



CBC Newsletter 192 Autumn 2026

FORTHCOMING CLUB MEETINGS

Every third Tuesday of the month

Next Meeting 21st April 2026

18h45 for 19h00

Wanderer's Club

Come early (17h00-ish) and join us for supper in the restaurant. Good food, great company!

PS Be sure you have the security key to get into Wanderers. This is sent through Debbie's newsflashes or on the Cuckoo WhatsApp.



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DAY OUTINGS

Club Chair
Organiser: Dennis Townsend

dennis.townsend4@gmail.com



SPEAKERS

Organiser: Debbie Jennings

deb.jiq@gmail.com



MID-MONTH OUTINGS

Organiser: Lester Niss

lestern256@gmail.com



TRIPS AWAY

Organiser: Marion Melville

marion@claymorefin.co.za



SECRETARY

Mo Bellis

info@thecuckoobirdclub.org.za





FROM THE CHAIR

THE CUCKOO BIRD CLUB CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR THE CALENDAR YEAR 2025

As Chairman I would like to offer my thanks to the committee, Marion Melville, Alex Jennings, Mo Bellis and Penny Clemson, and the office bearers, Bev Williams, Lester Niss and Debbie Jennings for their support and efforts on behalf of the club. The committee continued to meet on a regular basis throughout the year.

Special thanks to Mo Bellis for all her hard work as club secretary over all the years, Thanks to Penny Clemson for all the wonderful newsletters over all the years, Both Mo and Penny will be standing down.

Thank you to all members for your contribution and support during the year.

Thanks to Heather and Phil for the use of their house for our 2025 year-end function.

The club managed to meet regularly at Wanderers Club and had regular Sunday and mid-month outings.

Club once again assisted with the Beaulieu Bird Sanctuary and Marievale CWAC's. Thanks to all for assisting with counts.

Club made donations too Mouse Free Marion, and BLSA Birding Big Day.

An away trip to Wolhuiskraal was arranged in February, unfortunately had to be postponed due to Foot and Mouth disease.

The club did a trip to Sekoma Island, Zambia and Chobe. Special thanks to Marion Melville for arranging a wonderful and memorable trip.

Thanks, Bev Williams, for the Birding Big Day visit to Tree Trust Farm during December. We had two teams participating on the day.

Johna Turner arranged trips to Nylsvley and Ingula. Nylsvley was unfortunately cancelled due to the introduction of buffalo. Ingula was well attended, and all had a good trip. Thanks Johna



Midweek outings were arranged by Lester, sadly, poorly attended, but for those attending there were some most enjoyable morning outings. Thank you, Lester.

Penny Clemson provided us with her most informative newsletters, which included all manner of interesting facts and anecdotes. Thank you, Penny.

Thanks to our treasurer, Alex Jennings, who has guided us through the year with her capable hands on the club finances, which are in good shape. Thanks to Roy for the audited financials

Mo Bellis, our secretary, handles club matters timeously and efficiently, always keeping me up to date and giving general feedback. Thank you, Mo.

Thanks to Debbie, for arranging the speakers through the year. We have had a number of interesting talks. Thanks to those members that shared special talks about their trips and experiences with us.

Thanks, too, to Debbie, for sending out news flashes, and keeping all up to date.

Thanks, Bev, For WhatsApp's and Facebook Updates.

Much appreciation to our office bearers for their invaluable work:

Facebook and WhatsApp	-	Bev Williams
Equipment	-	Lester Niss
Front desk	-	Mo and Alex

Thank you.

Sadly, Mo and Penny will be standing down after many years of service to the club. I would like to thank them both for their support and loyal service to the club.

The committee would like to encourage all members to give input. Please advise what you would you like from the Club, i.e. where you would like to go, more day outings, etc.

The great success of the club has been the enthusiasm that members show in participating in all outings, events and meetings of the club. This, coupled with the special motto of the club – '20% birding 80% fun' - makes our club one of the best!



So, I am confident that we can look forward to another year under the guidance of the committee, with the support of the club's members.

Dennis Townsend
17th March 2026



CBC Treasurer's
Report Year Ended :



CBC AGM MINUTES
17.03.26.docx

Please see above the Minutes of our A.G.M., held on Tuesday 17th March 2026 at the Wanderers Club, Illovo, together with the Chairman's Report and the Financial Statement as at 31.12.25.

Mo Bellis

EDITOR'S CHIRP

Autumn seems to be here a tad early, but how beautiful the weather is! It makes up for the summer we never had. I hope everyone manages to get out and about to do a spot of birding before the winter chill.

I'm a big fan of Derek Keats' Learn the Birds website and presentations. The May meeting will be about photographic gear and might be of interest to some members

Title: Photographic Gear: Stumbling Block or Not? – Passion and Purpose

Determine the Outcome

Presenter: Pietman Muller

Date: Thursday, May 21, 2026

Time: 19h00 (SAST) (GMT+2)

Register at: <https://learnthebirds.com/event/photographic-gear/>

As you know, this is my last newsletter. Debbie Jennings will be carrying on the tradition with some fresh ideas. I have enjoyed my time writing to you all, and I'd like to thank you for the kind words and support and for the wonderful photos and information you've sent for inclusion in the newsletter. Special thanks to Heather, who regularly sends beautiful photos.

Ed.

BIRDING AT MARAKELE

Heather spent the weekend of 13th-15th March on a trip with the SAN PARKS Honorary Rangers to Marakele National park about 10km north of Thabazimbi.

“Unfortunately we did have quite a bit of rain which made birding a bit difficult but never the less I did get two lifers : Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, and Brown-crowned Tchagra.

I have attached a couple of pictures of birds I saw. We also saw a Rock Python; only a young one we reckoned, but still 3m long!”



Crimson-breasted Shrike



Male Rock Thrush



Female Rock Thrush



Swallow-tailed Bee-eater



Young Lesser-striped Swallow waiting for mum with food

Heather Darby

PAST TRIPS AWAY

Modderfontein 15th February

Heather mentioned that the group saw a Sacred Ibis hanging in a tree. This again highlights the lack of care that people fishing or using weed eaters have with regards discarding waste material. A horrible death for that poor bird.





Heather Darby

The morning started rather chilly and overcast, but things improved and we saw a respectable number of birds.

Included in the list were:

Yellow-fronted canary

Lesser Swamp Warbler

Willow Warblers

Barn Swallows,

White-throated Swallows

Lesser-striped Swallows

A few unidentified swallows (Too fast to identify)

White-rumped Swifts

Flock of Storks

Dennis Townsend

SEKOMA

Some more fabulous pictures from Lance Robinson



Malachite Kingfisher



Black Cuckooshrike

Pied Kingfisher



White-faced Whistling Ducks



Water Thick-knee



White-winged Tern



Juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron



Black Crake



Blue-cheeked Bee-eater

Lance Robinson

UPCOMING EVENTS

Unfortunately, attendance at the midweek walks with Lester hasn't been good enough to continue, at least for the time being.

However, Lester has organised a very interesting trip on Thursday, 16th April. Details follow:

“Following on from the talk in January about Melville Koppies, I have arranged a guided walk in the koppies for Thursday morning 16th April.

There will be a bird guide and someone knowledgeable about the history and nature.

The cost will be **R100 per person** which goes towards the security staff they employ.

This is a fantastic opportunity for us to experience what the area was like before the city arose.

Please reply to me if you would like to attend, to determine numbers. No payment yet.

Lester Niss (082-570-4641)

lestern256@gmail.com”



Lester Niss

STUDY LEARNS THE REAL REASON WHY BIRDS SING SO PASSIONATELY AT DAWN

Each morning begins with the same sound – birds singing before sunrise. A new study on zebra finches explains this behavior with remarkable clarity. The researchers found that early singing isn't random joy, but a rebound from silence. During the night, darkness suppresses the birds' urge to sing. When the first light appears, that urge bursts out. The silence builds tension; the sunrise releases it.

This response doesn't rely on habit. It's built into the biology of the bird. The need to sing is always there, even when light blocks the expression. Once that block lifts, the song comes rushing back, full of energy and precision. The result is what we hear each morning – the chorus that marks the arrival of day.



Zebra Finch

Birds sing intensely at dawn

The scientists delayed the morning light for a few hours. When the lights finally came on, the birds sang far more than usual. Shorter nights produced weaker singing.



The difference showed that the dawn chorus grows stronger after long suppression. This rebound explains the explosive start of morning songs across bird species. It isn't a planned concert. It's a surge of energy after forced restraint.

This kind of rebound behavior appears in many living systems. Muscles grow stronger after rest. Hunger feels sharper after fasting.

The pattern is universal – restriction followed by release intensifies action. Birds simply express this cycle through sound.

Birds wait in the dark

The finches didn't wait for the sun to wake up. They moved and stretched in the dark, already alert. They simply held back their voices. Their bodies were ready; the darkness held them silent.

When light returned, everything released at once. That release – the shift from stillness to song – is what people hear as the dawn chorus.

The birds' early activity shows that the dawn chorus doesn't begin with light – it begins in anticipation of it.

The song is an emotional and physical outburst that follows the buildup of alertness. This timing makes the chorus one of the earliest and most reliable signals of daybreak in nature.

Hormones help birds start singing

Melatonin guides the rhythm. This hormone drops before dawn, signaling the body to prepare for activity. Even without light, the birds wake up as melatonin falls.

When researchers blocked melatonin's action, the finches began singing even earlier. The hormone's natural decline starts the process, and light finishes it. It's a handoff between biology and environment.

This connection between internal chemistry and external change keeps the birds in sync with the world. Their internal clocks run on rhythm, not reaction.

The hormonal drop creates readiness; the light provides permission. Together, they produce perfect timing for the start of the chorus.



Singing at dawn is exercise

Morning songs do more than greet the day. They act as a warm-up. Birds lose some vocal precision during long silence. The first songs of the day help recover that control.

The study showed that finches refined their song patterns faster after longer nights. Singing early wasn't just habit – it was training

The dawn chorus, then, is vocal exercise that restores performance before the day's challenges begin.

The repetition improves coordination, strength, and confidence. A strong morning performance may also impress potential mates and intimidate rivals.

The practice sharpens both voice and instinct, ensuring that the bird remains competitive.

Same pattern found in nature

Under natural light, zebra finches in groups showed the same behavior. Their singing peaked at dawn and varied with weather. When sunrise light was delayed by clouds, they sang earlier and longer.

The consistency between lab and natural conditions showed that the mechanism is universal. The motivation to sing builds in darkness, and light sets it free.

This match between experiment and nature strengthens the study's conclusion: dawn singing arises from internal drive, not social imitation. Whether isolated or among others, the birds respond to the same biological cues.

The rebound singing hypothesis

This idea forms the rebound singing hypothesis. Birds wake early due to hormonal cues. Darkness prevents singing, raising motivation. When light appears, the built-up drive turns into intense song.

The process links body chemistry, internal clocks, and environment. It fits the warm-up hypothesis too – the view that birds sing to regain top form after rest. Both ideas describe the same natural rhythm: suppression followed by release.



The hypothesis may also explain why some birds sing more vigorously during breeding seasons.

Higher hormone levels may amplify motivation, producing louder and longer dawn choruses. The same rhythm that prepares them for the day may also prepare them for courtship.

Why birds sing early

Singing at dawn offers clear benefits. It advertises health and readiness. Males that sing early show stamina and precision – traits that attract mates. It may also help defend territory before rivals wake up.

The chorus signals alertness and strength. Evolution shaped it because it works. Morning songs become proof of fitness, not mere sound.

In species that compete for mates, timing matters. A male that sings first announces both vitality and confidence. For females, that song signals a capable partner.

The dawn chorus thus carries deep biological meaning: survival, reproduction, and communication rolled into one.

How timing builds pressure

The study resolves a long debate. Some argued light triggers the chorus; others said hormones control it. Both are right. Hormones decide when the body wakes. Light decides when the bird can act.

The gap between those moments builds pressure. The first light breaks the barrier, releasing energy as song. That tension-release rhythm creates the timing and power of dawn singing.

The pattern echoes across species. Suppression builds motivation. Release intensifies behavior. After silence, energy returns stronger.

Humans feel similar effects – ideas flow after quiet, movement feels easier after rest. The principle is the same. Constraint shapes drive. Release turns drive into action.



A chorus of renewal

The dawn chorus is no mystery now. It's nature's reset – a mix of hormones, patience, and practice. Zebra finches taught us that early singing is not simple enthusiasm but precision timing.

Each note is a release of stored energy, a test of readiness, a start of another day in rhythm with the world.

The chorus we hear each morning is not just music – it's biology in motion, life stretching its voice after a long night's pause.

The study is published in the journal bioRxiv. **By Eric Ralls**
Earth.com staff writer

BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA

Botha's Lark conservation: a new chapter

[The Botha's Lark Species Action](#)

[Plan](#) charts a bold path to save South Africa's most threatened grassland bird. With five core goals – research, engagement, education, policy and collaboration – it guides targeted action to protect the species' habitat, monitor its populations and secure its future.

Botha's Lark is a Critically Endangered species found only in the high-altitude grasslands of South Africa's Highveld. Over recent decades it has suffered a significant decline due to habitat loss, degradation and changes in land use.

Much of its remaining range occurs on privately owned farmland, making partnerships with landowners and local communities crucial to its survival.



Photo by Richard Flack



The Species Action Plan provides a coordinated roadmap to guide conservation efforts over the coming years. Developed through collaboration between researchers, conservation organisations and other stakeholders, the plan identifies the most pressing threats to the species and outlines priority actions for its protection.

It focuses on five core goals to safeguard Botha's Lark:

- Research: to improve understanding of the species' ecology, population trends and habitat needs to inform effective conservation management.
- Stakeholder engagement: to build strong relationships with landowners, farmers and local communities to support grassland-friendly practices.
- Education and awareness: to raise awareness about Botha's Lark and the importance of grasslands to inspire broader support for conservation in schools and communities.
- Policy and advocacy: to strengthen policy and planning frameworks to ensure that the development and use of land take into account threatened species and habitats.
- Collaboration: to promote collective action among conservation organisations, researchers, government agencies and partners to maximise impact.

Now that the Species Action Plan is complete, the focus shifts to implementation. By prioritising actions with the greatest conservation impact, we aim to stabilise and increase Botha's Lark populations while safeguarding the broader Highveld grasslands.

As Botha's Lark is a flagship species for South Africa's grasslands, conserving it benefits many other grassland-dependent species. The completion of this plan represents a vital step forward in ensuring that the distinctive call of this Critically Endangered lark continues to be heard for generations to come.

We are especially grateful to Birding Ecotours birdingecotours.com for funding this project, making the development of the Species Action Plan possible and supporting conservation action for Botha's Lark and the Highveld grasslands.



Supporting Botha's Lark: Be One of 340

The Be One of 340 Campaign highlights the urgent plight of Botha's Lark, with fewer than 340 individuals remaining in the wild. Supporters can 'own a dot' in a unique artwork made up of exactly 340 dots, each representing an existing lark. For R500, your name (or a chosen name) will be added to one of the dots in a giant 2x2 m installation at the BirdLife South Africa Grasslands Conservation Centre in Wakkerstroom – and 100% of the funds raised will go directly to Botha's Lark conservation. This initiative provides a tangible way for birders and supporters to help secure the species' future while raising awareness of the urgent conservation actions needed, including research, monitoring and conservation interventions.

[Purchase your Botha's Lark dot here.](#)

Matthew Orolowitz,
Birding Ecotours Fellow of Grasslands Conservation



Birdlife South Africa

This article is repeated from the last newsletter.

**EcoTraining
& BirdLife South Africa**

Racket-tailed Roller
Ceracias spotalatus

**Enjoy Birding In Makuleke while
expanding your birding knowledge**

Join us for this Birding event at Makuleke on the below dates:
3 - 6 April 2026 | 3 - 6 July 2026 | 9 - 12 October 2026
20 - 23 November 2026 | 4 - 7 December 2026

EcoTraining & BirdLife South Africa

Birds of a feather flock together and that is why EcoTraining along with BirdLife South Africa is proud to offer this unique program. Together we will bring you an unforgettable educational safari from one of the special birding hotspots of Southern Africa – The Makuleke Concession.



Why choose Makuleke?

This northern-most section of the Kruger National Park holds seventy-five percent of the biodiversity found in the region and is on the bucket-lists of keen birders and naturalists alike. Visitors come in search of a trove of sought-after species like Pel's Fishing Owl, Rackle-Tailed Roller and Amot's Chat, but always leave with so much more than just a pencilled-in checklist. And almost always leave a sliver of their soul behind.

Rates R7,420.00 p/p Sharing

Rates Include

Accommodation
Three meals daily
Tea, coffee & cordials
Specialist Instructors, Walks & Game drives

Rates Exclude

Beverages (beers, ciders, soft drinks)
Entry to Kruger Park (for Makuleke Concession)
Transfers from the camp to Pafun gate can be arranged at an additional cost. (Please enquire).



Meals

Early morning wake-up: Tea, coffee, biscuits, fruit & cereal.
Brunch after activity: A cooked breakfast and fruit salad.
Afternoon tea: A light lunch or sandwiches.
Dinner: A warm plated meal; meat, vegetables & salad.



Accommodation

The sleeping arrangements at Makuleke consist of two people sharing per safari tent (en-suite, linen provided). Single requests are required to pay double rates. Women and men do not usually share tents unless booked as a couple.



To make a booking or any enquiries please contact EcoTraining Sales Team at:



enquiries@ecotraining.co.za



+27 (0) 13 752 2532



WEB PAGES

This is our August speaker – with the proviso that the date might change.

<https://share.google/YjMUtfV5wFEki2q5U>

A fascinating study by the University of the Free State, carried out at Golden Gate National Park

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AAJ.kajwxcrqc>

Happily, we weren't bothered by these creatures whilst heron-hunting at Marievale.

[95 million-year-old Spinosaurus had a scimitar-shaped head crest and waded through the Sahara's rivers like a 'hell heron' | Live Science](#)

Wonderful descriptions of animals – and birds – that live in communities.

["It has ventilation systems, food storage, nurseries, toilets and highways" – 11 animals that build villages, towns and even cities | Discover Wildlife](#)

It is not often that BirdLife South Africa's Policy and Advocacy staff appeal government decisions, particularly in the solar energy development sector.

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-02-01-fasttrack-solar-plan-crumbles-as-risks-to-endangered-vultures-come-to-light/>

Sense of smell? This was new to me.

[The brilliant and bizarre ways birds use their sense of smell – from natural cologne to pest control](#)

Good news about the penguins, for a change.

<https://www.goodthingsguy.com/environment/sanccob-african-penguin-hatchlings/>



Some local birding spots that might help with a somewhat tricky birding experience.

[Forests with hidden birdlife gems you've never heard of](#)

Extraordinary photos in the 2026 World Photography Awards. I suppose, since it's only April, there will be more.

[Sony World Photography Awards – The year's standout images capturing motion and objects](#)

Many birders were watching the migration of Rory, the European Roller. An epic story. Several websites are available giving information not only about Rory, but about the amazing stories of migratory birds all over the world. Worth looking up!

<https://www.birdlife.org/globalflyways/>

[European Roller found after epic journey from South Africa to China](#)

<https://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-news/a-4-month-old-bird-flew-more-than-8000-miles-nonstop-from-alaska-to-tasmania/1867703>



COMMITTEE

Chair	Dennis Townsend
Secretary	Mo Bellis
Treasurer	Alex Jennings
Day Outings	Bev Williams
Weekends Away	Marion Melville
Speakers	Debbie Jennings
Newsletter	Penny Clemson
News Flashes	Debbie Jennings

OFFICE BEARERS

Facebook Page	Bev Williams
WhatsApp	Bev Williams
Equipment	Lester Niss



BANKING DETAILS

Cuckoo Bird Club

Standard Bank Sandton

City Branch code 051

001

Account number 023 212 934

CONTACT info@thecuckoobirdclub.org.za

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 with the title: **Opt Out/Unsubscribe**