



Newsletter 182 July-September 2023

CLUB MEETINGS

Every third Tuesday of the month

Next Meeting: 17 October 2023

18h30 for 19h00

Wanderer's Club

Come early (17h30ish) and join us for supper in the restaurant. Good food, great company!



CONTENTS

CLUB MEETINGS.....	1
Contents.....	2
EDITOR’S CHIRP	3
Wheel Cover	4
DAY OUTINGS	4
SPEAKERS	5
PREVIOUS MID-MONTH OUTINGS.....	6
July, Northcliff Ridge	6
WEEKEND AWAY	6
PREVIOUS MONTH-END OUTINGS.....	7
July, Marievale.....	7
August, Faerie Glen	9
September (October 1st), Klipriviersberg	13
PREVIOUS WEEKEND AWAY	18
August, Sediba	18
BIRDING IN GORONGOSA	24
NYSLVLEY BIRDING BASH	29
A FIRST FOR SOUTH AFRICA AS UP VETERINARY TEAM PERFORMS BEAK TRANSPLANT ON VULTURE	30
BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA NEWS.....	32
EUROPEAN HONEY BUZZARD	35
CAN YOU SPOT THE PHEZUKOMKHONO?	36
THE CURIOUS CASE OF FORGERIES OF AN AVIAN NATURE.....	40
WHITE-BREASTED WATERHEN	44
OWAMBO SPARROW-HAWK, GAUTENG	47
WEB PAGES TO INVESTIGATE.....	48
COMMITTEE.....	50
OFFICE BEARERS.....	50
BANKING DETAILS	50
CONTACT: info@thecuckoobirdclub.org.za	50
NOTES.....	51



EDITOR'S CHIRP

Hi Everyone

What a peculiar Springtime! We seem to be getting a few beautiful days and then a reminder of winter. Nevertheless, the gardens and streets are looking beautiful with blossom and fresh green leaves. And now the bougainvillea are in spectacular bloom. (We won't discuss the potholes – maybe it's time to accept defeat and turn them into water features.)

Can you believe we're nearly at the end of the year? Our Year-end Event is planned for November 26th, and we've been invited to Alex and Roy's house. There will be more information shortly.

Talking among ourselves the other day, we got onto the subject of people we haven't seen for some time. Come back, do! We'd love to see you again. Why not join us on the 26th November?

Thanks to all contributors – Heather, Mark, Debbie, Peter, and Dennis – much appreciated. Thank you, Johna, for the article and photos of Gorongosa. As Johna says, 'one for the bucket list'!

More thanks for some terrific outings and weekends away. If you haven't been getting out and about with the Cuckoos, give us a try. Our Chairman and Kathy spend a lot of time sussing out places to visit and things to do. The care and attention to detail pays off handsomely.

The latest one, to Klipriviersberg, was super, with many of our friends (Cuckoos and birds) out and about. One of the best things, for me, is the post-walk picnic. Stay for a while if you can.

Lester's mid-month walks are another way to meet – and make – friends and spot birds. We'll be starting earlier now that the mornings are lighter (and warmer), and we generally finish around 10h00-11h00, depending on how far we travel.



WHEEL COVER



70 cm wheel cover available free to a good home.

Our previous Chair, John Blackmore, had this made. Mo would like it to be used by someone in the club. Contact her on:

info@thecuckoobirdclub.org.za

MONTH-END OUTINGS

Organiser: Dennis Townsend

dennis.townsend4@gmail.com



There have been some great month-end outings over the past three months. Watch for the Newsflash for info on the next one

Dennis Townsend

MID-MONTH OUTINGS

Organiser: Lester Niss

lestern256@gmail.com



Keep an eye out for the News Flash on the next mid-month morning walks.

SPEAKERS

Organiser: Debbie Jennings

deb.jiq@gmail.com



We've had some fascinating talks recently. In July there was a great photography presentation from Rolf Weisler. August's talk by Sara Orchardson was all about owls. As you see from the photos below, there were some fine examples:



Debbie Jennings



Mo Bellis

Cassie Carstens, from BirdLife SA gave an interesting and lively talk on his special bird, the Secretary bird in September.

Watch for Debbie's Newsflashes with info about upcoming speakers.

PREVIOUS MID-MONTH OUTINGS

JULY, NORTHCLIFF RIDGE

It was a VERY chilly morning when 13 keen (and definitely cuckoo) birders ventured to the top of Northcliff Hill to see what birds are nuts enough to appear early on a winter's day.

Despite a lack of birds, for those of us who hadn't been to the EcoPark before, it was a good trip. To see the wonderful views was a very worthwhile experience – you really feel as though you're on top of the world.



Our star performer was a Striped Pipit, who stayed with us for a while, maybe hoping for a (hot) breakfast.

Dennis Townsend



WEEKEND AWAY

Organiser: Bev Williams

bevjiwil@gmail.com

Birding Big Day, 2 December 2023

Angel's Valley 1-3 December 2023

Bev has organised a weekend away at a Nature Reserve, Angel's Valley. The resort offers excellent accommodation in a beautiful setting, with game and birdlife on the property. (And a pool!)

See page 35 for info from BirdLife.

Please contact Bev for details.



PREVIOUS MONTH-END OUTINGS

JULY, MARIEVALE

Now this was a courageous thing to do! Seven Cuckoos went to Marievale to take part in the CWAC (Co-ordinated Waterbird Count) winter count. The morning was icy, with the wind coming in off the water; the car dashboard thermometers registered 4°, but nobody felt that warm!

There was a slow start at Duiker hide: very few birds compared to previous counts – all still in bed!

We moved on from Duiker hide and came across a flock of more than 550 flamingos.

As it warmed up, very late in the morning, we started seeing more. Lots of Moorhens, Coots, Geese, and Spurwings and a few African Snipe, Avocets, Stilts, Teals, Grebe, African Swamphens.

Thanks to Bev, Sue, Mark, Johna, Alex, and Lester for braving the elements and participating in count – a good cause.

After the count, a tasty beef and vegetable soup was served to all who wanted

something warm to eat.

The next CWAC will be in January 2024 for the summer count.

See below photos of some of the Flamingos (hands frozen so not the best!)

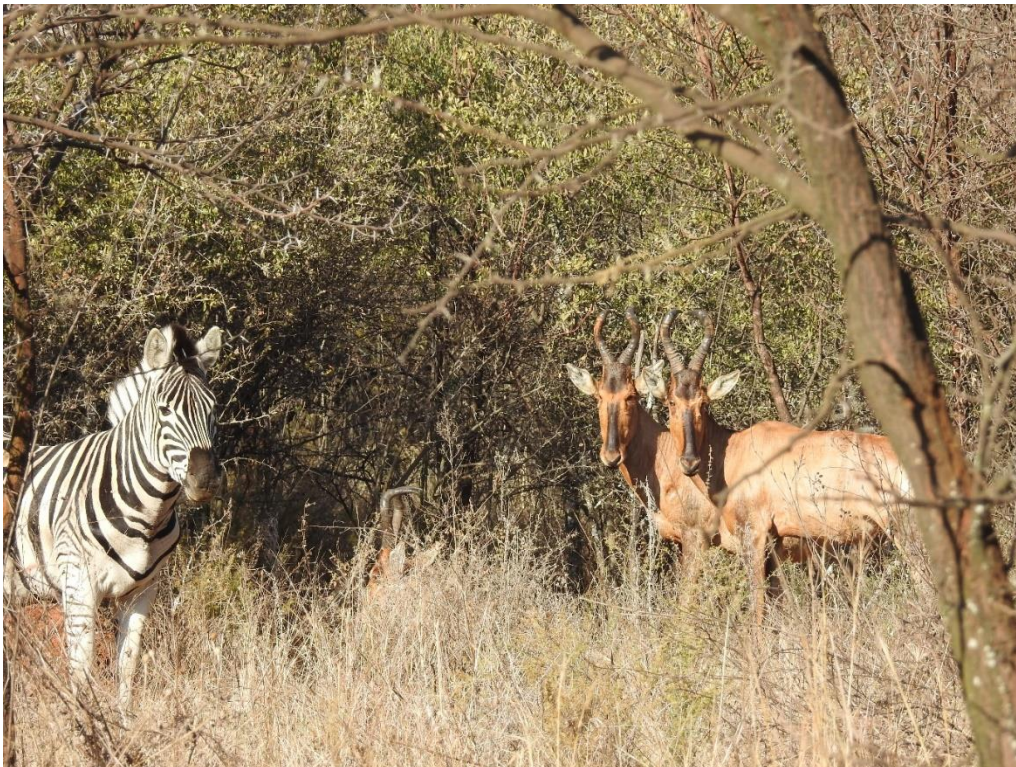


Dennis Townsend

AUGUST, FAERIE GLEN









Heather Darby

SEPTEMBER (OCTOBER 1ST), KLIPRIVIERSBERG











Heather Darby

PREVIOUS WEEKEND AWAY

AUGUST, SEDIBA

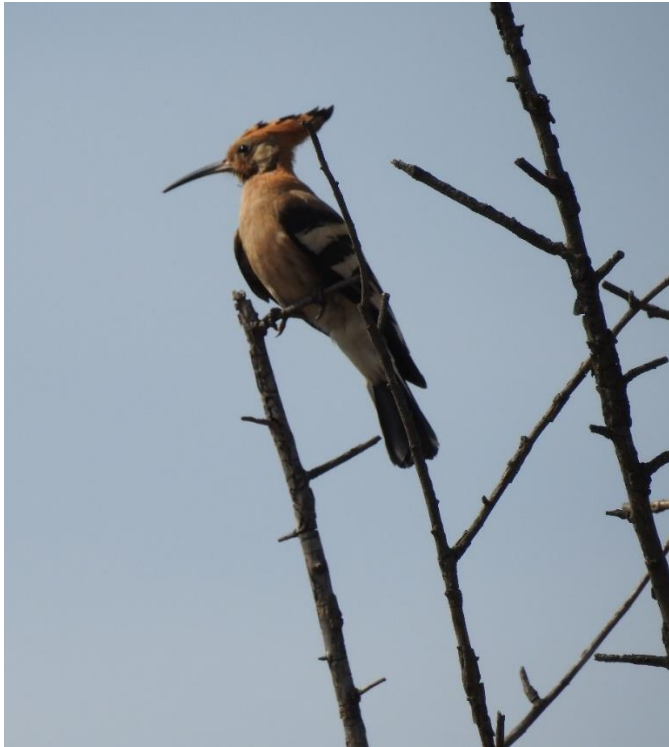




Dennis Townsend











Heather Darby



BIRDING IN GORONGOSA

Gorongosa is best known among birders for the Green-headed Oriole, which is only found in Southern Africa on Gorongosa Mountain. But Gorongosa National Park (which includes the mountain as a separate part) is an amazing conservation success story. Having had its environment and wildlife decimated by the war in Mozambique, the threads were picked up by the Carr Foundation in 2006 and for the last 17 years millions of US dollars have supported the restoration of the park towards its previous glory. In 2022 alone, US\$ 17 million was spent on operations, conservation, and human development programs in a holistic approach to the long-term sustainability of Gorongosa. Elephants, lions, leopards, hyenas, buffalos, side-stiped jackals and other smaller animals have been re-introduced.

From a birding perspective, the Roberts/Sasol App records 451 bird species occurring in the park, excluding the mountain, and 332 species in the mountain. These are impressive figures considering Gorongosa is about 20% the size of KNP. No self-drive is allowed so birding is done from a Gorongosa open safari vehicle with a guide. This is the route for visitors who are camping, staying in bungalows or at the more expensive tented Wild Camp. The best is to put together your own group of birders or you may end up on a safari vehicle with non-birders and we all know what drama that can lead to.

I have been to Gorongosa a couple of times, the last in August 2023. In a week we recorded 170 bird species. I had previously been to Gorongosa Mountain and seen the Green-headed Oriole and Blue-spotted Wood Dove, so this trip was focused on the bottom of the rift valley. The trip to the mountain involves 6 to 7 hours driving on terrible roads and then a relatively short time spent in the forests near the base of the mountain. However, Gorongosa's plan from 2024 is to make the mountain trip a two-day overnight activity to allow birding to start early in the morning.

Lake Urema sits in the centre of Gorongosa in the rift valley floodplain. The shoreline is accessible at a few locations; however, most of the extensive shoreline is not accessible. The lake is full of hippos, crocodiles, and the expected waterbirds such as African Spoonbill, White-faced Duck, Comb Duck, Common Greenshank, Saddle-billed Stork, Yellow-billed stork, African Openbill, Egrets and others. Pink-backed

Pelicans occur but the lake is so large that they are not always seen. The immediate grassy floodplain is home to large flocks of Spur-winged Geese, Egyptian Geese, Collared Pratincoles and Grey-crowned Cranes. Specials that we saw on the most recent trip were Cabanis's Bunting, Narina Trogon, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Collared Palm Thrush, Grey-crowned Crane, African Skimmer, Red-throated Twinspot, Dickenson's Kestrel, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Carmine Bee-eater, Senegal Lapwing, Square-tailed Drongo, Green Malkoha, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, and Pale Batis.

A visit to Gorongosa must take in more than the birds. The geology and vegetation diversity are amazing, leading to the diversity of wildlife. Mammal species we saw included wild dogs, lions, elephants, porcupines, civets and oribis. Waterbuck have recovered to huge numbers and the beautiful sunsets over the lake with waterbuck and waterbirds is the enduring memory of Gorongosa.

Expensive but a good destination for a bucket list.



The elusive, Blue-spotted Wood Dove photographed at dusk.



Dusk produced large flocks of waterbirds moving to their roosts.



The floodplain is dotted with smaller temporary and permanent pans.



Pink-backed Pelicans breed in colonies in the tall lala palms in the floodplain around Lake Urema.



Flocks of Grey-crowned Cranes were common in the floodplain grasslands.



The extensive floodplain grasslands are occupied by large herds of waterbuck and their attendant Western Cattle Egrets.

Johna Turner

NYLSVLEY BIRDING BASH



For 20 years FoN has organised an annual woodland bird census. From 2024 the woodland census will be replaced by a Birding Bash (woodland and water birds) designed to be a fun filled birding weekend, but which also provides some scientific data. The vision is for this to be an annual event for the decade to come.

The Birding Bash will take place from 17hr00 on Friday 26 to 10hr00 on Sunday 28 Jan 2023. Separate teams of between one and four persons will bird in the different habitats of Nylsvley. Teams will be asked to bird in a combination of two habitats assigned to each group, and as many other habitats as the groups wish to cover, conducted at whatever times in the day the teams choose. In this way all habitats will be covered by at least one team. All habitats will be accessible on foot, but for some habitats vehicle access will be limited. Participants can form their own teams or be included in other teams. To give the bash some scientific value each team should have one BirdLasser literate member who will record sightings according to the BirdLasser protocol.

Accommodation choices are between camping, Hamerkop Group Camp, Ducks Den Cottages or Heron House. Friday evening will be a meat bring-and-braai with vegetables by FoN. Other meals (for all participants) will be provided by FoN at Hamerkop to facilitate meeting and chatting at mealtimes and around the campfire. The cost will depend on the accommodation chosen and include the Reserve entrance fee. Please bring your own drinks.

Participants who wish to participate without staying at Nylsvley will pay a nominal amount to cover administration costs and make a small contribution to FoN (used to support the reserve).

Programme: Friday: From 15hr00 collect maps and receive allocated habitats. 19hr00 meat bring and braai.

Saturday: 06hr00 coffee and rusks; 10hr00 brunch; 17hr00- 20hr00 dinner (allows some night birding).

Sunday: 06hr00 coffee and rusks; 10hr00 brunch.

BOOKING IS ESSENTIAL.

Cost: R750 pp camping.

R850 pp sharing two per room in the Hamerkop Group Camp. R1150 single.

R2800 for one Ducks Den cottage (three cottages, accommodates two in each cottage).

R8400 for Heron House (accommodates six). Must book the whole house.

R 150 pp (excluding entrance fee and meals) for participants not using Nylsvley accommodation.

Nicky: 0716744723 nfwood@icon.co.za and copy to Johna: 0824922880 accipitertours@gmail.com

Friends of Nylsvley bank details will be supplied when you book.



A FIRST FOR SOUTH AFRICA AS UP VETERINARY TEAM PERFORMS BEAK TRANSPLANT ON VULTURE



By University of Pretoria

24 Jul 2023

What do you do when a vulture with a crushed beak needs a new beak and two attempts to fit an acrylic beak fail? You improvise and use the beak of a deceased vulture, successfully enabling the injured bird to feed again.

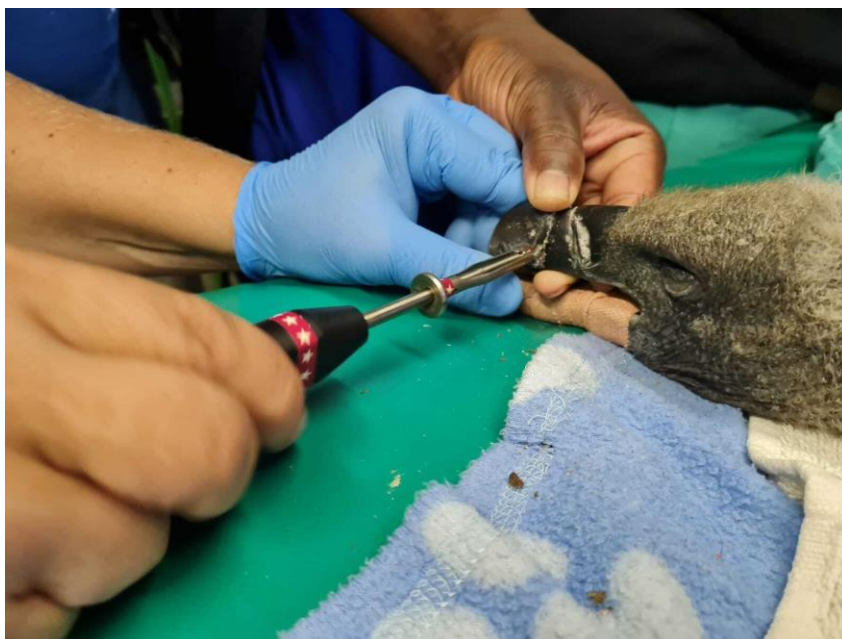
In another first for South Africa, this remarkable procedure was recently performed on an African white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*) by a University of Pretoria (UP) team led by Professor Katja Koepfel, a veterinary wildlife specialist in UP's Faculty of Veterinary Science at the Onderstepoort campus.

For more photos of the vulture and the procedure, [view this gallery](#)

The beak of the female white-backed vulture, an endangered species, was crushed when it was hit by a car in March this year. The bird also presented with a serious head injury, causing blindness in the right eye. The vulture was taken in by the non-profit conservation organisation [VulPro](#), and was hand-fed as it was not able to feed independently at the time.

VulPro CEO Kerri Wolter then brought the bird to UP's Faculty of Veterinary Science, where Prof Koepfel, together with wildlife veterinarians Dr Jennie Hewlett and Dr Bart Gazendam, veterinary nurse, Sr Murendeni Lalamani and a few students, attempted on two occasions to fit the bird with prosthetic acrylic beaks and wires.

However, the vets found that the prosthetic became unstable once the vulture tried to feed on a carcass.



Orthopaedic screws were used to secure the new beak to the broken beak underneath.



Prof Katja Koepfel with the vulture after performing the successful procedure.

Following a more innovative approach, Prof Koepfel then decided to use an intact beak from a deceased vulture; this would provide the correct shape for tearing meat.

Fortunately, a matching piece of beak was obtained from a dead white-backed vulture which was stored in a freezer for research purposes. Prof Koepfel and the team were able to perform the ground-breaking procedure in May, which involved using six

orthopaedic screws to attach the beak, thus saving the bird's life.

The result has been remarkable.



“The vulture has shown tremendous improvement,” Wolter said. “She is doing fine and is eating well with the new beak. The crushed beak, which is made of keratin, will continue to grow back fully underneath the bit bolted onto it, but it will probably take a few years. The transplanted beak will then be taken off.”

The vulture will be staying at VulPro and be monitored on a continuous basis. Unfortunately, the blindness caused by the head injury means that she will not be able to rely on her otherwise excellent sight any longer and will not be released back into the wild. **DM/OBP**

** The white-backed vulture is the most common and widespread vulture species in sub-Saharan Africa but is listed as an endangered species because of its decreasing population. These scavengers are vital to our ecosystem as they feed primarily on the carcasses of dead animals, thus clearing the landscape of carrion and helping to curb the spread of dangerous diseases and bacteria.

Daily Maverick

BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA NEWS



Here's some excellent news! Our very own Chair, Dennis Townsend, has been elected **Chair of the Northern Region Bird Club Forum**. He has taken over from Yvonne Pennington, who is now Chair of BirdLife South Africa.

Congratulations from us all!

Northern Region Bird Club Forum

The forums serve as a communication channel between affiliated bird clubs and BirdLife South Africa, as well as a platform to facilitate the sharing of all aspects of club activities.

The forums assist BirdLife South Africa, the South African National Biodiversity Institute, the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, and other academic



institutions by encouraging and coordinating bird monitoring (such as SABAP2, CWAC and CAR) and on the ground conservation work, such as the implementation of conservation action in Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), and the formation of Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) to support the organisation's conservation work generally.

The forums also support avitourism in their regions by encouraging the use of the organisation's Go Birding information platform, Community Bird Guides and BirdLife South Africa Recommended Accommodation. The bird clubs and their members can also mentor the Community Bird Guides.

The forums promote membership of BirdLife South Africa to their club members.

Northern Region Forum is made up of affiliated bird clubs in Gauteng, Limpopo, Northwest, and Mpumalanga provinces. There are currently 15 bird clubs participating in the forum's activities.

The forum meets every 2 to 3 months on a Saturday morning at Isdell House, BirdLife South Africa's head office in Johannesburg and via Teams or Zoom for those to attend from outlying areas.

- During the meetings, the following items are discussed and agreed on:
 - Discussion and agreement on action plan and budget for the year, or (during the year) feedback on execution of the action plan.
 - Feedback from BirdLife South Africa staff member(s) on conservation work, upcoming events, membership, and other activities.
 - Citizen science projects.
 - Conservation initiatives, such as Local Conservation Groups, KBAs, etc.
 - Feedback from all club chairpersons on membership, activities, projects, etc. at their club
-



(This is an abbreviated copy of last month's article)

Get ready for Birding Big Day!

BirdLife South Africa's

39th Birding Big Day (BBD) will get under way on Saturday, 2 December and you are invited to join hundreds of birders around the country who will be looking to record as many species as possible within a chosen time, be it the entire day or a few hours in the garden or a local park.

information, go to <https://www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2023/>. Alternatively, feel free to contact me at ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za. To register, please go to <https://www.birdlife.org.za/birding-big-day-2023-entry-form/>
ERNST RETIEF, BIRDING BIG DAY ORGANISER

NOTE: See Bev's plans for a weekend away to join the BBD. Sounds great.

EUROPEAN HONEY BUZZARD



A female European Honey Buzzard Bird was fitted with a satellite tracking system in Finland recently and was of particular interest to locals because it spent the most recent austral summer around the town of Reitz in the Free State in South Africa. She left Reitz to start heading north on 20 April and on the 2nd of June, she finally reached Finland where she will probably spend the boreal summer before probably returning again next season for a visit in South Africa.

Here is an image showing the data received from the tracker which plots out the route that she took to head north... so, in just 42 days, she covered over 10 000 km at an average of more than 230 km every single day! Isn't that just amazing...?!"

What is amazing is how she took a straight line north except for when she had to fly over water. (or Sudan)

Apparently she turned right at the source of the Nile and followed it. It is still fascinating that after that deviation she returned to the same longitudinal line she started on and continued until she reached her destination. Mother nature at its most fascinating best...

CAN YOU SPOT THE PHEZUKOMKHONO?

(That's Zulu for red-chested cuckoo)



The red-chested cuckoo – newly named phezukomkhono – ‘has always been used by ladies to know when to plant their crops’. Photograph: Ian Rijsdijk

A 10-year project to name all of South Africa’s birds in the evocative isiZulu language is finally giving a voice to Indigenous communities

Until recently, a Zulu speaker who spotted an iCape gannet would have no choice but to refer to the majestic seabird by its unedifying “zulufied” name. But now the gannet, which can [plunge into the ocean](#) at speeds of up to 120km/h when hunting sardines, finally has a Zulu name that does it justice: isicibamanzi (the spear into the water).

After years of research and work with Indigenous communities, a list of isiZulu vernacular names for all 878 birds found in [South Africa](#) has recently been put together.

“In South [Africa](#), birding has always had a bit of a stigma as a white people’s thing,” says Nandi Thobela of BirdLife South Africa, the organisation behind the isiZulu bird names project. While there are many reasons for this, the fact that bird names (and field guides) were all in English or Afrikaans certainly didn’t help. “When you have to translate a word, you lose people,” says Thobela.

Birding may be a predominantly white pursuit, but the birds themselves have always been important to the Indigenous people of South Africa. “The Nguni languages were developed from people observing nature,” says Thobela. “Before people had clocks and calendars, it was the birds that told farmers when to reap and when to sow.”

A case in point is the phezukomkhono, the recently ratified Zulu name for the red-chested cuckoo. Sakhamuzi Mhlongo, one of the bird guides who has been involved in the project since its inception, explains that the name has been in use for centuries: “This bird has always been used by ladies to know when to plant their crops. Every spring they wait and wait and wait for the phezukomkhono to come back from migration. Phezukomkhono means ‘roll up your sleeves’ and grab your hand hoe and plant the crops. It’s got a good meaning for Zulu-speaking people.”

“Language and culture encode and express our meaningful engagement with the world,” says the Cambridge University linguist Karen Park. “For a language like isiZulu, spoken by people who have inhabited the region of South Africa for millennia, words can hold both a deep knowledge of place and a powerful connection to ancestry and cultural identity.”

The African emerald cuckoo, or ubantwanyana, which supposedly sings: ‘Little children don’t get married!’ Photograph: Mac Two Photography/Shutterstock



While English bird names often follow conservative conventions (like relying on chest markings or naming them after old white explorers), Zulu names are far more varied and original. The black cuckoo is an undodosibona (man who sees us), a reference to the bird calling from dense vegetation where people can’t see it; the African emerald cuckoo is ubantwanyana, a verbalisation of the bird’s call – it supposedly sings: “Little children don’t get married!”; and Klaas’s cuckoo is an umazalashiye (the bird that lays eggs and then leaves them behind).

In South Africa, birding has always had a bit of a stigma as a white people’s thing.

Nandi Thobela, BirdLife South Africa

The standardised list of isiZulu bird names has been more than a decade in the making. In 2012, Noleen Turner and Adrian Koopman – both isiZulu professors at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal – led an effort to compile a complete list of Zulu

names for birds found in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province (where most ethnic Zulu speakers live). They first canvassed communities to ascertain which of the province's 500 bird species already had names. It turned out that some species had many names, some had one name, and some had none.

They then brought together 30 Zulu-speaking bird guides from around the province for a series of naming workshops. If there was already a Zulu name this always took precedence. When several names existed, the guides would debate and settle on one name that best represented the bird. When no name existed, they would work together to come up with a name. "You want a name that makes people remember the bird," says Mhlongo.

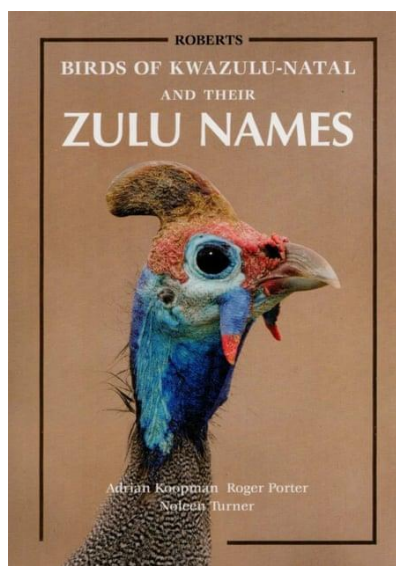
**Bird guides ... (from left)
Sakhamuzi Mhlongo, Junior
Gabela, BirdLife's Nandi Thobela
and Themba Mthembu at a
naming workshop. Photograph:
BirdLife South Africa**



Ornithology experts were on hand to tell of the identifying features and habits of each species, but the final say always went to the ethnic Zulus. "It feels really good to know that there is a complete list of bird names in my language," says Mhlongo. "The fact that the list was made by Zulu speakers and for Zulu speakers is the cherry on the top."

Park echoes this view: "The systematic, comprehensive and community-led approach sets an important standard of multidisciplinary collaboration and local empowerment, ownership and engagement that I hope to see emulated."

She believes that global engagement with our natural world "too often overlooks the rich cultural and linguistic context of the people who inhabit the places that compel our interest. I find this has especially been the case with global biodiversity conservation organisations, which tend to impose a western science framework on the practice of protecting, maintaining, and restoring biological diversity."



A book of Zulu names for the birds in Kwa-Zulu Natal inspired efforts to create a national list. Photograph: Roberts

By 2018, Koopman and Turner’s team had finalised Zulu names for all the birds found in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Then came the publication, in 2020, of a glossy, full-colour book: [Birds of KwaZulu-Natal and Their Zulu Names](#). “For so many years, we’ve been having this

problem of getting Black people into birding,” says Mhlongo. “It’s always easier to learn something when you are still young. Now we have a book that is written in black and white. The kids can take it home and read about the birds, and the parents can read it too.”

Inspired by all this groundbreaking work, BirdLife South Africa decided to extend the project to include all birds found in South Africa. The recently completed [nationwide bird list is currently out for public comment](#). “We wanted to give Zulu speakers a chance to challenge or improve the list,” says Thobela. “But so far we have only received praise and encouragement.”

They have already been contacted by Sepedi and Setswana linguists who are keen to create bird lists in their languages. And BirdLife South Africa is on the verge of agreeing a deal with a large international app developer to create a free isiZulu bird app.

“Ultimately, we want to have bird names in [all 11 languages](#),” says Thobela. “We started with isiZulu because of the pioneering work done by the pros and because Zulu is so widely spoken. But we want all South Africans to feel a connection with the birds that live around them.”

THE CURIOUS CASE OF FORGERIES OF AN AVIAN NATURE

Shaun Smillie 25 Jul 2023 Daily Maverick



An African cuckoo chick. (Photo: Claire Spottiswoode)

In a remote corner of Zambia, an arms race is being fought — and the loser could face the threat of extinction.

The arms race is over the eggs of the fork-tailed drongo, a common bird species found in South Africa that happens to be the only known host of the brood parasite, the African cuckoo.

For aeons, the African cuckoo has been laying near-perfect replica eggs in fork-tailed drongo nests. By tricking the drongos into believing the eggs are their own, they leave their hosts to rear their young. Once hatched, the cuckoo chick pushes the remaining eggs out of the nest and is fed by its foster parents, growing to twice the size of an average fork-tailed drongo.



A selection of fork-tailed drongo clutches that have been parasitised by African cuckoos. In each photo, the egg to the right is a cuckoo egg. (Photo: Claire Spottiswoode)

But now researchers have found that fork-tailed drongos in southern Zambia have developed an extraordinary eye for spotting these forgeries. Once identified, the cuckoo egg is turfed out of the nest and ends up on the ground.

“They seem to have a good idea of what their egg patterns look like, and they will throw out anything that doesn’t match that,” says lead researcher and zoology doctoral student, Jess Lund.

**A fork-tailed
drongo nest with
a cuckoo egg on
the bottom right.
(Photo: Jess
Lund)**



The team comprised researchers from the University of Cambridge and the University of Cape Town, working in collaboration with a community in Zambia. Their findings were published in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*.

Publication comes after four years of fieldwork in the Choma district in Zambia where the researchers were surprised to discover how closely African cuckoo and drongo eggs matched up. Sometimes they even had difficulty spotting the different eggs in drongo nests.

Still, drongos somehow seemed to be able to pick out the imposter eggs more often than not.

The scientists conducted several experiments and observations to get a measure of the African cuckoo's ability to trick its host into rearing its chick.

They first recorded the differences in colour and patterns of the fork-tailed drongo eggs and the cuckoo eggs. This confirmed that, on average, both were almost identical.



A newly hatched African cuckoo chick in a fork-tailed drongo nest, about to throw a drongo egg out of the nest. (Photo: Claire Spottiswoode)

Second, they conducted egg rejection experiments where they would place other fork-tailed drongo eggs into nests as a proxy for African cuckoo eggs.

From what they found, they were able to create a model that predicted how often an African cuckoo had its eggs rejected by a fork-tailed drongo. It was an astonishing 93.7%.

“So that was obviously very surprising because you can’t really have a sustainable population of females only fledging two chicks in her lifetime,” Lund explains.

The African cuckoo spends its winters in Central Africa before migrating to southern Africa to breed. It is estimated that the female African cuckoo will lay 20 eggs in a season.

Co-author of the paper Collins Moya lowers an African cuckoo chick from a tree in southern Zambia. After the chick was measured, it was returned to the nest. (Photo: Claire Spottiswoode)



The results of this study have puzzled the scientists because their research suggests the African cuckoo's poor success rate should mean it would be unable to sustain its population. However, the parasite remains a common bird throughout the continent.

It could be that the drongos of Choma have developed a keener eye in spotting forgeries than their compatriots elsewhere in Africa.

But it is an advantage Lund believes the drongos might not have for too long.

"It could be that they just have a very hard time in Zambia, and in other areas, they're much better off," says Lund. "But one could also look at this in terms of evolutionary cycles.

"So, if African cuckoos became rarer throughout Africa, then there would be less selection on fork-tailed drongos to be very good egg rejecters. If we relaxed the selection on African cuckoos, then that would allow their population to increase again." **DM**

Submitted by Peter van der Meer

WHITE-BREASTED WATERHEN

An alternative approach to reduce opinion, speculation, and conjecture.



From Trevor Hardaker: Dr. Rob Little sent through the piece below which offers yet another approach to things. I thought I would share it here, just so that everyone can read Dr Little's comments:



I have found the commentary by Trevor and Derek on the life history of White-breasted Waterhens interesting and applaud the effort put into the literature review entailed. However, with regards to the potential origin of the individual bird recently found near Tzaneen (July 2023), and for that matter of many vagrant individual birds found in Southern/South Africa, I think we need to take a step back and consider the biological relevance.

What is meaningful for conservation biology purposes is to have an inventory of the avifauna of a biogeographical region. This is useful for understanding species richness, biodiversity communities and ecosystem management approaches. The currency for this is largely *taxon based and often at the species level, although sub-species may also be important. In any event, to engage with species richness and avian community representation in a rigorous manner we need only to consider functional species present.

The temporary occurrence of individuals from species which do not otherwise occur in the region is largely irrelevant. That is whether they are rare vagrants or escapees. Although their occurrence may be fascinating and should be recorded in case their occurrence status changes in the long term, they should not be included in the biodiversity assessment of any region. I thus suggest that both for conservation biology and listing purposes there should be two separate lists - one for functional species and one for vagrants.

The functional species are relatively easy to determine, including residents, regular migrants, established wild breeding populations of introduced/escaped species and even extralimital species, such as the Yellow-throated Leafloves and Angola Cave Chats in northern Namibia for a Southern Africa list. The single Ross's Turaco near Rundu is questionable.

The vagrants should include species which occur only as occasional individual records. The debate around whether these individuals occur



because of natural self-movement or as escapees can then be given consideration. A somewhat more rigorous approach to this debate rather than speculation and conjecture might be to use stable isotope or other tested approaches to investigate their origin. But at the end of the day the occasional occurrence of single individuals of a species should not be regarded as a functional component of biodiversity.

Can I end by reiterating that I think it would be beneficial to separate the listing of functional species from vagrants for the presentation of Southern/South African avian biodiversity/species richness. This should also be reflected in both the compilation of bird field-guide books and for personal listing purposes.

I am also baffled why the birds of Marion Island are included in the South Africa avian species richness list, surely birds don't carry passports. I hope my comments offer a broader biologically based approach to listing and thereby reduce the importance of opinion, speculation, and conjecture. Perhaps the rarities committee could consider convening a workshop of interested parties to interrogate these issues and to develop an appropriate bird listing protocol for Southern/South Africa.

Rob Little

Dr R.M. Little

Trustee: Wild Bird Trust

Board: Mabula Ground Hornbill Project

Africa representative: IUCN SSC Galliformes Specialist Group

Retired: FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, UCT

*In [biology](#), a **taxon** ([back-formation](#) from [taxonomy](#); PL: **taxa**) is a group of one or more populations of an organism or organisms seen by taxonomists to form a unit. See Wikipedia for more information.

Submitted by Derek Townsend

OWAMBO SPARROW-HAWK, GAUTENG



Owambo Sparrowhawk in front of one of the superb late winter moon viewings.

Submitted by Mark Yammin



WEB PAGES TO INVESTIGATE

Submitted by Alex Jennings. She notes that though this insect hasn't arrived in SA, it very well might. Be Aware!

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-66333478>

ANIMALS

[Dog brains are tuned to dog-directed speech spoken by women](#)

[Meet The Fancy New Persian Gold Tarantula, With Locks Of Golden Hair | IFLScience](#)

BIRDS AND BIRDING

We've had a lot of info on feeding and watering birds, but here's some more from Martha Stewart believe it or not!

[How to Clean a Bird Bath \(marthastewart.com\)](#)

[For First Time, Crows Have Been Found To Use Statistical Inference To Make Decisions | IFLScience](#)

<https://latestsightings.com/single-post/baboons-hang-on-to-bridge-for-dear-life-to-avoid-lions-mala-mala-game-reserve>

(Open this one in your browser)

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/this-seabird-courtship-ritual-is-the-romance-of-the-summer/>

[Birds' fancy footwork may be explained by move into trees, say scientists | Evolution | The Guardian](#)

[Birds are using anti-bird spikes to build more secure nests \(newatlas.com\)](#)

PHOTOS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

[What you lookin' at? The winners of the Black and White Photo Awards 2023 \(newatlas.com\)](#)

<https://www.bbc.com/news/in-pictures-66706149>

<https://www.boredpanda.com/incredible-images-of-nature-photography-selected-by-aap-magazine/>



[Is Your Camera Strap Tied Incorrectly? Here's How It Should Be Done so Your Camera Doesn't Break | Fstoppers](#)

[The best black and white photography: 2023 Mono awards – in pictures | Art and design | The Guardian](#)

<https://contrastly.com/how-to-photograph-birds/>

These are birds of North America; the photos are stunning.
Our Favorite Female Bird Shots From the 2023 Audubon Photography Awards

[The 2023 Audubon Photography Awards: The Top 100 | Audubon\](#)

[30 Awesome Summertime Photography Examples to Set up Your Mood \(thephotargus.com\)](#)

MISCELLANEOUS

Now here's a useful addition to your pet family!

[Robotic dog turns up the heat with a flamethrower backpack \(newatlas.com\)](#)

[Xiaomi lets more pooch-like CyberDog 2 off the leash \(newatlas.com\)](#)

[The Anthropocene: Canadian lake mud 'symbolic of human changes to Earth' - BBC News](#)

[WAF shortlist highlights exceptional architecture from around the globe \(newatlas.com\)](#)

[Meteorite Strike Story Has Us Wondering, What Are Your Chances Of Getting Hit By One? | IFLScience](#)

[5 million-year-old fossils reveal 2 new species of saber-toothed cats in South Africa | Live Science](#)



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Technical Support/Online Host	Mike Hamilton

BANKING DETAILS

Cuckoo Bird Club
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NOTES

This newsletter is for members of the (Slightly) Cuckoo Bird Club only. It is not intended to be passed on to people outside the club.

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