



**CBC Newsletter 187 October - December 2024**

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## **FORTHCOMING CLUB MEETINGS**

**Every third Tuesday of the month**

**Next Meeting: 21 January 2025**

**19h00 for 19h30**

**Wanderer's Club**

**Come early and join us for supper in the restaurant.**

**Good food, great company!**

**NB You will need the code to enter the carpark. This is posted on the Cuckoo WhatsApp a few days before the meeting. If you have a problem, please contact [info@thecuckoobirdclub.org.za](mailto:info@thecuckoobirdclub.org.za)**

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## SPEAKERS

Organiser: Debbie Jennings

[deb.jiq@gmail.com](mailto:deb.jiq@gmail.com)



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## DAY OUTINGS

Organiser: Dennis Townsend

[dennis.townsend4@gmail.com](mailto:dennis.townsend4@gmail.com)



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## MID-MONTH OUTINGS

Organiser: Lester Niss

[lestern256@gmail.com](mailto:lestern256@gmail.com)



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## TRIPS AWAY

Organiser: Marion Melville

[marion@rbs.co.za](mailto:marion@rbs.co.za)





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## FROM THE CHAIR

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for a good and most enjoyable 2024.

Thanks to all the committee members for their time and efforts to ensure the club's success.

All outings, meetings and trips were well attended.

Have a good holiday season and all the best for 2024.

Looking forward to a good 2025 birding year.

Stay safe.

Dennis Townsend

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## EDITOR'S CHIRP

Maybe it's a bit late to try for the special offer on the Marion Island cruise, but you never know. There are often cancellations.

You might have noticed, we're now in 2025 and with hope in our birding hearts, we want to see those elusive lifers and so much more. Your committee will do their best to give you those opportunities.

There's a lot about penguins in the early pages of the newsletter. There are heartbreaking stories but there's still a chance to save them. Please donate if you can, or just spread the word. These are beautiful, appealing little birds and apart from holding an important place in the grander scheme of things, they give us a lot of pleasure.



Our end-of-year function was a great success. The weather was kind, and several members who've been absent for a while joined us. A big welcome back and we hope to see you again during the year. Thanks to Alex and Roy for the venue and for all the work they put in to make this a special day.

Thanks to all who contribute regularly to the content and to those who contribute now and again, thanks to you, too. This issue includes a couple of very interesting articles on birding in different parts of the sub-continent and the bird photographs throughout the newsletter are superb.

So, here's to lots of happy birding outings, weekends away and monthly meetings.

Have a brilliant 2025!

Editor

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## SANCOB

Dennis also brought the dire state of the African penguin to our attention. This is a sad and disappointing tale. If you think you can help, please follow up.

Below is a heart-rending story of some chicks and another about a patient with serious injuries who is now, thanks to SANCOB, rehabilitated.

### OUR PENGUINS NEED YOUR HELP! A MESSAGE FROM SANCOB

Dear Dennis

We reach out to you at a crucial time for the African penguin. This past month, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) declared the African Penguin Critically Endangered, one step away from extinction, marking an urgent plea to the world: **Without**



**immediate intervention, we could lose the African Penguin**

But there is hope. Last weekend, a group of African penguin chicks arrived at SANCCOB from Stony Point. Abandoned by their parents, **these chicks were found just in time by our seabird rangers**, saving them from predation and starvation. Now



in SANCCOB's care at Table View, they are being cared for until they're strong enough for release back into the wild. This is just the beginning of our 'chick season', during which we may admit hundreds of African penguin chicks annually in dire need of our intervention for their survival. When we admit them, many are weak and emaciated, and we then

have to hand rear and care for them for a minimum of 3 months until they have their juvenile feathers and are strong enough to be released into a colony. After that, their future is only as sure as the rest of their species. This is a sobering thought.

**An inspiring story of the resilience of the indomitable African penguin** is patient AP741, who was found in Yzerfontein nearly a year ago. This young penguin had



severe injuries to its face and back from a suspected predator attack. After 336 days of dedicated rehabilitation, multiple surgeries, numerous nights of not knowing if we could save him, and ongoing care from our SANCCOB team, AP741 proved himself to be a true fighter and was recently released back into the wild at the Stony Point Colony in

Betty's Bay. Like many others, he has been given a second chance at survival, but his future remains uncertain, unless we act now.



These are the stories that keep us fighting, but the African Penguin needs more than just hope. **The new Critically Endangered status calls for immediate action.** Commercial fishing depletes their food sources, and despite protected zones, more action is urgently needed.



To address this, **SANCCOB and BirdLife South Africa have launched landmark legal action**, advocating for larger and more effective no-take fishing zones and greater protection. The African Penguin, an essential part of our ecosystem and South African heritage, deserves a chance.

Here's How You Can Help:

1. Donate: Follow this link to help our cause. [DONATE HERE](#)
2. Adopt: You can choose to adopt an egg, rehabilitation patient or a permanent home pen resident to support or daily operational costs. [ADOPT A PENGUIN HERE](#)
3. Partner with us: You can partner with us by setting up a monthly debit order, so even when you are busy, our work can continue. [PARTNER HERE](#)
4. Sign the Petition: Join thousands in advocating for the African penguin by signing our petition [SIGN OUR PETITION HERE](#)

Your support is critical to ensure that these beloved birds do not become a distant memory.

Yours sincerely

**The SANCCOB Team**

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## BIRDLIFE NEWS

**From:** Alistair McInnes <[alistair.mcinnnes@birdlife.org.za](mailto:alistair.mcinnnes@birdlife.org.za)>

**Sent:** Monday, 28 October 2024 17:24

**To:** Forum <[forum@birdlife.org.za](mailto:forum@birdlife.org.za)>



**Subject:** African Penguin uplisted to Critically Endangered by IUCN

Good afternoon,



Today signifies an important but distressing marker in our persistent efforts to protect Africa's only penguin species. It has just been announced by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) that the African Penguin, among several other species, has been uplisted from **Endangered** to **Critically Endangered** - just one step away from extinction in the wild. The change in status is a result of the rapid decrease in penguin numbers over recent years, with the population having more than halved in the last decade. The uplisting to Critically Endangered by the IUCN is an important reminder of how crucial our work towards saving this species is, and we



cannot do it without wide awareness raising and support, as well as concerted efforts to put pressure on government to implement the interventions that will ensure that African Penguins are afforded a fighting chance of survival.

The press release ([Press release](#)) has been circulated to international and national media today and there will also be postings about the uplisting on our social media. Please amplify the message by liking and sharing our posts on X, Instagram and Linked-In.

If you have not already done so, sign the global petition at <http://only.one/act/save-african-penguins>, and encourage donations via our website <https://www.birdlife.org.za/african-penguin-conservation/#donate>.

Thank you for your ongoing support for our work.

Kind regards

Alistair

Birdlife South Africa

# INFO ON EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES IN 2024

This is what we did this year

2024



Members: R20; Guests: R40  
Come early and join us for supper in the restaurant.  
Good food, great company! (for your own account)

Please let Lester know if you are attending.  
No specific cost but all entrance fees, transport and refreshments for your own account

Please let Dennis know if you are attending.  
No specific cost but all entrance fees, transport and refreshments for your own account

Away trips must be booked and paid for in advance. Arrangements vary as appropriate for each trip.

MONTH	Usually 3rd Tuesday of the month Evening Meetings at Wanderers (6:30 for 7:00)	Usually 3rd Thursday of the month Lester's mid-week walks	Usually last Sunday of the month Dennis's Sunday outings	Marion's away trips and other events
January	16 Jan 2024 Tue Mike Hamilton: Walking 500 km in Eastern Zimbabwe - Blue Cross Challenge	18 Jan 2024 Thu Random Harvest Nursery	28 Jan 2024 Sun Marievale summer CWAC (Co-ordinated Water Bird Count)	before end of January Annual subs to be paid Individual - R320 Couple - R420
February	20 Feb 2024 Tue Ernst Retief BirdLasser 101	15 Feb 2024 Thu Lonehill Park	25 Feb 2024 Sun Faerie Glen Nature Reserve, Pretoria	
March	19 Mar 2024 Tue AGM & Lester's world famous Quiz!	14 Mar 2024 Thu (moved from 21st Mar - Public holiday) Johannesburg Zoo	24 Mar 2024 Sun (moved from 31st Mar - Public holiday) Bishop Bird Park, Rooihuiskraal	Fri 5 - Sun 7 April 2024 Wolfhuiskraal (Marion Melville)
April	16 Apr 2024 Tue Francesca Parrini: The challenges of managing herbivores in confined reserves	18 Apr 2024 Thu (Dennis Townsend) Delta Park	28 Apr 2024 Sun Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve	
May	21 May 2024 Tue Natasha Lyon Bees and Honey	16 May 2024 Thu Cumberland Bird Sanctuary in Bryanston	26 May 2024 Sun Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve	
June	18 Jun 2024 Tue Melissa Whitecross Grassland Birds of Gauteng	20 Jun 2024 Thu Norscot Koppies Kingfisher Nature Reserve	30 Jun 2024 Sun The Aloe Farm, Hartbeesport R104	
July	16 Jul 2024 Tue Mark Yammin Gorongosa and Coutada National Parks	18 Jul 2024 Thu Golden Harvest Park in Randburg	28 Jul 2024 Sun Marievale winter CWAC (Co-ordinated Water Bird Count) - Lester Niss	Saturday 13 July 2024 Beaulieu winter CWAC (Co-ordinated Water Bird Count)
August	20 Aug 2024 Tue Jessica Wilmot BLSA European Roller project	15 Aug 2024 Thu	25 Aug 2024 Sun Roodplaas Nature Reserve (Southern Section)	Saturday 24 August 2024 Bird Fair Woodmead Country Club
September	17 Sep 2024 Tue Johna Turner & Mark Yammin Trip to Caprivi 2023	19 Sep 2024 Thu James and Ethel Gray Park in Birdhaven	29 Sep 2024 Sun Modderfontein Nature Reserve	Fri 20 - Sun 22 September 2024 Sediba Lodge, near Brits including Lance Robinson training (Dennis)
October	15 Oct 2024 Tue Nicholas Newman Birding in Colour	17 Oct 2024 Thu Outspan Bird Sanctuary in Morningside	27 Oct 2024 Sun Eastern end of the Magaliesberg in Wonderboom, Northern Pretoria (Steve Stevenson)	
November	19 Nov 2024 Tue John Gibbs Sharing the Skies: Bird Life and Renewable Energy	21 Nov 2024 Thu Gillooly's Farm in Bedfordview	24 Nov 2024 Sun Kloofendal Nature Reserve in Roodepoort	
December				Sun 01 Dec 2024 Year End Function
December				Fri 6 Dec 2024 - Sun 8 Dec 2024 Wolfhuiskraal for Big Birding Day (Bev Williams)

Debbie Jennings

## BIRDLIFE SA

Chance of a lifetime!



No images?

**BirdLife**  
SOUTH AFRICA  
Giving Conservation Wings

**BirdLife**  
IS FLOCKING TO MARION  
ONBOARD MSC MUSICA !

STARTING FROM **R 8 316\*** P.P (7 NIGHTS) (Excl Mandatory Fees)

**Flock to Marion with BirdLife South Africa | Last-Minute Deal**

Join us again on the ultimate birding expedition aboard the luxurious MSC Musica, setting sail on **24 January 2025**. This 7-day voyage will take you to the remote and pristine **Marion Island**, halfway to Antarctica, where nature's most elusive seabirds thrive.



### Why Join This Exclusive Cruise?

#### Birding Paradise:

Spot rare seabirds like **Wandering Albatross**, **Sooty Albatross**, **Grey-headed Albatross**, and **Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross**, among others.

#### Marine Marvels:

Encounter majestic marine life, from **Blue Whales** and beaked whales to playful penguins such as **King**, **Macaroni**, and **Rockhopper Penguins**.

#### Expert-Led Discovery:

Learn from over **60 professional bird guides** and **world-renowned seabird experts**, including **Peter Harrison MBE**, **Hadoram Shirihai**, and **Professor Peter Ryan**, through insightful lectures and on-deck guidance.

#### Support Conservation:

Help fund BirdLife South Africa's conservation project to **eradicate invasive mice** on **Marion Island**, safeguarding crucial seabird breeding grounds.

### Your Expedition Highlights:

- **Departure:** 24 January 2025 from Durban, South Africa
- **Duration:** 7 Days | **Return:** 31 January 2025
- **Price:** Starting from ~~R15,869~~ **R8316\*** per person (Excl. mandatory fees)

### Why This Trip Matters:

Seabirds like **albatrosses** and **petrels** are among the toughest birds to spot due to their remote habitats. This cruise offers a rare chance to see dozens of **Southern Ocean species** while supporting vital conservation efforts.

**Reserve Your Spot Now Call 011 844 6073!**

Join us on this much anticipated annual journey into the heart of the **Southern Ocean**. Spaces are limited, **secure your cabin today** and be part of this extraordinary adventure.

**Connect with Nature | Support Conservation | Discover the Unseen**

### Terms and Conditions:

- **BirdLife Last Minute Deal** is valid for new bookings made from 12 December'24 - 20 January'25.



- All rates are per person, based on 2 people sharing a 2-berth Deluxe Interior Experience cabin.
- Other cabin categories are available.
- Entertainment fee of R1500.00 per person
- All advertised rates exclude mandatory fees and subject to availability, foreign exchange and fuel cost fluctuations.
- All cruise offers are capacity-controlled and offer selected cabins at a specific price in line with MSC Cruises' Dynamic Pricing Policy.
- The advertised rates do not include flights which are available upon request.
- Promotions are not combinable with each other but are combinable with the MSC Voyagers Club discount (excluding Voyagers Exclusives).
- Single supplement applies.
- Prices are correct at the time of submission.
- ST&Cs apply.
- E&OE.

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## **BIRDLIFE NEWS**

### **Birding Big Day**

The winning team recorded 329 species. They birded in Southern Kruger, Komatipoort, Malelane area

The Cuckoo club had three teams in Wolfhuiskraal.

The Cuckoos recorded 107 species

Steve, Lester and Heather

The Jacobin Cuckoos recorded 72 species

Alex, Roy, Kathy & Dennis

The Jacobins recorded 68 species  
Bev, Sue, Penny, Mo & Debbie

Dennis Townsend

Photos follow on the next page.

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## WEEKENDS AWAY

Wolfhuiskraal, December 2024



*African Snipe*



*Great Spotted Cuckoo*



*African Spoonbill*



*African Pipit*



*Capped Wheatear*



*Barn Swallow and Caspian Tern*



*Three-banded Plover*



*Barn Swallow*



*Capped Wheatear*



*Red-billed Teal*



*Three-banded Plover*



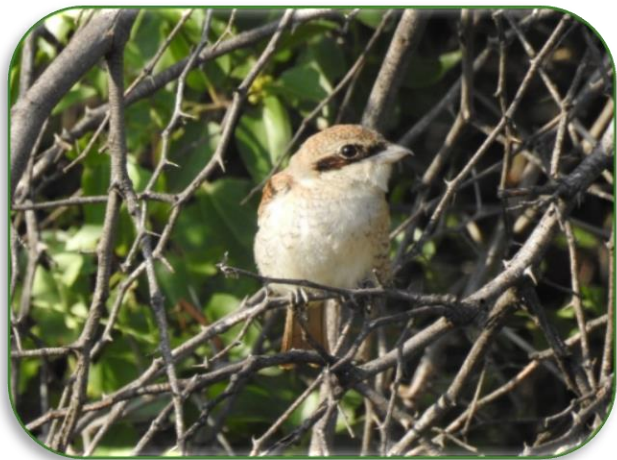
*Juvenile Fish Eagles*



*Black Cuckoo*



*Diederick Cuckoo*



*Red-backed Shrike*



*Burchell's Starling*



*Ruff*

Heather Darby

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**MONTHLY OUTINGS**

Wonderboom Nature Reserve



*Neddicky*



*White-browed Sparrow-weaver*



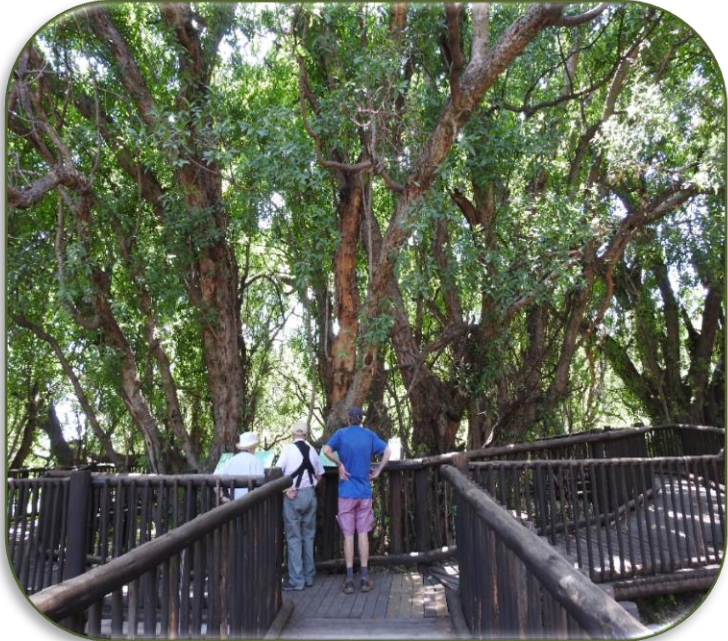
*European Bee-eater*



*View of Pretoria*



*Very dry landscape*



*The Wonderboom Tree*



*The Old Fort*

**Heather Darby**

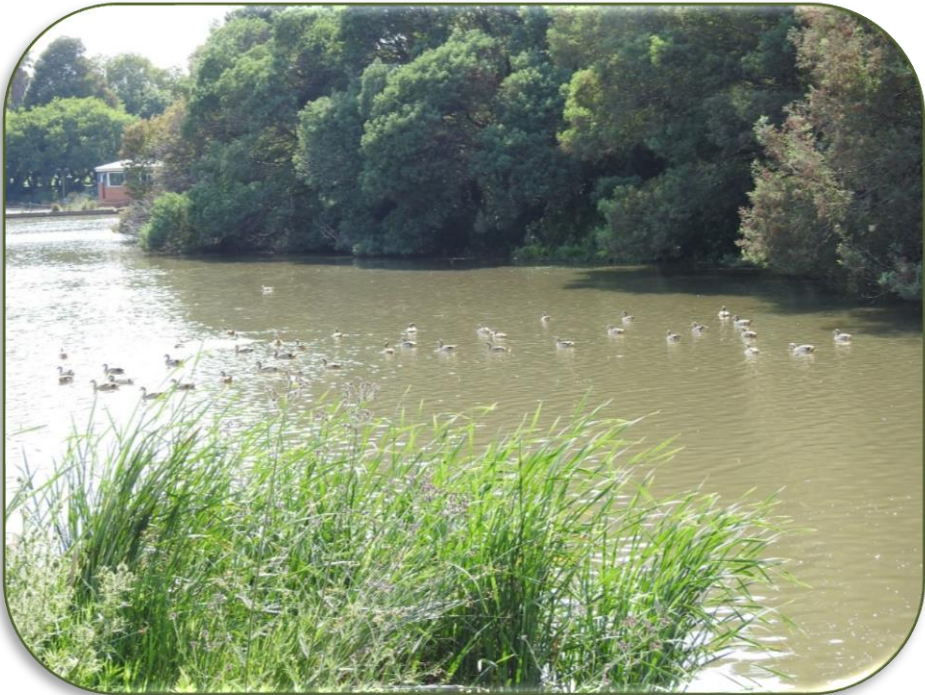
## MID-MONTH OUTING

### Gilloolies Farm

This was a lovely morning and although there were only five of us, we saw more than 30 birds. Most enjoyable.







Heather Darby

## HONEY – FROM FLOWER TO JAR

How many flowers does it take to make a teaspoon of honey?



*Bees visit thousands of flowers and fly vast distances to produce the honey we consume daily. Picture: Kathy\_Büscher/pixabay*

**The journey of honey from flower to jar is an extraordinary feat of nature, requiring remarkable cooperation, precision, and effort from bees.**

Honey production is a result of meticulous teamwork within a hive, where each bee plays a vital role in converting nectar into the golden liquid prized worldwide.

For a single teaspoon of honey, a bee must visit approximately 5,000 flowers. This effort requires flying nearly 80 kilometres, totalling around 55,000 combined flight hours when factoring in the work of an entire hive.

Each bee produces only about one-twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in its lifetime; it will take 12 bees their entire lives to produce a teaspoon of honey. Granted, the typical worker bee lives for around five to six weeks.

Bees collect nectar from flowers using their specialised tongues and store it in their honey stomachs, separate from their main stomachs.



Upon returning to the hive, the nectar is passed mouth-to-mouth among worker bees, reducing its water content and transforming it into a thicker substance. Once deposited into honeycomb cells, bees fan their wings to further evaporate moisture, ensuring the honey's preservation.

The purpose of honey production is survival. Bees create honey as a long-term food source, particularly to sustain their colony during winter months when flowers are scarce. This natural storage system is essential for maintaining hive strength and productivity.

Bees will produce honey indefinitely. A natural hive, usually built on branches of a tree or on a cliffside, will have the space to expand without the bees having to find a new location.

If a beekeeper doesn't harvest the honey, the colony will probably swarm as it rapidly outgrows the hive. It will search for a new location to start building a new home. If the bees don't swarm, the excess honey they're housing could be targeted by other bee colonies and insects - like ants.

**Dennis Naidoo**  
**IOL November 2024**

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## **BIRDING MKUZE, NDUMU AND ATLASSING NORTHERN KZN**

I took the brave step to sign up for my first Atlassing outing, which was organised by BirdLife in northern KZN. The Atlassing was designed to cover lesser Atlassed pentads close to Mbazwana. Once the decision was taken, it seemed a waste not to combine the Atlassing with other birding, so the trip was extended to include the Mkuze and Ndumu Game Reserves. For six days my sister-in-law and I birded these three areas in diverse weather conditions - rain, wind and extreme heat. To answer

the obvious question at the start – about 185 species in total with significant overlap of species in the different areas.



*Red-billed Oxpeckers*



*Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow*

**Mkuze Game Reserve (about three days and 120 species).**

Mkuze was a pleasant surprise. The Matuma Camp accommodation was good, and the unfenced area always had impala, nyala and occasionally a bull elephant wandering about. The road system is not extensive, but there are five good hides to watch mammals and birds. The highlight of Mkuze (and the whole trip) was a walk through the Fig Forest on the Mkuze River, which included a short aerial boardwalk section. The forest was alive with the calls of Trumpeter Hornbills, Red-chested



*Trumpeter Hornbill in the fig tree forest*



*Red-breasted Swallow*



*Grey Waxbills*



*Squacco Heron at Mkuze's Insumo Pan*

Cuckoos, Red-capped Robin-chats and others. Specials were the Narina Trogon, White-eared Barbet and Dark-backed Weaver. This walk can only be done with a guide. Four species dominated the large flora of the forest – Sycamore Fig, Quinine Tree, Natal Mahogany and Fever Tree. The beautiful Insumo Pan (with two hides) had few waterbirds, but we visited on a windy day. We saw White-breasted Cormorant, Goliath Heron, Squacco Heron and Whiskered Tern. The pans in the savanna areas were a good location for many different species, Grey Waxbill being the special. Lesser-striped Swallows were in abundance over the whole reserve.



*Lesser-striped Swallow skimming at Mkuze's Kusaminga pan at dusk.*

**Ndumu Game Reserve (about two days and 100 species).**

The accommodation at Ndumu was another pleasant surprise with the chalets and campsite all very comfortable.



*Ndumu's beautiful Nyamithi pan from the Ezulweni hide*

The vegetation at Ndumu is very dense and the road system very limited so birding was difficult. The most beautiful feature is Nyamithi Pan. Unfortunately, there is only one point from which the pan can be seen, and it is from a hide situated quite a long

way from the water. Great White Pelicans, White-faced Ducks and Egyptian Geese were seen from a distance. A second hide has been closed for a number of years and why more hides have not been constructed is beyond understanding. We had a chance to walk through the unique Sand Forest and Pongola Riverine Forest, both of which must be done with a guide. A group we met walked the Riverine Forest four times unsuccessfully searching for Pel's Fishing Owl. The highlight of Ndumu was several good sightings of Tambourine Doves.



*Tambourine Doves are quite common in Ndumu*

### Guides

The issue of guides at both Mkuze and Ndumu was quite frustrating. We visited Mkuze at both the beginning and end of the trip for logistical reasons. During our first



*A pair of Common Scimitar-bills feeding their young*

stay at Mkuze the guide was on holiday, so we were only able to do the fig forest walk on the second stay. There is no backup guide, so the walks just stop – tough luck if that is when you visit the reserve!! The walk done on the second stay was far too short to do justice to the magic of the fig forest and my feeling was that the guide (been there 30 years and

very knowledgeable) just wanted to get it over with.

At Ndumu there were two guides taking a maximum of eight guests per guide (walking restrictions). With the thick bush, limited road system and prime areas only accessible with guides, the guides are in demand. The Sand Forest is the only location for Rudd’s Apalis and other special birds and trees, and Pel’s Fishing Owl is seen in the Pongola Riverine Forest. Why visitors cannot self-drive through the sand forest and riverine forest is a mystery. We were told that the guides could only be booked on arrival at the reserve. When we arrived one group of four guests had booked one of the guides for four days. On the day of our walk, when the guests gathered it happened that the guides were overbooked (second guide had been allocated ten guests) so guest juggling had to take place.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the guide issues. Be aware if you are planning a trip and don’t be disappointed.

**Mbazwana Atlassing (about two days, four pentads and between 30 and 60 species in each pentad).**

For convenience we stayed at the very pleasant self-catering Toad Tree Cabins from where we travelled to the target pentads. Atlassing was hard work, trying to identify every bird by sight or call. A full protocol card



*Red-fronted Tinkerbird*

is defined as birding for a minimum of two hours in a pentad, visiting all habitats. We found it required three to four hours to achieve meaningful coverage of the pentad, and the species count increased by more than 50% when the Atlassing time was doubled. where we travelled to the target pentads. Atlassing was hard work, trying to identify every bird by sight or call. A full protocol card is defined as birding for a minimum of two hours in a pentad, visiting all habitats. We found it required three to

four hours to achieve meaningful coverage of the pentad, and the species count increased by more than 50% when the Atlassing time was doubled.

The area is rural KZN, and we used 1:50000 maps and Tracks 4 Africa to try and find our way around on the many tracks. All of this contributed to only being able to cover four pentads, although pentads are small.

One of the pentads included a section of Lake Sibaya. It was extremely beautiful but almost devoid of waterbirds. The highlight birds of the Atlassing were Eastern Golden Weavers and Lemon-breasted Canaries.



*Lemon-breasted Canary*

After submitting the cards, we got 12 OFRs (out of range) notifications, which meant we had to justify those identifications. More hard work but comfort that the SABAP2 process is very thorough. And a great learning experience.

Overall, the birding was a little below expectations. We had hoped for a better count, especially on waterbirds. There were also few raptors. But it is always interesting to experience and bird a new area - and wonder what the count would have been if the time had been spent in a different place?

**Johna Turner**



## HWANGE OCTOBER 2024

Here's some feedback on Tim Brebner's recent trip to Hwange for the game count.

The count is organised by WEZ (Wildlife and Environment Zimbabwe) who provide a detailed analysis of the count about six weeks after the count.

Instead of this detailed analysis, I have attached a report by Friends of Hwange (the trust my brother works with) which gives you some information on how the count went as well as some photographs of what was seen. Friends of Hwange raises funds via donation which it uses to install solar powered borehole pumps in the park. The park is very dry currently after a terrible drought but, thanks to the pumps, all the pans I saw had nice pools of water in them. They are currently adding batteries to their solar pumps so that water is pumped using solar during the day and then using batteries at night.

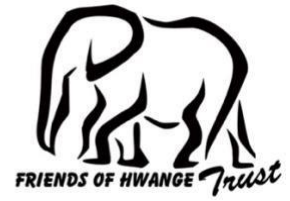
Apart from the 24 hours of the count, when we saw 160 elephant, a big herd of Wildebeest and a few other species, I was camping in the park for another four nights so in total we saw an abundance of game. In addition to a huge number of elephant, about 20 lion, a beautiful leopard, a Sable bull, Roan antelope, a big herd of buffalo and many of the plains game. People we were camped with saw about 20 wild dog and a cheetah but unfortunately, we did not.

I had forgotten how beautiful Hwange is.

**Tim Brebner**

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# Friends of Hwange Trust



## HWANGE GAME COUNT 2024



Zimbabwe experienced a disastrous 2023/24 rainy season culminating in the worst drought we have experienced in decades, so the prospect of doing the annual 24-hour game count in Hwange wasn't as appealing as usual.

The count was held in the middle of October when the heat is usually at its most oppressive. However, meeting up with close friends, seeing some lovely animals, and having great birding whilst making new memories is always very special, and the sunrises and sunsets are spectacular.

It was a delight to find a pack of twenty-five pretty painted dogs, including a number of adorable pups, resting in the shade along the road into Main Camp. The dogs were in prime condition, their full bellies evidence of a successful morning hunt.



Once checked in, it was no surprise to find the Park exceptionally dry although the waterpoints in the Main Camp area where our team was based, were managing to keep up with high demand from plenty of animals, most notably large numbers of elephants.

There was very little food to be had anywhere near the pans. The bush was parched and arid although several species of tree and bush were beginning to leaf. The delicate gold, lime and orange leaves of the Mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*) were starting to shoot and as always, the Camelthorn trees (*Acacia erioloba*) were out in full leaf, showing up like beacons amongst all the grey and brown. The vleis were almost grassless and dust flew everywhere. Elephant herds dominated with many young afoot. An unusual number of very tiny, newborn elephant calves were evident perhaps pointing towards premature births as a result of stress. We wonder,



how many will survive before rains come.

On the way to our count, we were treated to a stunning view of a beautiful female leopard. At first, she remained well hidden behind a blue bush (*Diospyros lycioides*), but she obliged us by

sauntering out, stalking imaginary prey and looking all around her before lithely scaling up a nearby tree. She made herself comfortable before gazing out with tawny yellow eyes at the vehicles lined up along the road – a perfectly posed queen overlooking an admiring audience. What a gorgeous cat!

The first recorded mammal on the count sheet was a stream of wildebeest, well over eighty in number, some of which stopped to drink while others sauntered on to cross the railway line further along. A family of eight zebra were next and numerous herds of elephant followed, visiting the pan at intervals during the night.

Those people “off duty” didn’t manage much rest due to the constant grumbles, arguments and shrieks of the “hobos of bobos” (lots of baboons) roosting close by in the trees. Black-backed Jackal and a Spotted Hyena were heard away in the distance, but very little else was recorded after dark except for two cute bushbabies peering over the branches close to us.



Morning saw a visit from a few impala, some kudu and more wildebeest, a family of warthogs and a lovely herd of 280 buffalo including many young, that appeared out of a billowing dust cloud.



The birding was excellent, not so much in numbers of species but in quality. An impressive pair of Saddle-billed Storks lingered around the periphery for the duration. Then we heard a loud whooshing sound over our heads as a magnificent Martial Eagle dived from the sky behind us like a jet fighter,

attempting to grab a Helmeted Guineafowl. Although the kill wasn’t successful, the sound was astoundingly loud, it’s speed amazing to see, scattering the guineafowl in a noisy clatter.

Shortly thereafter, a stunning Dark Chanting Goshawk descended to sip gracefully from the clean water flowing into the pan.

The trees were alive with a variety of little birds. We picked up a surprising number of Red-headed Weavers in various stages of maturity along with Violet-backed

Starlings, Cape Glossy Starlings, a Black-headed Oriole, a pair of Scimitarbills and a family of Green Woodhoopoes fossicking about and chattering incessantly. There was a never-ending stream of Yellow-fronted Canaries, Black-throated Canaries, Yellow-throated Petronias, a few Black-eared Seedeaters, Golden-breasted Buntings, Southern Grey-headed Sparrows and crowds of Cape Turtle Doves coming to the water to drink. A lone Black-winged Stilt waded about in the pan and a Hamerkop popped in briefly towards evening. Just after dark, a pair of Black-headed Herons appeared and had a noisy altercation on the edge of the pan before taking off while still grumbling and shouting. A startlingly handsome Melanistic Gabar Goshawk snatched a Cape-Turtle Dove at the water's edge and as it scuttled under a nearby bush to pluck and begin feeding, two other Gabar Goshawks arrived to stand with feet in the water quite some time. The brilliant yellow of an African Golden Oriole grabbed our attention when that gorgeous avian came for a drink.



After the count, we caught up with a large herd of buffalo that had been roaming along the Kennedy vlei for a few days and further along, we found lion feeding on a two-day old elephant carcass. Most of the fifteen cats sighted had obviously had their fill and were off to seek some shade for the day. There were several trees loaded with vultures awaiting their turn at the feast.

We found a majestic Sable bull with a fine set of horns, cautiously making his way down to drink at Kennedy Two pan, and further along the vlei a stunning cheetah male was seen sunning himself on the ridge of an anthheap.



We ended our stay in the park at Guvalala enjoying the facilities of the refurbished platform. A lone hippo inhabited the pan whilst a variety of animals came to drink throughout the day. Stately giraffe, cautious kudu, a sounder of warthogs, some



glossy impala, several hesitant roan antelope, a troop of baboons, a number of nocturnal hyaena whooping and cavorting in and around the water, a dazzle of zebra and, of course, a never-ending stream of elephants visited the pan. The battery system that has been installed successfully provided water throughout the night.

Waking at dawn, we noticed what looked like a young dead elephant stuck in the thick, black, sticky mud. After observing it for a while, it moved, curled up its trunk, writhed in the mud and gave a heart wrenching gurgle. It was still alive! A lone adult elephant cow close by, that we erroneously assumed to be its mother, kept vigil, watching over the calf.

Acting quickly, we eventually managed to get a message through to Jason at Main Camp to bring his Friends of Hwange (FOH) team urgently, with several sets of straps that were recently donated expressly for animal rescue. The team arrived about an hour later and, keeping a watchful eye on the hippo that was taking

marked interest in the activity, as well as the lone elephant cow and her companion that appeared on the scene as soon as our interest in the calf became evident, the rescue operation began. Using the FOH Land cruiser, it took about 30 minutes to attach the straps to the calf and pull it successfully out of the mud.

Fortunately, the victim was not very big, so use of a tractor was not necessary. Once released from its glue-trap, the exhausted little animal rested for a while, mustering up enough energy to struggle to its feet. As it gained its balance, it slowly ventured forth to join up with the two elephant cows that stood waiting patiently close by.



It was interesting to note that the mother of the calf (the second cow to arrive on the scene) was not the least bit sympathetic, nor did she appear visibly pleased to be reunited with her sorry-looking offspring. She lifted her head, sniffed at the calf, then immediately turned on her tail and headed straight back into the bush with her muddy, traumatised, baby trailing some distance behind. Our most grateful thanks to Jason and his team for yet another job well done.



Although there are a few weeks to go yet before the onset of the rains brings relief to this tremendously difficult season, we're pleased to note relatively few elephant deaths to date. Let's hope the Park enjoys a favourable rainy season ahead.

Sincere appreciation must be extended to the following:

- WEZ Matabeleland Branch for organizing and running the 2024 Game Count.
- Global Humane Conservation Fund of Africa for the donation of animal rescue straps.
- The Director General of ZPWMA, Dr Fulton Mangwanya and all the staff at Main Camp for their assistance and co-operation. All work is undertaken in close collaboration with ZimParks.

**Jenny Brebner and Paula Dell**

**Images – David Dell**



*D.Dell; B.Edwards; B.Wolhuter; S.Danks; K. Jenkins; G. J. Brebner*

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## THE CREATURE FEATURE



## SMART ECO PLAN

## Wasps help endangered birds

NA striking example of how conservation projects can help ensure the survival of species, one of the world's rarest bird species, the Wilkins' bunting/finch, has received a lifeline in the form of a tiny wasp.

These birds are found only on the isolated Nightingale Island in the South Atlantic Ocean, where their plant food source was threatened by invasive insects.

Scientists embarked on an epic journey of 10 000km over land, sea and air to transport the wasps to the island so they could control the plant pest and help the finches survive.

On Nightingale Island, these birds have always feasted on the fruits of the *phylica arborea*, the island's only native tree. But by 2011, researchers discovered that non-native sap-sucking insects had been accidentally brought to the pristine island by humans.

The pest secretes honeydew, which causes a mould to grow on the trees, eventually killing them.

The invaders threatened an en-

tire forest and, with it, a small feathered population with extinction. This was very distressing for the team of experts who had spent years researching the small green-yellow birds and trying to protect their numbers.

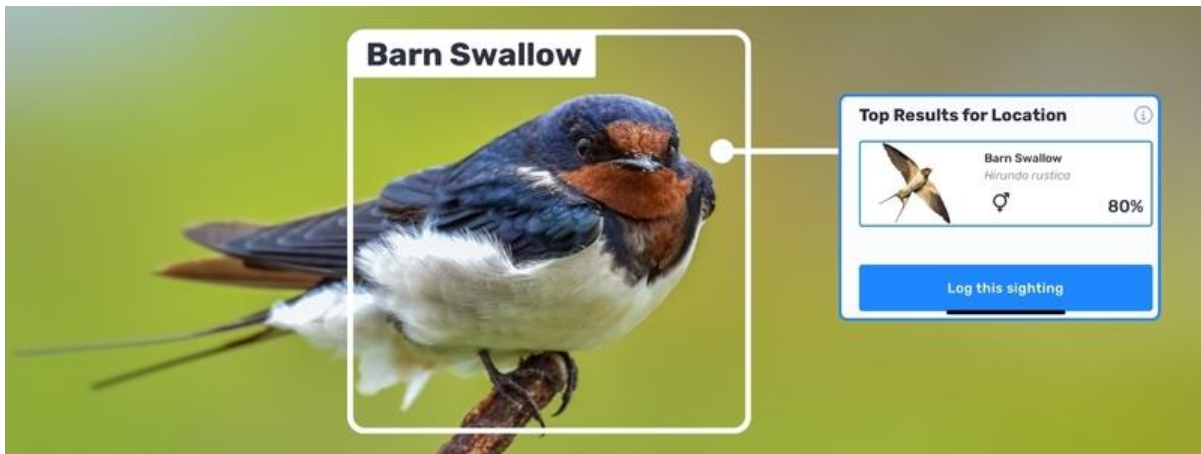
Researchers devised their unusual rescue plan to release *Microterys nietneri* wasps on the island, which would prevent the scale insects from breeding.

Easier said than done. It would ultimately involve a month-long journey from London to Cape Town, with the wasps in a cooler bag, and then by sea to Tristan da Cunha island and finally to Nightingale Island. Only about 10% of the wasps survived the journey. The first ones were released in 2021.

According to a review of the results this month, the project was a success. The Nightingale Island forest has already significantly recovered, allowing the Wilkins' finch population to begin stabilising, and scientists now expect significant recovery in their numbers over the next two years.

## BIRDA NEWS

Birda sent the following information through last month. As you can see, this works in Southern Africa. I haven't checked it out yet, but please let me know if you do, and what you experienced.



What's that bird?

Bird identification just got a whole lot easier. Whether you're a seasoned birder exploring new habitats or a beginner getting to know your backyard visitors, Birda's Photo AI tool is here to help.

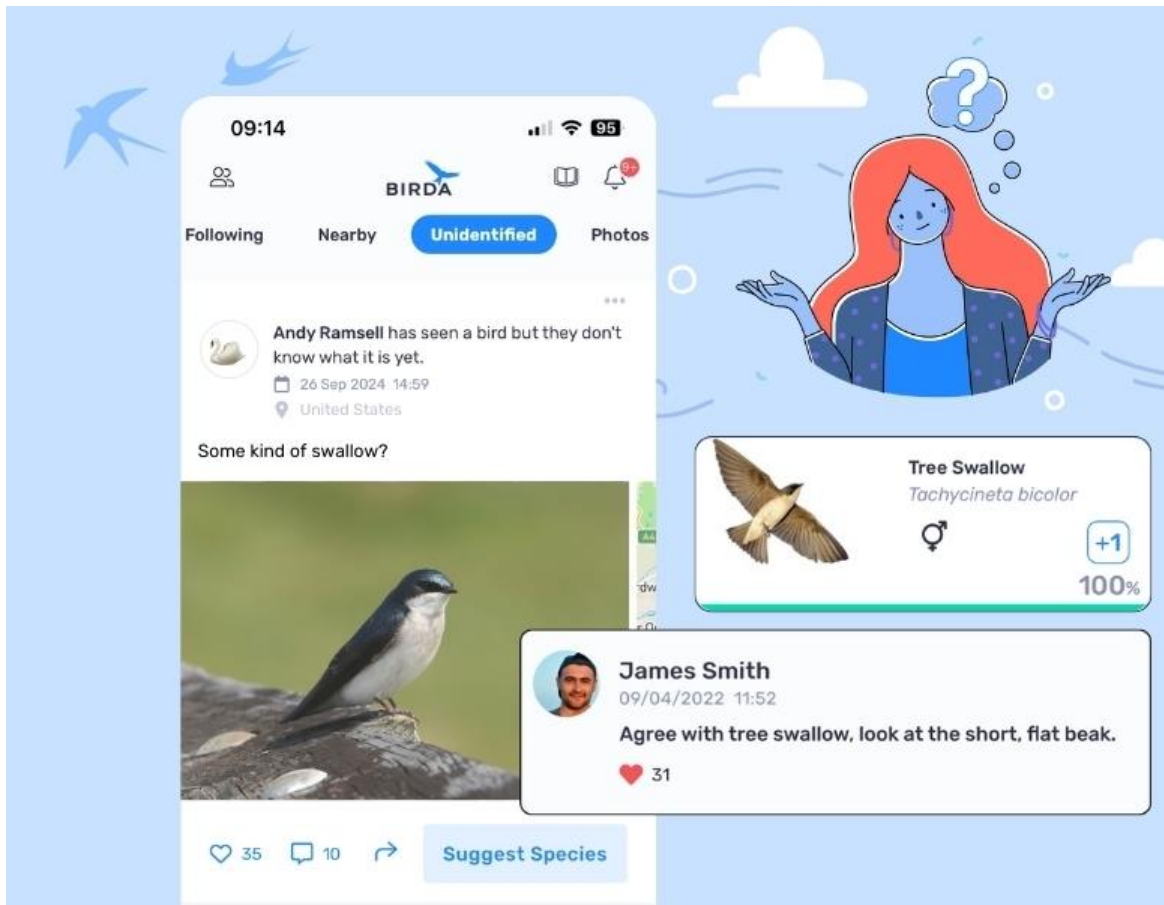
How does it work?

**Snap a Photo:** See a bird you don't recognise? Just take a quick picture using your smartphone.

**Upload to Birda:** Open the Birda app, hit the plus button and upload your photo. Make sure you choose the correct location and time to get the most accurate results.

**Get Instant Results:** Birda's AI will analyse the image and provide you with the bird's name and a confidence rating.

**Post Your Sighting:** Share your bird sighting on Birda to add it to your personal records. Plus, this data helps conservation researchers monitor bird populations and protect wildlife—bonus.



Tap into the community

Not quite sure about the AI's identification? No problem! Birda has an amazing community brimming with bird knowledge. Birda's AI Photo ID is a new feature, and while it currently has strong [species coverage](#) in North America, Europe, and Southern Africa, we're working hard to expand to other regions soon. In the meantime, if you're outside these areas or if the AI tool can't help, you can always turn to our community for expert opinions and advice. It's like having a team of birding enthusiasts right in your pocket, no matter where you are.

[Get Started](#)



## DIGGING INTO THE FIRST WORK OF MODERN ECOLOGY

**What Carl Linnaeus can teach us about animal appetites.**

BY CHARLES DIGGES, November 13, 2024

Anyone who remembers that King Philip came over from Germany stoned owes a debt of gratitude to 18th-century polymath Carl Linnaeus. That cannabis-scented mnemonic device from high school biology class refers, of course, to the taxonomic ranks of kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species—the system of classifying the natural world from least to most specific. We are genus *homo*, species *sapiens* because of Linnaeus' *Systema naturæ*, which, when published in 1735, brought some order to our sprawling family trees—not only for us, but the trees, too, and every living thing in between.

After classifying who belongs where, Linnaeus, in 1749, set out to compose a massive thesis about who eats what. Published in Latin as *Pan Svecicus*, this wide-ranging botanical study of the Nordic countryside sought to give Swedish farmers hard data on which plants their grazing animals liked to munch on. It was a remarkable doorstop of a work that was far ahead of its time, Håkan Rydin, an emeritus professor of plant ecology at Sweden's Uppsala University tells me. By examining the interplay between plants, the animals that ate them, and the places they grew, Linnaeus unwittingly conducted the first work of modern ecology. But *Pan Svecicus* was also a mess.

As one of Linnaeus' lesser-known works, written originally in dense Latin, *Pan Svecicus* presented a staggering amount of data that Linnaeus never really got around to analyzing, says Rydin. It describes 2,325 experiments involving 643 different plant species, but largely ignores what useful things the data suggest. So, Rydin and co-authors recently undertook a study of their own, which was published in September, to bring some tidiness to Linnaeus' little known work.



*Photo by Wirestock Creators / Shutterstock.*

**HUNGRY AS A GOAT:** Carl Linnaeus' early work of ecology revealed that goats will eat just about anything. They consumed 85 percent of the flora they were offered, including many plants considered "toxic."

Within the thickets of information recorded in the Swedish countryside by Linnaeus and dozens of his students, Rydin's team discovered some interesting facts that for 275 years had gone more or less unnoticed.

For one thing, it turns out that pigs are exceptionally picky eaters. They ate only 32 percent of the 204 plant species they were fed in Linnaeus' study. On the other extreme, goats eat just about anything, consuming 85 percent of the flora they were offered. Sandwiched in the middle were horses, cows, and sheep. What the ruminant animals chose to eat, Rydin discovered, overlapped significantly, but the pigs had tastes that deviated from that norm. This was a surprising result, says Rydin. As omnivores, pigs weren't thought to be very selective, then or now. But the opposite is true. Their rooting behavior, in fact, often leads them past green leaves to the roots and worms that Linnaeus' data showed was more to their liking.

The farm animals generally preferred plants from the orders of Fabales—which contains species such as peas, beans, alfalfa, and clover—and Poales—which



includes the staple grains like rice, wheat, and barley. But pretty much all of the animals steered clear of things like sage, mint, basil, poppies, and buttercups—plants of the orders Lamiales and Ranunculales. Horses and cows, meanwhile, were keener to avoid plant species presumed toxic to livestock, such as northern water hemlock, unlike goats and pigs, while all animals showed a preference for species that are today considered nutritious.

This confirmed what scientists knew back in the 18th century. But back then, they could not have known why: that the animals are drawn to nitrogen fixing mutualists—or small bacteria living symbiotically with legumes—that were ringing the dinner bell. Had Linnaeus analyzed his data with current statistical methods, he might have uncovered these facts, which would have helped farmers select better plant species for their grazing meadows. “But this was long before biologists knew about statistics,” says Rydin.

### **Linnaeus unwittingly conducted the first work of modern ecology.**

So, what compelled Rydin and his team to disgorge these bits of barnyard wisdom from a chaotic study that’s been collecting dust for nearly 300 years? Basically, it was simple curiosity stoked by another project Rydin was working on, he tells me. While preparing a text on Linnaeus and ecology for Swedish schools, he ran across a handful of references to *Pan Svecicus*—a bit of Linnaean lore that he hadn’t previously seen.

Particularly stirring to Rydin was a 2007 paper called “Linnaeus and the Economy of Nature,” by Frank Egerton, which identified *Pan Svecicus* as “one of the earliest, if not the earliest, series of experiments on an ecological question, and surely the earliest such large-scale quantitative experiments.” This set Rydin on a quest to find out how Linnaeus interpreted the results of his experiments—and then he discovered that he hadn’t.

“We realized that [*Pan Svecicus*] summarized what was already known at the time about the feeding of these animals, and the text of the thesis was not at all based on the results of the investigation,” Rydin told me in an email. “So, we had to find out for



ourselves.” Why Linnaeus hadn’t analyzed his data, says Rydin, remains something of a mystery. On a practical level, quantitative analysis wasn’t really a thing in Linnaeus’ time, Rydin says. Plus, Linnaeus was a busy guy. As a man who wore many hats—university professor, physician, botanist, mermaid researcher—it’s possible he just didn’t have the time to reflect on what the data could tell him. He just tabulated the data and had to move on to other things, Rydin suggests.

Equally mysterious to Rydin was why no one else had yet applied the more modern tool of quantitative analysis to Linnaeus’ data. Rydin, however, lays no claim to his interpretations as being definitive. “Please, bear in mind that this is 18th-century research, before strict scientific protocols were invented,” he said. “We do not claim that our interpretations about what the animals prefer are scientifically correct, but they show what Linnaeus could have concluded if he had had statistical tools.”

As lacking in modern refinements as *Pan Svecicus* may be, the method behind it nonetheless anticipated the modern academy’s approach to writing scientific papers. “Scientists in those days worked mostly on their own,” said Rydin. “So, we were most surprised by how Linnaeus structured the research by tasking a number of his more senior pupils—much like postdocs—and these in turn had more junior students to help. How could he otherwise have gathered more than 2,300 observations?”

That is certainly a task of a different order.

[Nautilus December 2024](#)

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## WEB PAGES

It's time to say goodbye to the tiny tardigrade. But you must admit, he is an amazing little creature!

<https://www.livescience.com/animals/teeny-tardigrades-can-survive-space-and-lethal-radiation-scientists-may-finally-know-how>

<https://www.popsci.com/environment/weather-photographer-of-the-year-2024/>

<https://www.popsci.com/environment/immigrating-birds-learning/>

Fossil finds: Footprints on South Africa's coast offer a glimpse into our ancestors' lives.

<https://phys.org/news/2024-11-fossil-footprints-south-africa-coast.html>

[World's oldest termite mounds discovered in South Africa – and they've been storing precious carbon for thousands of years](#)

<https://www.popsci.com/environment/international-landscape-photographer-of-the-year-2024/>

<https://www.popsci.com/environment/wildlife-photographer-of-the-year-2024/>



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## NOTES

1. 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.
2. To opt out of receiving mail from the Cuckoo Bird Club, please send an email to [dennis.townsend4@gmail.com](mailto:dennis.townsend4@gmail.com) with the title: **Opt Out/Unsubscribe**