A REPORT ON A BIRDVIEWING WEEKEND (16TH TO 18TH JANUARY 2015) AT WAKKERSTROOM, MPUMALANGA, ORGANISED BY THE SHR’S, KWA ZULU-NATAL REGION

Eugéne Joubert and Estelle Buys

The need to make the general public aware that birds are as satisfying to observe as the big five, has been a long standing policy of SANParks. SANParks therefore encourage honorary ranger regions to organise birding days in our national parks. A secondary benefit is that it create opportunities raise funds for conservation projects in national parks. Many regions have taken up the challenge and West Rand region, for example has been running successful birding days in the Kruger National Park the past 18 years. SASOL came to the party and has been sponsoring R500,000 per year to the SHRs as seeding money for birding days, on condition it takes place in a national park.

KZN region has been agonising for years on the need to also run a birding weekend. However, as Free State region has monopolised Golden Gate Highlands National Park for their annual birding weekend, our region was at a loss on a suitable venue. During a regional meeting in 2014, when the issue was again debated Theuns and Lerouxna Botha, both of whom are members of Birdlife Northern Natal and Birdlife South Africa suggested that we should consider Wakkerstroom as a possible venue.

BirdLife Centre, Wakkerstroom

The Wakkerstroom wetlands house the BirdLife South Africa Tourism and Education Centre. The centre is situated within the Grassland Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA), which has been recognised by BirdLife South Africa and BirdLife International as both a national and global Important Bird Area. It is also regarded as one of the highest priority IBAs in South Africa. The centre is located on 114 ha of grassland adjoining the internationally-renowned Wakkerstroom wetland, home to many globally-threatened bird species such as African Marsh Harrier, Grey Crowned Crane, Rudd’s and Botha’s Lark as well as the Yellow-breasted Pipit.
The region decided to use the event to raise funds for the SANParks’ sniffer dog project. Sniffer dogs are used by SANParks rangers in their anti-poaching campaigns, which include increased security at entrance gates to the Kruger National Park. An organising committee was appointed with Estelle Buys as the coordinator, with Theuns and Lerouxna Botha to act as facilitators with the BirdLife Centre at Wakkerstroom. The organising committee, dubbed “The Feathers” consisted of the following honorary rangers: Estelle Buys; Theuns Botha; Lerouxna Botha; Hazel Corcoran, Craig Hewitt; Darryl Louch and Koos Vorster. During the birding weekend five additional members from the KZN region travelled to Wakkerstroom and offered their services as volunteers. They were: Malindri Eastes; Martie Strydom; Marsha Vorster; Lene Hansen, Gerda Joubert and Eugéne Joubert.

Although financial constraints was an initial problem, Theuns and Lerouxna managed to solicit generous contributions from major donors, Monsanto (R 10, 000) and TWK (R5, 000). They also succeeded to obtain promotional items from Henred Fruehauf, Nedbank and Solgar.
Estelle managed to get a R5,000 sponsorship from Pinetown Alpine Motors, bags from Mr. Price and T-shirts from Kakiebos. All these donations contributed to turn the event into a successful venture. The assistance and cooperation by Kristi Garland and her team at Birdlife Centre is gratefully acknowledged, together with the Wakkerstroom Bird Club who assisted in assuring that guides would be available.

Although the most successful way of advertising seemed to have been through the SANParks honorary ranger’s website and Birdlife South Africa’s website, people also responded to other advertisements. One person reacted to a poster that was advertised at Kloof Conservancy while others received info through posters sent to the various bird clubs in South Africa. This enticed birders from as far afield as Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga to participate.

Forty-eight birders attended the event. Registration started at 14:00 on Friday at the Birdlife Centre, where the birders received a ‘goody bag’ sponsored by Mr Price filled with donations of pens, water, diaries, various other items and a T-shirt. Various information leaflets on tourist attractions in and around Wakkerstroom and information on BirdLife South Africa (BLSA) were also included. The birders were encouraged to visit the different hides that afternoon and to explore the wetlands that is located close to the town. Here birders were met by bird guides, stationed at strategic points to identify the feathered inhabitants of the reed beds and on sections of open water. Most birders were fortunate to see several species of water fowl, swallows, swifts, martins, weavers, harriers and also crows, ravens and, of course hadeda.

Clive Beck Hide with Wakkerstroom in the background.
A cheeky Levaillant’s Cisticola allowed it to be photographed by many birders (See below). Comments were also made on the large numbers of Amur falcons sitting on the fences and telephone lines next to the roads (See photographs of male and female Amur falcons below).
REGISTRATION

Malindri Eastes and Estelle Buys manning the registration table with Theuns Botha, Martie Strydom and Lerouxna Botha looking on. Ready for the birders.

Martie Strydom, Marsha Vorster and Theuns Botha with the goody bags.

Birders waiting to be registered
The social events of the weekend took place at De Oude Stasie restaurant, housed in the historical station building from a bygone era. Friday evening started with Koos Vorster, chairperson of the SANParks Honorary rangers, KwaZulu-Natal region, giving a short welcome and introducing the programme and entertainment of the weekend. The evening was brought to a close after the participants were treated to a delicious meal by the catering staff of De Oude Stasie.

Koos introduced Mr John McAllister, presently a Wakkerstroom inhabitant, who gave an informative talk on grasslands, one of the most threatened biomes in southern Africa, actually globally. Apart from the mountain grasslands protected in Golden Gate Highlands National Park, the Wakkerstroom area is important as it house one of the few other remaining vestiges of grasslands in South Africa.

This was followed by Rina Pretorius, from Birdlife Northern Natal, who entertained those present with a slide show on Amur falcons. Newcastle is known for, amongst the more serious of the birding fraternity of South Africa, as well as internationally, as host of the biggest roost of Amur falcons (*Falco amurensis*) in the region. According to recent counts up to 25, 000 Amur falcons roost in the tall trees growing along the northern boundary of the Newcastle show grounds. Apparently there is another much smaller roost at Volksrust in a single tree. Most of the present information on the migration of Amur falcons, were obtained from birds netted and ringed at the Newcastle roost.

Rina Pretorius have been working closely with Dr. Bernd Myburgh, a medical practitioner in Germany and a keen ornithologist in his spare time. He has a passion for Amur falcons and has been studying them for a number of years. With the aid of Rina and other members of Birdlife Northern Natal, they managed to catch several of the falcons in mist nests at the roost. This was no mean feat as the birds roost in the tops of very tall trees. Eight of these birds were fitted with satellite tracking transmitters which allowed Dr. Myburgh to follow their specific migratory route from South Africa to eastern Asia and back.

Although it was generally known that Amur falcons travel up to 11, 000 km from Siberia, eastern China, Mongolia and northern Korea to southern Africa (Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and South Africa), reaching southern Africa around November and departing again from April, satellite tracking defined the knowledge. Especially for those individuals that overwinter in KZN and Mpumalanga areas. When these Amur falcons return to their breeding grounds in Asia, they migrate at a leisurely pace northwards along the African east coast. On reaching Ethiopia they spent several weeks here, building up body fat as reserves. After a short layover they fly on to their breeding grounds in Inner Mongolia.

Annually large numbers of Amur falcons are caught and eaten in Nagaland by the locals to augment their diet – a serious threat. They then fly nonstop from here, across northern India, just south of the Himalayan mountain range to Nagaland, a hilly state in north eastern India – a distance of around 7, 000 km.
Saturday morning: birders enjoying warm coffee and rusks

Theuns organising the groups with bird guide Lucky looking on

After the birders were seen off, Theuns took some of the SHRs on a short trip: “It was right here, where my great grandfather saw and shot the first Botha’s Lark ever to be recorded!”

Lerouxna and Theuns Botha; Craig Hewitt; Darryl Louch and Martie Strydom
Saturday dawned cold and wet with mist shrouding the Centre’s building. Although the fog lifted later during the morning it remained overcast, which did not make for good photography. The birders were treated with coffee and rusks at 6 O’clock. Theuns then grouped them into groups of 10 each, in three vehicles each group with a guide. The first and last car in each group had a two way radio which ensured communication within each convoy. Honorary ranger Jan van Rensburg organised a number of radios and the rest was sponsored by Graham Grewcock. After lunch, each group departed on a different route. The birders had mixed success on these outings, but in general between 130 and 150 species were recorded and most of them managed to tick off the specials on offer in the area.

Saturday evening the guests were entertained with a quiz competition by Kristi Garland. She managed to slip in a few birds which had the audience stumped, to the pleasure of all. This was followed by a talk by Eileen Strydom on her project on secretary birds in the area. None of the participants were fortunate enough to spot a secretary bird, but she assured us that they do occur in the area. Her enthusiasm and obvious dedication to the project impressed all. There were also enough lucky draw prizes for all participants to the birding weekend and a special prize sponsored by BLSA. The guests were treated to a lamb spitbraai with two sheep donated by a local farmer Mr. B.P. Greyling.

Overall we had positive feedback from the birders. They thoroughly enjoyed the well organised weekend and excellent program. The presentations by the speakers in the evenings were also appreciated. A separate balance sheet will be available under another cover, but over R41,000 was raised over the weekend.

We have already thanked our sponsors, but we need to thank them again for their generosity. They are in no particular order: Monsanto, TWK, Alpine Motors, Nedbank, NTC, Henred Fruehauf, Mr N. Yamawaki, Mr H. Wassink, Mr. B.P. Greyling and Mr. Graham Grewcock.

Finally, to all those SANParks Honorary Rangers who contributed in one way or the other to this birding weekend, we also extend a warm thank you.
Some other photographs taken during the weekend.