa
Communications Manager
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
nomondem@ewt.org.za



BARBERTON BIRD CLUB

PO BOX 618

BARBERTON 1300



Chairman

Dave Mourant

Mobile : 082 923 5366

Email : amourant@jafrika.com

Vice-Chairman

Dr. Justus Dirks

Tel 013-712-2498 | Mobile 082-601-8946, E

E-mail: dirkshugo@telkomsa.net

Treasurer

Andrew Lean:

Tel 013-712-2697 | Mobile 083-491-2951

E-mail: andrewlean@telkomsa.net

Member

James van Dyk

Tel 013-712-3644 | Mobile 072-969-6968

Public Relations Officer

Lynette Spencer

Mobile 082 473 1570

Email: lynette6@gmail.com

Recent Club Outings and Sightings

June 22 saw us visiting the Mbayane Bush Experience property near Low's Creek where we had a great welcome from the Roux family. Rianna and Josh accompanied us during the outing.

This is a beautiful place with very varied bush, a large dam, rock-strewn mountains, densely-bushed gullies and open grassland - all very accessible with some driving then walking. Sixty species were identified during the morning and we then adjourned to the spectacular boma for lunch. Certainly a place we hope to re-visit.

July's outing was to Parados in the Krokodilpoort. A site we visit annually and once again are always made most welcome. Despite quite a lot of walking most of the sightings were in the vicinity of the farm buildings and guest facilities. The dam on the entrance road is in one of the most beautiful settings and always provides good sightings. Most notably this time our first Greater Striped Swallows and 64 species in all were seen

In August we hope to be visiting another new venue, Komati Springs out near Badplaas. After a brief look at their recent bird list we are in for some specials.

Some interesting sightings noted by various members recently include:



Martial Eagle : Photograph by Ed & Liz Harris ©

Martial Eagle – Grace Farm Cottages – James van Dyk; June

Black Stork - Aloe Ridge – David and Anne Mourant; June and July

Fiscal Flycatcher - Aloe Ridge – David and Anne Mourant; June

Lizard Buzzard(s) - Aloe Ridge – David and Anne Mourant; June and July

Purple Heron – Grace Farm Cottages – James van Dyk; June

White-throated Robin-Chat Aloe Ridge – David and Anne Mourant; June and July

Little Sparrowhawk – Marj and Andy Nuns – Barberton – July

Shikra - Aloe Ridge – David and Anne Mourant; June and July

Burchell's Coucal - attacking a snake – Herbert Otto – Barberton - July

Juvenile Cuckoo Hawk - Aloe Ridge – David and Anne Mourant; July

Violet-backed Starling - Aloe Ridge – David and Anne Mourant; July 31st

David Mourant
Chairman